

The Revival of Athens in the History of Political Thought*

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ABSTRACT

The author of this paper advocates a reevaluation of fifth-century and fourth-century Athenian political thought. The theory of the decline of Athens, one of the fundamental premises in the study of Greek political thought since the mid-nineteenth century, fails to account for real democratic progress during this period. After presenting the Thucydidean and Platonic versions, two similar but different stories of Athenian decline, the author illustrates their partisan nature with two historical events, the law reforms and the reconciliation after the Peloponnesian War and the civil war. To grasp Athenian political thought, we must go beyond our long romance with the fifth century to acknowledge a broader range of ideas and practices.

Key Words: Athenian democracy, direct democracy, the decline of Athens, Plato, Thucydides

Athens holds a central place in any reflection on Western political thought. To understand Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, we must understand the government of their day. To understand democracy, we also need to know how the Athenians governed themselves. Many scholars have failed to appreciate the differences eighty years made in Athenian politics: the charismatic leadership that marked the fifth century BC gave way to policies of reconciliation and rule by law in the fourth century. Strikingly divergent lessons can be drawn from the two periods.

No other community has ever mandated the degree of civic participation found in classical Athens, where virtually every decision of any politi-

*I am grateful for the anonymous reviewers' comments.

cal significance was administrated by a large body of officials chosen by lot. Six thousand citizens attended the assembly, about one of the largest numbers of people who might hold a public discussion in ancient times. And the Athenian law courts were full of hundreds or even thousands of citizens selected by lot to serve as jurors. More than one thousand worked in the central government, nearly all common citizens selected by lot and replaced yearly.¹ The level of participation in local government may have been even higher (Whitehead, 1986: 226 ff). Finally, the scale of Athenian civic participation was not limited to the political sphere, strictly construed—it extended to all aspects of civil life, including religious festivals, cultural events and military campaigns (Sinclair, 1988: chap. 3; Strauss, 1996).

In succeeding ages, critics assailed the radical institutional arrangements and culture of Athenian democracy. They blamed mob rule for the eclipse of a golden age, destroyed by the demos's folly. Even today, though its achievements in culture, philosophy and empire are widely appreciated, the Athenian form of popular government is still viewed with deep suspicion. It has frequently been said that the demos was not competent to govern, since its members were not properly educated. Many scholars consider this type of popular government dangerous because especially susceptible to passion or demagoguery.

In tracing Athenian history from the victory over Persia and the establishment of a great naval empire to defeat in the Peloponnesian War and the civil war in the fifth century, those who speak of decline manage to overlook the miraculous restoration of democracy in the following century, especially its achievements in law reform and its reconciliation with the oligarchs. A fuller consideration can convey important lessons about the relationship among law, popular participation and civic friendship. The theory of the decline of Athens is therefore problematic, if not misleading—the time has come to reconsider one of the essential assumptions in the study of Athenian political thought. As we will see below, despite the effort to re-evaluate the performance of democratic Athens in the last thirty years, this theory is still a dominant model for our understanding of direct democracy, especially in the realm of democratic theory.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the theory of the decline of

1 It is hard to exaggerate the significance of popular participation in Athenian society. For a concise summary of how Athenians participated in government, see Hansen, 1999: 313.

Athens. This paper gives only an account of Athenian democracy that is *sufficient* for the examination of this theory, its variants and its problems. Neither a general account of Athenian history nor interpretation of Athenian writers such as Thucydides and Plato is attempted in this paper, since it is not necessary regarding the purpose of this paper.

In the pages that follow, I examine the main sources for the theory, that is, the works of Thucydides and Plato, to see how they have been used or adapted in our modern imagination of Athenian democracy.² The theory of the decline of Athens will be tested against the city's performance in the legal reforms and the reconciliation right after the Peloponnesian war, for the two events illustrate a much neglected aspect of Athenian democracy. I then draw attention to two decades of scholarship challenging unsuccessfully the established view that political life in Athens degenerated in the fourth century. In the conclusion, I consider the possibility of an alternative political thought based on the politics of fourth-century Athens.

I. Theories of the Decline of Athens

Long after the universal fall of feudal states, we inexplicably cling to their dogmatic characterization of fifth-century Athens as a disastrous instance of mob rule. To the extent that sympathy with democratic ideals has softened that aversion, it has come late—not with the American Revolution in 1775, not with the French Revolution in 1789, but only a century and a half ago, around the time that the British historian George Grote and educator published the first part of his *History of Greece*.³ Before then, though Athens received great praise for its achievement in the visual arts (Rhodes, 2003: 32), its government was often described as utterly chaotic—in the words of a twenty-first century chronicler, “turbulent, factionalised, ir-

2 Other Athenian writers such as Aristotle and Demosthenes did not play an important role as Thucydides and Plato did in the theory of the decline of Athens.

