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IV

Oswyn Murray

MODERN PERCEPTIONS OF ANCIENT REALITIES FROM MONTESQUIEU TO MILL

We tend to forget how swift the transitions of political thought are, as political forces attempt to justify their current obsessions by means of past ideas and past practices. The modern cult of democracy is in fact extraordinarily recent: its appearance as the most ideal form of government is essentially a product of the Cold War and the propaganda of both the Soviet Union and the United States, who made 'democratic government' the central issue of their ideological conflict; from that war of ideas the alleged "2500th anniversary of the birth of democracy" in 1992/3 was the culmination of this tendency to view ancient democracy as an inspiration for modern democracy.

Nowadays virtually every modern state is a democracy; and one may almost measure the distance from true democratic ideals by the official insistence on that fact. While many countries are content with designating themselves as 'republics', the addition of superfluous adjectives such as 'People's Republic' (of China, or Bangladesh), or 'Socialist Republic' (of Vietnam), does not add conviction to their credentials as defenders of western style liberty; whereas the addition of the word 'Democratic', as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or the Deutsche Demokratische Republik or the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka may positively suggest opposition to such values, while the ultimate 'Democratic People's Republic

of (North) Korea' recalls indeed the famous remark of Voltaire: "le saint empire romain n'était ni saint, ni romain, ni empire".[1] The conclusion might seem to be that the less attention paid to personal freedom, the more corrupt and tyrannical the regime, the more it insists on its democratic credentials; or perhaps this prevailing nomenclature simply calls attention to the fact that democracy and liberty are (as philosophers are fond of observing) fundamentally incompatible, like liberty, equality and fraternity. In contrast countries designated officially as 'kingdoms' seem to have a more healthy democratic record, as in Denmark, the Netherlands or the United Kingdom, or even Lesotho, Saudi Arabia, Siam or Thailand.

But until the new age of American domination, in the twentieth century democracy was not usually regarded as in itself an ideal form of government; and it has always been seen as a far more loaded and ambiguous concept than the easy comparison between modern America and ancient Athens might suggest. It is true that for a brief period at the end of the First World War, under American influence, democracy was proclaimed as the preferred form of government for the newly independent countries of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.[2] But within a decade the word disappeared from practical political discourse, as it became clear that democracy meant the resurgent nationalism of the middle European states, the persecution and enforced migration of minorities, and the free democratic elections that brought into power Fascism, National Socialism and the left-wing Spanish Republic, in each case against the wishes of well entrenched and substantial minorities, to cause a decade of armed conflict. For old-fashioned liberals of this period like

[1] I note that the Liberal Democratic Party which ruled Japan for 54 years was similarly "once described as neither liberal nor democratic, and not even really a party" (*The Independent* Monday 31st August 2009, 16).

[2] See M. MAZOWER, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London 1998), esp. chapter I.

Benedetto Croce the central ideal of modern political thought was not democracy but 'liberty', which was often seen as antithetical to and threatened by modern 'democracy'.

This can be illustrated for ancient history by a text shortly to be published in its original English version,[3] the eight lectures given by the young refugee Arnaldo Momigliano in Cambridge in spring 1940, in that tense period known in Britain as "the phoney war", when many hopes and dreams were entertained — before the collapse of Dunkirk and of the French resistance, the appointment of Churchill as Prime Minister, the entry of Italy into the war, and the Battle of Britain. The lectures are entitled *Peace and Liberty in the Ancient World*. Their theme is the philosophical one inspired by Benedetto Croce, of the unity of Greek and Roman history as an expression of the fundamental truths of western society. In these lectures Momigliano argued that the Greeks understood and indeed created the western ideal of liberty, but could not reconcile it with the idea of peace; the Romans, who inherited something of the Greek idea of liberty, lost it in the pursuit of peace. These two great ideals of western man, of peace and liberty, were in perpetual conflict until they were reconciled by Christianity: only in Christianity could peace — the peace of God — be reconciled with the idea of the freedom of the individual. For anyone brought up in the empirical tradition of positivist historical research, this was a completely alien way of looking at ancient history, as the interplay between great concepts, rather than as the history of events and the political and military power struggles of a long dead civilization; and there is no evidence that the miniscule audience of seven senior members of Cambridge University who faithfully attended the lectures could understand it, whether because of Momigliano's halting English and

[3] A. MOMIGLIANO, *Decimo Contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico,* a cura di R. DI DONATO (Roma 2010).

heavy Piedmontese accent, or simply because for them history meant something quite different: as he said in 1972, "when I arrived in Oxford in 1939, it was enough to mention the word 'idea' to be given the address of the Warburg Institute".[4]

To a modern audience there is one obvious omission in this account, as Franco Basso pointed out to me when I presented an account of these lectures to a group of Cambridge graduate students in theology and classics in October 2006: there is no discussion of the phenomenon of Greek democracy. The rise of democracy and its explanation in relation to Athenian cultural achievements is indeed virtually ignored. This is despite the fact that the decline and fall of democracy was one of the most fundamental issues of the 1930s: in Italy Momigliano and Piero Treves along with other members of the school of Gaetano De Sanctis battled over the significance for liberty (but not for democracy) of the conflict between Demosthenes and Philip; while in England I well remember Peter Brunt describing to me the huge importance that this ancient version of a modern conflict had for his generation of students. The absence of democracy itself from this intense debate reflects the distance between ourselves and the inter-war generation; so swiftly does the significance of apparently stable political concepts change — and who is to say that our present perceptions are any more true than those of a previous or a future generation?

