

DEMOCRACY AND THE ATHENIAN LESSON

Classical Perspectives on a Contemporary Ideal

by Emily Wilson

What is democracy? Citizens of the United States tend to associate it with freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of religion. We assume that democratic societies are better than tyrannies, theocracies or militia states. We may assume too that democracy includes “checks and balances” that make elected officials less liable to make bad decisions than leaders in other forms of government.

Modern democracy is largely inspired by one of the earliest democratic societies: ancient Athens. It is from the Athenians that we get the word *democracy*, from the ancient Greek *demokratia*, “rule by the people.” But our assumptions about democracy would not have been shared by many in classical Greece. By the standards of Athens, whose electorate had a direct vote on big decisions, the U.S. is not really a democracy at all but an oligarchy of elected representatives.

Athens offers some corrective lessons for anyone who idealizes democracy. For one thing, the Athenian democracy destroyed itself through democratic means: by voting again and again for disastrous wars. For another, a legally appointed jury voted the death penalty for the public intellectual Socrates.

To Athenians in the later years of the 5th century B.C.E., as the Peloponnesian War dragged on and on, it was clear that voters could be swayed to favor the best speaker or

the most charismatic personality in a political debate – even though that person might not have made the best argument. Wars make voters restless and unhappy, but they do not necessarily help people make good decisions. *The Knights*, a play by Aristophanes, vividly depicts People (*Demos*) as the slave to Cleon, a general and demagogue who whipped up popular feeling against the Spartans and persuaded the populace to perpetuate war at enormous cost in treasure and lives. The play suggests that democracy need not mean freedom. It may mean that the people sometimes choose bad masters. The personality politics created by today’s media risks taking us closer to the demagoguery and ruin of the Athenian political scene.

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After almost 30 years of fighting, Athens lost the war. A military junta seized power, but democratic government was eventually restored. One of the first actions

of the new democracy was to put on trial its most notorious citizen: the outspoken gadfly Socrates. The charges against him were primarily religious. He was accused of not worshipping the gods of the city and corrupting the young. Socrates was condemned to death by hemlock in 399 B.C.E.

In the United States, religious fundamentalism and liberal democracy are assumed to be opposed. Those who defended the war in Iraq argued that we could fight “Islamic extremism” by creating Western-style democracies in the Middle East. From a modern perspective, it may be tempting to see the death of Socrates as the failure of Athens to live up to the principles of democracy. We might respond that it ought

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not to be a crime to believe in whatever gods one pleases and that teachers should be free to explore intellectual possibilities with students. Surely excessive oversight of education is antithetical to democratic freedom.

But Socrates’ contemporaries did not see things this way. The association of democracy with secularism is a modern invention, as is the assumption that democracy and freedom of speech go together. The Athenians killed Socrates not despite their democratic system but because of it. Piety toward the gods was a central value, and citizens voted to execute a man who threatened their religion and their children’s morals.

Socrates’ student Plato insisted that his teacher’s condemnation was a lesson in the failings and dangers of democratic government. An obvious lesson was that democracy allows ignorant, uneducated citizens to have power over the lives of the few who might teach them. Plato’s *Republic*, in which philosophers are kings and the masses are kept under strict surveillance and control, is an anti-democratic ideal inspired by the death of Socrates.

Whether or not we agree with Plato, a look back to Athens seems essential at a time when we idealize our own version of democracy – and try to impose it on the world. Democracy does not, in itself, ensure that human rights will be protected. Restrictions on intellectual and religious freedom, along with torture, unfair trials, and unequal access to education, work, money and political power are features of democratic societies, ancient and modern. If Socrates left any lasting legacy, it ought to be a reminder to ask questions, even about our most cherished beliefs.

Emily Wilson is an assistant professor of classical studies and author of The Death of Socrates. Her essay is based on an article that first appeared in the March 16, 2008, Philadelphia Inquirer.