3 Numerous scholars are in agreement on this issue. See Hansen, 1992: 18; see also Roberts, 1994: chaps. 9–11; Wood, 1994: 59–80; Hartog, 1994: 41; Cartledge, 1994: 29; Dawson, 2000: 187; Rhodes, 2003: 32; Dupuis-Deri, 2004: 120; Dunn, 2005: 72, 92. Grote's work is more a symptom than a factor of this change in the fortunes of Athenian democracy. Other political developments at the same time, such as the enlargement of party organization and the universal suffrage for adult males in France and the United States, probably played a much more important role than Grote's *History* (Dupuis-Deri, 2004: 125–126).

rationally swayed by orators, and inconsistent in respect of public policy and justice” (Dawson, 2000: 187). Even Pericles was usually portrayed as a wicked politician rather than the great statesman lauded by Thucydides (Hansen, 1994a: 18). Grote (2001: 950–954) was one of the first moderns who praised the Athenian democracy and its empire.

While the mid-nineteenth-century reversal has been carefully documented, it must not be exaggerated.⁴ In fact, anxieties about mob rule lurked just beneath the surface, taking the form of a distinction between the political forms of the fifth century and the fourth, the forceful leadership of Pericles contrasted with the disastrous defeats that followed. Many scholars lamented the post-Periclean period as a time of terminal decline.⁵ Paul Millett (2000: 352) puts it concisely:

In its crudest form, this arrangement has three phases. First, there is the rise of Athens to the climax of the ‘Golden Age’ under the guiding hand of Perikles, its greatness exemplified by the power and wealth of the empire. Then comes the climacteric of the Peloponnesian War, culminating in the defeat of Athens and the loss of empire. The third stage is downhill all the way, *via* the so-called ‘crisis of the fourth century’ to Makedonian domination with the destruction of the democracy and the end of Athens as an independent *polis*.

Partisans of Periclean democracy declare that direct democracy does not necessarily coincide with mob rule, but can be one of the greatest forms of government as long as the desire and passion of the people are constrained and guided by great leaders. Without such leaders, a democracy may be doomed to excess and chaos (Hartog, 1994: 41). This amounts to praising fifth-century Athens for its least noteworthy trait. And, indeed, modern

4 Nineteenth- and twentieth-century admirers of Athens lauded not only its politics but its empire, its culture, and even its attitude toward slavery. See Hansen, 1992: 19; 1994b: 35; Roberts, 1994: 263; Millett, 2000: 353; Dawson, 2000: 190; Rhodes, 2003: 32, 47. The twentieth century’s ideological confrontation between liberalism and totalitarianism drove more into the Athenian camp. See Roberts, 1994: 291. For the strategies of resistance against democracy that emerged after the days of Grote, see Morris and Raaflaub, 1998: 4.

5 Among scholars of ancient history, the superiority of Periclean politics to those of the fourth century was hardly in doubt. See, e.g., Hansen, 1992: 20–21; 1994b: 34; Tritle, 1997: 3; Dawson, 2000: 196; Millett, 2000: 352–353; Rhodes, 2003: 39; Ober, 2005: 31.

scholars have obsessively returned to the question of Athenian leadership.

A. Thucydidean Version⁶

The theory of the decline of Athens draws much of its force from the great works of Thucydides and Plato, though their thoughts are far more complex than the theory.⁷ Other ancient writers such as Xenophon and Demosthenes, though providing important historical materials, are far less important than Plato and Thucydides in the modern theorization of the decline of Athens.⁸ Two versions of the theory developed from the adaptation of the two main sources. The Thucydidean version stresses the danger of civil strife and the function of political leadership while the Platonic one proposes the cure of philosophy and law against tyranny. Few efforts were made in the past to clarify the differences between the two versions.

A series of events in Thucydides' *History* indicates that moral corruption led to partisan conflicts and poor judgement during the Peloponnesian War.⁹ The war had hardly begun when, in 430 BC, Athens was stricken by plague. The disease attacked indiscriminately, overwhelming the city's medical capacity. Many were abandoned by families terrified of infection; the sight of corpses and dying men and women hardened the hearts of survivors. There was no time for proper funerals; bodies were piled high in houses, streets and temples. The authority of law and tradition collapsed. Thucydides (1972: 2.53) recorded the destructive effect of the plague on

6 The famous Periclean funeral speech would be dismissed by proponents of the theory of the decline of Athens as insincere rhetoric. There are several difficulties in taking the speech seriously. For example, the praise of Athens in the speech does not seem to be consistent with the imperial behaviour of the city described in Thucydides' *History*. More importantly, while the Athenian participatory way of life is praised in the speech, Thucydides himself remarks famously that Athens was only democracy in name; the power of the city was actually in the hands of its first citizen, that is, Pericles. (Thucydides, 1972: 2.65) The funeral speech therefore seems to be composed for its occasion rather than expression of Thucydides' view. See also Hornblower, 1991: 298-299.

7 I will not attempt to offer here any but passing remarks about the theories of politics developed by the two writers.

8 Xenophon's political works have received attention recently. However, scholars still fell obliged to justify their decision to discuss Xenophon's political thought. See, for example, Nadon, 1996 and Howland, 2000.

9 I give a brief historical account here. The debates over Thucydides' account of the series of events will not be discussed in this paper.

morality:

Athens owed to the plague the beginnings of a state of unprecedented lawlessness. Seeing how quick and abrupt were the changes of fortune which came to the rich who suddenly died and to those who had previously been penniless but now inherited their wealth, people now began openly to venture on acts of self-indulgence which before then they used to keep dark. Thus they resolved to spend their money quickly and to spend it on pleasure, since money and life alike seemed equally ephemeral.

Another tragedy wrought by the plague was the death of Pericles. Thucydides believed that Athens would have won the war had it maintained Pericles' policies. But lacking the power and foresight of their predecessor, the leaders who followed allowed themselves to be drawn into partisan struggles instead of devoting themselves to good government. As a result, domestic and foreign policies fell into confusion and contradiction that, Thucydides remarked (1972: 2.65), lost the war for Athens.

The invasion of Melos in 416 BC is often cited as the nadir of Athens' moral corruption. According to Thucydides, Melos had remained resolutely neutral throughout the conflict, so Athens decided to make an example of it. When they met their Melian counterparts, the delegation from Athens reportedly proclaimed the harsh principle 'might makes right':

We on our side will use no fine phrases saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire because we defeated the Persians, or that we have come against you now because of the injuries you have done us—a great mass of works that nobody would believe. . . . The standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept. (Thucydides, 1972: 5.89)

Melos refused to surrender, and the Athenians destroyed the city, killed every male of military age, and sold the women and children as slaves. With this merciless act, Athens ceased to embody the heroic defence of Greek liberty and became the worst sort of tyranny.

Three years later, Athens invaded Sicily. This military operation, in Thucydides' estimation (1972: 7.89) the greatest act in Hellenic history, last-

ed for two years and ended in epic failure. The whole of the expeditionary force was destroyed: more than one-third of Athens's men were lost, as were great quantities of military equipment. Thucydides (1972: 2.65) blamed leaders so obsessed with currying popular favour that they failed to provide the resources the army needed.

Athenian democracy entered the final stage of its decline after the Sicilian debacle. The city-state had managed to make enemies of most of the classical world's bigger players—Sparta, Persia, Sicily and many former allies; in addition, partisan conflict was dividing the city from within. The period between 411 and 400 BC proved the most chaotic in Athenian history: a list of lows would include capitulation to Sparta and the attendant loss of empire, repeated grinding of democracy under the heels of oligarchs, and civil wars. In many modern scholars' view the decade looked much like the civil strife of Corcyra described by Thucydides (1972: 3.81).¹⁰

The Corcyraeans continued to massacre those of their own citizens whom they considered to be their enemies. . . . There was death in every shape and form. And, as usually happens in such situations, people went to every extreme and beyond it. There were fathers who killed their sons; men were dragged from the temples or butchered on the very altars.

Thucydides observed that politicians knew far more about managing their image than they did about governing, and professional rivalries grew savage enough to spark bloody fighting. The misguided adventure in Sicily, Thucydides (1972: 2.65, 6.15) explained, had been pursued by ambitious politicians who saw it as a means to advance their careers. When they were not sending soldiers off to almost certain death, these all-too-familiar leaders fomented so much domestic enmity that neighbours took up arms against

10 Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian war ends before the Athenian civil war in 404 BC. However, his well-known account of the Corcyrean civil strife is meant to be an illustration of a common political problem. (Thucydides, 1972: 3.83) The Corcyrean case is therefore often referred to in modern scholars' discussion of the fall of Athenian democracy. The equation of the civil wars at Corcyra and Athens, though not uncontroversial, is a common theme in historical research. See Hornblower, 1991: 490-491; Cohen, 1995: 28. Paul Cartledge (1993: 129) even suggests that Thucydides' account of the Corcyrean civil war would be more insightful for our understanding of the Athenian case than Xenophon's account.

one another. What happened in Corcyra bore too close a resemblance to what happened in Athens between 410 and 403 BC:

Leaders of parties in these cities had programmes which appeared admirable . . . but in professing to serve the public interest they were seeking to win the prizes for themselves. . . . More interest was shown in those who could produce attractive arguments to justify some disgraceful action. As for the citizens who held moderate views, they were destroyed by both the extreme parties, either for not taking part in the struggle or in envy at the possibility that they might survive. (Thucydides, 1972: 3.82)

All this strikes us as all the more tragic because of the contrast between self-serving leaders and the great hero of Thucydides's tale—Pericles. Quite capable of guiding the people by his personal authority, Pericles never stooped to flattery. As Thucydides (1972: 2.65) wrote, "Because of his position, his intelligence, and his known integrity, [Pericles] could respect the liberty of the people and at the same time hold them in check." The historian (1972: 2.65) heartily approved the consequent softening of Athenian ideals: "In what was nominally a democracy, power was really in the hands of the first citizen." If only all democracies could have a Pericles, they could escape the cycle of rise and decline.

B. Platonic Version

A different account of the decline of Athens appears in Book 8 of Plato's *Republic*.¹¹ Plato (1991: 557a) opened by describing democracy as a regime that guaranteed equality and freedom. Citizens shared "the regime and the ruling office . . . on an equal basis; and for the most part, the offices in it are given by lot." They also enjoyed perfect freedom to do whatever they wished, "[in] the absence of any compulsion to rule in this city even if you are competent to rule, or again to be ruled if you don't want to be, or to make war when the others are making war, or to keep peace when the others are keeping it, if you don't desire peace," said Plato with more than a little

11 Other important passages about the decline of Athens occur elsewhere in Plato's works: in the *Laws* 698b ff. Athens is said to have declined after its victory over the Persians; and in the *Gorgias* 517a ff. the Athenian empire is presented as a source of corruption rather than a great achievement.

irony. Rather than view such an arrangement as paradisiacal, Plato (1991: 564a) worried that “too much freedom seems to change into nothing but too much slavery. . . . Tyranny is probably established out of no other regime than democracy . . . the great and most savage slavery out of the extreme of freedom.”

The road from democracy to tyranny, in Plato’s view, usually involved a shortcut through the Alley of Hero Worship: “People are always accustomed to setting some one man as their special leader and to foster him and make him grow greater.”(1991: 565c) Ambitious politicians would therefore compete to lead the people, making all kinds of irresponsible promises such as the cancellation of debt and the redistribution of property. Once they won the people’s trust and took power, they would transform democracy into tyranny. Plato (1991: 569b-c) concluded his fable of the decline of democracy as follows:

The people in fleeing the smoke of enslavement to free men would have fallen into the fire of being under the mastery of slaves; in the place of that great and unreasonable freedom they have put on the dress of the harshest and bitterest enslavement to slaves.

Plato appears to have endorsed two remedies for the decline of democracy. He (1991: 473c-d) placed his faith in unlikely rulers: “Unless the philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophised . . . there is no rest from ill’s of democracy and other political systems.” But the presentation of this idea suggests that Plato may not consider putting it into practice, and many believe that he offered a more practical solution revealed in the title of his later work, *The Laws*. When philosopher-kings could not be found, a body of law created by wise legislators would best serve the state. Plato (1980: 875c-d) wrote:

For no law or order is stronger than knowledge, nor is it right for intelligence to be subordinate, or a slave, to anyone, but it should be ruler over everything, if indeed it is true and really free according to nature. But now, in fact, it is so nowhere or in any way, except to a small extent. That is why one must choose what comes second, order and law —which see and look to most things, but are incapable of seeing everything.

The Thucydidean and Platonic passages quoted above constitute the crux of the story of decline enshrined since the mid-nineteenth century. But by conflating the two texts, scholars have failed to appreciate the important differences between them. While Thucydides and Plato both emphasised democracy's susceptibility to demagoguery and the divisive effect of partisan conflict, they relied on very different methods and narratives. Thucydides was at pains to explain that his account was a faithful reconstruction of events based on his own experience and that of others whom he questioned, but the Platonic version of Athens is more freely constructed. The historian worried, above all, about civil strife, while the philosopher fretted about the rise of tyranny. And Plato would certainly have disagreed with Thucydides' evaluation of Pericles. But the biggest difference between the two lies not in their presentation of the problems but in their proposed solutions. Thucydides believed in Periclean leadership, while Plato insisted on the political application of philosophy and the rule of law.

II. Historical Reality

But did either of the Thucydidean or Platonic stories offer a plausible description of Athenian democracy? If not, the lessons drawn from their famous books could hardly serve as primers to would-be philosopher-kings and charismatic rulers.

Can the events of fourth-century Athens accurately be labelled 'democratic corruption and decline'? Or is such a label a misleading shorthand for a much more complex story?

Certainly, we may accurately speak of an Athenian decline in the fifth century BC. Defeated by Sicily and Sparta, twice roiled by power-hungry oligarchs, the polis was humbled. But then came a dramatic revival of Athenian democracy. The history of democratic Athens did not end in the fifth century—the following century was witness to a stable, admirable government. Democracy not only revived quickly after each of the oligarchic coups, it set standards for moderation and rule of law. Amnesty granted to the oligarchs contributed to remarkable stability and continuity. The law reforms and the reconciliation between the democrats and the oligarchs right after the Peloponnesian war show most clearly how the theory of the decline of Athens has misled us.

A. Legal Reforms

Wide-ranging legal reforms were initiated in 411 as a response to mounting pressure from Sparta, Sicily and Persia (Aristotle, 1996: 29; Thucydides, 1972: 8.65). Many Athenians were convinced that the Persian king would become their ally if the city rejected its former infatuation with democracy. A constitutional committee was elected to review all laws and to make whatever revisions it deemed best (Aristotle, 1996: 29.2-3). Ambitious oligarchs took the chance to usurp the government. However, the Athenian people managed to accomplish this important reform twelve years later.

Ancestral laws that were ratified in this reform became the ruling authority of Athens (Andocides, 1968: 1.83). Thanks to the thorough reforms, the elder generations now spoke with unwonted clarity and precision (Rhodes, 1991: 98). For the first time in Athenian history, all laws were recorded and archived in the agora, where they were accessible to the public (Sickinger, 2004: 101-102). These were declared the only laws in Athens, and they applied equally to all, including the government and its officials (Andocides, 1968: 1.85-87). In other words, a kind of constitutional government was set up. According to the *Aristotelian Athenian Constitution* (Aristotle, 1996: 41.2), the legal reforms carried out from 403 to 399 produced a stable body of law that was not significantly altered until 322.

B. The Reconciliation

Another important Athenian achievement was the amnesty granted to those who had supported the polis's most infamous rulers, the thirty tyrants, in 403. After a coup brought about with the support of Sparta, the tyrants expelled the democratic party from the city. They not only executed potential rivals, they also killed the rich for no other reason than to confiscate their property. During their reign of terror, at least 1,500 Athenians were murdered (Aristotle, 1996: 35.4). Such crimes make it all the more extraordinary that the democratic government chose to forgive those who had collaborated with the oligarchs.

Forgiveness was nearly universal: only the leading oligarchs and murderers would be tried (Aristotle, 1996: 39-40). Those who could not tolerate living under a democratic regime were free to leave Athens. As recorded in *Aristotle's Athenian Constitution* (1996: 39.5-6), the official decree called for:

Trials for homicide be in accordance with the ancestral ordinances, if a man has killed or wounded another with his own hand. And that there be a universal amnesty for past events, covering everybody except the Thirty, the Ten, the Eleven, and those that have been governors of Peiraeus, and that these also be covered by the amnesty if they render account . . . those who will not render account . . . do migrate.

The government proved its determination to observe the amnesty by executing a democrat who sought to prosecute oligarchs. Instead of confiscating the oligarchs' property, Athens even repaid the military debt they owed to Sparta (Aristotle, 1996: 39-40). It is generally agreed that the reconciliation project was successful. There is little evidence of any vengeance being taken, and several men with oligarchic backgrounds became successful politicians later.¹² This remarkable achievement was widely acknowledged among ancient writers. Socrates' pupil, Xenophon (1979: 2.4.40 ff), described the democrats as pious and generous, contrasting them with the ruthless Thirty. *Aristotle's Athenian Constitution* (1996: 40.2) observed that the government appeared "both in private and in public to have behaved towards the past disasters in the most completely honourable and statesmanlike manner of any people in history."

New aspects of Athenian politics are found from the success of legal reforms and reconciliation.¹³ The first is that the democratic values of equality and freedom do not necessarily lead to anarchy or lawlessness, as Plato warned. On the contrary, Athenian democracy proved that the rule of law, exercised within a direct democracy, can protect civil equality, freedom and other democratic values. The citizens of Athens enjoyed equal

12 The infamous trial of Socrates did not violate the principle of reconciliation or forgiving the past crimes, since Socrates, according to Plato (1997: 29d), insisted on practicing his peculiar way of life. In any case, this single trial should not overshadow the Athenian achievement in the law reforms and the reconciliation. As to the exile of Socrates' pupils after the trial, the story is based on the dubious report of Diogenes Laertius 2.106 and 3.6, which was at least 400 years later. Even the report of Diogenes Laertius does not confirm the exile of Plato. See Nails, 2002: 247.

13 The Athenian demos was the predominate power in post-war Athens, since the oligarchs had been decisively defeated. The so-called moderate politicians played no major roles in post-war Athens. The influence of Sparta ended after Athens' alliance with Persia in 395 BC. There is therefore no reason not to attribute the success of the legal reforms and the reconciliation to the demos and its democracy.

protections thanks to constitutional guarantees. Protection from arbitrary rule was guaranteed by the decision to make written laws supreme, while the scale of popular participation was greatly improved by providing public access to a broad range of legal documents.

The second point is that people showed a remarkable ability to learn from their mistakes. It is true that the Athenians had made many serious errors over the course of the Peloponnesian War, among them the obsessive piling up of empire to the detriment of other Greek poleis, and the failure to respect established laws and ethical codes. The great suffering endured in the Sicilian expedition and other low points of the conflict were largely due to Athenian greed and partisan conflict. But in the wake of the war, the authority of ancestral laws and traditional morality were reestablished, and political decisions came to be made in accordance with laws instead of passions and whim. The democratic regime ceased to be a tyranny of the majority and became a generous government that forgave its enemies. It is fair to say that government changed because the demos finally learned or remembered the benefits of rule of law and communal harmony. Xenophon reported a rare story of how Socrates once advised a cynical aristocrat not to condemn the Athenian people too quickly, as they would learn to be better once they had been humbled by defeat. It was in keeping with human nature that “confidence implants neglect, easygoingness, and disobedience, while fear makes people more attentive, more obedient, and more orderly.” (Xenophon, 2001: 3.5.5)

The last point is the role of civic participation in promoting communal unity. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the Athenian participatory way of life was not limited to the political sphere, but extended to military service, religious practice and other aspects of daily life. While Thucydides and Plato may have worried that popular participation in politics would intensify partisan conflict and lead to civil war, in fourth-century Athens shared activities instead developed and strengthened a sense of corporate identity. Sympathy for fellow citizens convinced the supporters of a democratic government not to take revenge on the supporters of the oligarchs. Here Xenophon proves an able guide for students of Athenian politics. He (1979: 2.40.20-22) recorded the appeal a soldier made to the supporters of the Thirty to put an end to the civil war:

Fellow citizens . . . We have shared with you in the most holy religious services, in sacrifices and in splendid festivals; we have joined in dances

with you, gone to school with you and fought in the army with you, braving together with you the dangers of land and sea in defence of our common safety and freedom . . . You can be sure that we as well as you have wept much for some of those whom we have just killed.

III. The Modern Debate over Athenian Democracy

I am by no means the first to point out the signal achievements of fourth-century Athens: since the mid-1980s a number of historians have produced studies of legal reforms and reconciliation during that stormy period.¹⁴ Martin Ostwald's *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law* (1986) and Raphael Sealey's *Athenian Republic* (1987) are excellent examples. Though they did not give up their suspicion of the Athenian demos, they fully acknowledged the constitutional stability, rule of law and political maturity that marked the century. In 1989 Josiah Ober (1989: 20) published *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, arguing that nearly two centuries of democracy constituted "one of the original questions that led to the development by the Greeks of self-conscious political theory." In another important study, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (the first edition 1991), the eminent Danish scholar Mogens H. Hansen (1999: 22) called on classicists to reconsider the fourth century BC.

And the significance of the era had been noted earlier yet. Moses I. Finley in the 1970s and Arnold H. M. Jones in the 1950s both argued against the tendency to focus exclusively on the Periclean age.¹⁵ And at the end of the nineteenth century, a German scholar named Adolph Holm rejected the notion that post-Periclean democracy had declined, praising the fourth century as a time of peace and restraint (Roberts, 1994: 252). But the substantial change took place more recently.

In the 1990s the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of the birth of democracy occasioned numerous journal articles and conference papers by

14 For an insider's detailed account, see Roberts, 1994: 298-301; See also Euben, Wal-lach, and Ober, 1994: 9-10; Schwenk, 1997: 9; Ober, 2003: 11.

15 Jones, 1957; Finley, 1985. On the effect Finley had on later scholars, see, for example, Vidal-Naquet, 1995: 2-3; Morris and Raaflaub, 1998: 4. See also Rhodes, 2003: 39-40. For a detailed review of theories regarding the stability of democratic regimes, see Ober, 1989: 17-35.

eminent scholars.¹⁶ An understanding emerged: the extraordinary phenomenon of constitutional stability and political harmony, especially in fourth-century Athens, has been neglected for too long.¹⁷ Robin Osborne (1994: 20) urged scholars to end their love affair with the Thucydidean ideal of leadership and seek the reasons for the political successes of fourth-century Athens in Demosthenes' speeches and other contemporaneous materials. Paul Cartledge (1998: 12), on the other hand, suggested that "the secret of Athens' success lay in its multiple forums for, and determined practice of, creative political and social adaptation."¹⁸

This change of attitudes in the study of Athenian democracy has raised a new set of questions that demand different approaches. As Jennifer T. Roberts (1994: 298) put it, "Prosperous, powerful, culturally rich—these things had often been said about Athens; but it was a new intellectual universe that credited the Athenians with internal peacefulness." In other words, the field is in the middle of a paradigm shift. New criteria are being used to evaluate governments. Instead of gauging the scale of its imperial power, scholars have begun to assess the Athenian government according to its ability to maintain peace. New topics are being studied. The role of popular participation is now acknowledged as a crucial subject by many scholars, while in the past leadership alone was considered the decisive factor. Finally, Athenian democracy itself is being reassessed. It is no more a noisy, ignorant and impulsive crowd, but a decent government committed to the principles of moderation and constitutionalism. When we combine all these trends, the entire research agenda changes. No longer must historians ask why Athens fell, how it came to lose its empire. As Josiah Ober (2005: 2) suggested, scholars are now asking why and how the Athenians combined democratic rule with other political values so effectively, despite many serious obstacles.

How have students of political thought taken this revisionist move-

16 See, for instance, the special issue of *PS: Political Science & Politics* dated September 1993 and the articles in six issues of the British magazine *History Today* published from January to August 1994. Collections of conference papers include Cartledge, Millett, and von Reden (eds.), 1998; Morris and Raaflaub, 1998; Koumoulides (ed.), 1995; Osborne, 1994; Euben, Wallach, and Ober (eds.), 1994.

17 Not all historians agree with the reevaluation. See, for example, Samons, 2004: 6.

18 Other recent attempts to explain the stability Athens enjoyed during this period include Herman, 1994; Browning, 1995; Cole, 1996; Boegehold, 1996; Sinclair, 1988. Cf. Meier, 1998: 586.

ment? It appears that, though political philosophers and democratic theorists are acquainted with the literature, few appreciate its implications for the study of Athenian political thought.¹⁹ Consider, for example, *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Rowe and Schofield (eds.), 2000). Though the editors of this authoritative work recognize the contributions to a shared discourse made by philosophers, political theorists and historians, the chapters on Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are essentially theoretical, with little historical context.²⁰ Richard Kraut (2000: 229), a leading scholar of Plato and Aristotle, has vaguely noted that the Athenian demos “to some degree transform themselves into the just and educated citizenry,” he sticks to the traditional negative image of democracy.²¹ John Dunn (1992: 244; 2005: 38–50), while pointing out the stability and moderation of fourth-century Athenian government, accepted the negative image conveyed by Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle.

Some recent works of political philosophy, on the other hand, have seen contradictions between the theory of the decline of Athens and historical facts. Perhaps, they suggest, Athens had not been in decline all along. Malcolm Schofield (2006: 1) wrote, “The intensity of [Plato’s] obsession with political rhetoric as an inbred democratic disease is intelligible only against the background of an interpretation of fifth-century Athenian imperialism and its downfall in the Peloponnesian War.” Ryan K. Balot (2006: 190) wrote, “Plato’s powerful critique of ordinary morality . . . stemmed from Plato’s diagnosis of imperial Athens.” Arlene W. Saxonhouse (2006: 49) admitted the essential difference between Athenian democratic forms before and after the legal reforms: “By inscribing these laws on the stele . . . the Athenians moderated the democracy that allowed for the constant self-

19 Two exceptions are Woodruff, 2005 and Stone, 1988.

20 Rowe (Rowe and Schofield (eds.), 2000: 3–4), one of the editors, admits that “once Plato (and Socrates) and Aristotle have made their appearance in the volume, it is *political theory* which is privileged over other sorts of political thinking” (emphasis added). F. Rosen (2002: 202) comments that those chapters presume that “ancient Greek philosophy was the same as modern philosophy and that when words were put into the mouth of Socrates by Plato, they could be assessed and criticized just as any modern philosopher’s arguments could be understood and criticized.”

21 Here is a typical passage: “The Socratic-Platonic idea that knowledge should rule, and that expertise is superior to mere opinion, is still widely accepted in the modern world, and it poses one of the greatest challenges to democratic theory and practice” (Kraut, 2000: 228).

recreation of the democratic man such as Socrates describes in the *Republic*.” There is a distinction between fifth-century and fourth-century Athens; only the earlier period fits the Platonic stereotype.

However, we should go one step further than recognizing the gap between Athenian history and the theory of decline. The great writings of Thucydides and Plato emerged from the soil of a small Greek community in the fifth century BC; their reflections on local politics provided invaluable insights into the general domain of human politics. They spoke of the fragility of human goods, so easily destroyed by natural disasters and human errors. Their tragedy was especially spectacular because of the nature of Athenian politics. The passions of the demos, once constrained, were released by radical new freedoms, equality and general political participation. A great empire was reduced to ruin by its own impetuous people, law and morality corrupted, and the viciousness of human beings unleashed.

But when we consider the essential difference between fifth-century and fourth-century Athens, we come to see it as a great achievement by any standard. After all, democracy survived two oligarchic coups, civil strife and all the destructive effects of the Peloponnesian War. The stories of decline in the works of Thucydides and Plato are all too familiar—what moral would the two authors have drawn from the great achievements of democratic Athens after the war? And if anyone offered such a moral, can it be drawn from the extant ancient texts? The debate over this ancient form of government has just begun.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has distinguished the Thucydidean and Platonic versions of the decline of democratic Athens. It has also illustrated with two historical events how both of them present only partial images of the ancient city. However, by tracing the curious responses among scholars to the reevaluation of Athenian history since the 1980s, we have found that the theory of the decline of Athens remains one of the fundamental premises for our discussion of democratic institutions and values.

Democratic Athens is important in the history of political thought not only because it was the essential background for the reflections of great political theorists, but also because it provided the real expression of such crucial concepts such as power, equality, freedom and stability. It is one of the most curious developments in the history of political thought that,

despite its extraordinary stability, Athenian democracy has been portrayed as a precarious form of government since ancient times.

Research that highlights the positive side of Athenian democracy is often criticized for looking through a rosy lens. The institution was certainly far from perfect by any standard, and its *demos* were undeniably responsible for many enormous political misjudgements, from slavery to oppressive treatment of women. Yet, Athens did manage to rebuild after the Peloponnesian War. Contrary to general expectations, the *demos* proved resilient, wise and virtuous. These extraordinary deeds deserve our attention.

Fourth-century Athens shows just how effective direct democracy can be. It found a common ground between popular sovereignty and the rule of law, a system that protected equality and freedom from arbitrary government. Within the system, people learned from their own mistakes. Finally, the role of civic participation in improving communal solidarity is also noteworthy. It was the friendship built up through daily cooperation among all Athenians that helped them overcome the vicious circle of partisan conflict and revenge.

While the story of Athens from its golden age to the chaos of civil war was told by Thucydides and Plato, the sequel must be reconstructed from less celebrated sources. The discussion of Athenian legal reforms and reconciliation serves only as a starting point. There is no systematic account of fourth-century Athens in extant ancient texts, nor are the criteria for selecting relevant texts immediately apparent. One might, however, begin by looking for writers who deal with Athenian concepts of freedom, equality, citizenship and justice. The peculiar practices of the democratic government, such as popular deliberation and persuasion, should also be addressed. Texts that shed light on the cultural and institutional relationships among laws, community and democracy, that helped explain why the balance tipped in the direction of reconstruction rather than destruction, would be especially valuable. Anything that described discrimination against women and non-Athenians should be included—was the strict regulation of citizenship a fluke or an essential condition of participatory politics?

Another task is interpretation. Once a collection has been amassed from the different fields of philosophy, history, literature and rhetoric, each category needs to be examined according to distinct protocols. To incorporate these heterogeneous texts into political thought would be a Herculean task, maybe impossible. We need to consider not only the contents of ancient

texts but also their backgrounds, authorship, generic conventions and so on. Knowledge of the main hermeneutic traditions would be invaluable.

Would such a massive intellectual effort have any practical value? Though in today's world few people would object to crowning democracy as the prince of political ideologies, suspicion of popular sovereignty lingers, and very few democratic governments permit much meaningful popular participation. To most people, modern democracy means little more than voting from time to time. This inconsistency between democratic values and practice has lately sparked debates. While the decline of fifth-century Athens is often cited as an argument for limited popular participation, the study of fourth-century Athens yields a different message. A balanced view of democratic Athens will be a great help for the design of our political future.

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雅典民主的復興： 一個政治思想史的考察

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摘 要

本文重新檢視雅典民主在政治思想史中的地位。自十九世紀中期以來，雅典的衰敗一直是相關政治思想研究的一項重要理論預設，但是這項預設其實並未能真正反映出當時民主政治發展的全貌。本文首先歸納出雅典衰敗的兩種傳統版本，分別是柏拉圖式與修西德底斯式的版本，這兩種版本類似但不盡相同。本文接著以兩個重要歷史事件，也就是民主雅典在柏羅奔尼撒戰爭與內戰後進行的法律改革與政治和解，說明傳統看法所造成的偏差印象。最後，本文主張，要瞭解雅典民主在政治思想史中的地位，我們不僅要瞭解這個城市在柏羅奔尼撒戰爭時所犯下的一連串錯誤，也要重視它在戰敗後的重新反省與改革。

關鍵字：雅典民主、直接民主、雅典之衰敗、柏拉圖、修西德底斯