Benedetto Croce (and his disciple Robin Collingwood) were the last liberal representatives of the belief that history and philosophy must be studied together, if either is to have any meaning: if the two disciplines are now in contact at all, it is in the realm of methodology with Michel Foucault and the modern French school, rather than in political thought, which has lost its way with the collapse of the serious study of Marxism. It is

[4] A. MOMIGLIANO, *Sesto Contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Roma 1980), 329.

in an effort to combat the consequences of this vacuum that it seems to me important to return to the one period of western culture where history and philosophy marched together in an attempt to understand the nature of human society — the Enlightenment.

The eighteenth century is often seen as a period whose historical ideas were vitiated by a belief that human nature is constant and that therefore the study of history is to be understood as a lesson for life (*historia magistra vitae*). The conflict between the Ancients and the Moderns was indeed predicated on the shared assumption that human nature does not fundamentally change, and that the question of the relevance of the ancient world to the modern should be discussed on the assumption that the past might (or might not indeed) be relevant as a model for the future: for the moderns it was the differences in material conditions and scientific discoveries that meant the irrelevance of ancient ideas to the modern world, not the changing nature of humanity.

But this famous *querelle*, which was carried on in France and Britain especially, was simply the public display of a shared set of values, which enabled most thinkers of the period to nuance their views between one or the other poles of the conflict, and for the most part to persist in regarding ancient political institutions as at least capable of illuminating modern ones. Rome was of course especially important in this debate for its relevance to the Founding Fathers of the new American republic and the Constitution of the United States. In comparison Greece has usually been thought to have been less studied in the early modern age, although I shall argue that in the eighteenth century it was the centre of a very serious debate that is still relevant to us today.

Again this debate has often been characterised (by myself among others) as a simple and stereotyped contrast between Sparta and Athens, based on a comparison of Plutarch's *Lives* of Lycurgus and Solon; and it is true that Plutarch was the main evidence available and that the more superficial

educational works of the period scarcely rise beyond this comparative level. Thus it is relatively easy to establish two different sides in a debate — the 'Spartophiles' (such as Mably, Rousseau and Adam Ferguson) and the 'Athenophiles' (Voltaire, Hume, Adam Smith, de Pauw[5]), and to arrange all writers of the period in a spectrum between these two poles. The conservative view of the virtues of Sparta is usually considered to have been dominant. It is my purpose to argue here that this interpretation, proposed at length by Jennifer Talbert Roberts[6] and independently espoused by our esteemed convenor,[7] is fundamentally misguided. Recent research by younger scholars has called into question this simplistic version of a conflict between Athens and Sparta.[8] In contrast I wish to argue that the 'radical' view of Athens was equally strong in the eighteenth century, and that its importance has been obscured by the attempt of nineteenth-century radicals to claim that they were the innovators introducing a new view of Athens. This view especially asserted by the Utilitarians, and by liberal writers such as Macaulay, ignores the fact that virtually all their alleged new ideas about democratic Athens were already common

[5] I have omitted any discussion of C. DE PAUW, *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Grecs* (Berlin 1788) [English translation 1793] in this study because his work is so original that it seems impossible to consider him in relation to other writers on history; I hope to return to him on a later occasion.

[6] J.T. ROBERTS, *Athens on Trial. The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton 1994).

[7] M.H. HANSEN, "The Tradition of the Athenian Democracy A.D. 1750-1990", in *Greece & Rome* 39 (1992), 14-30.

[8] See especially the studies of C. AKÇA ATAÇ, "Imperial Lessons from Athens and Sparta", in *History of Political Thought* 27 (2006), 642-60; G. CESERANI, "Modern Histories of Ancient Greece: Genealogies, Contexts and Eighteenth-Century Narrative Historiography", in *Ancient History and Western Political Thought: The Construction of Classical Time(s)*, ed. by A. LIANERI (Cambridge forthcoming); P. LIDDEL, *Civic Obligation and Individual Liberty in Ancient Athens* (Oxford 2007); *Reinventing History: The Enlightenment Origins of Ancient History*, ed. by J. MOORE, I. MACGREGOR MORRIS, A.J. BAYLISS (London 2008); P. RAHE, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty* (Yale 2009); K. VLASSOPOULOS, *Unthinking the Greek Polis* (Cambridge 2007).

opinions from the mid eighteenth century onwards. But all such attempts to draw lines between adversaries should not let us forget that behind these accounts lies a continuing serious and philosophically important attempt, shared by both historians and philosophers in the eighteenth as well as the nineteenth centuries, to understand the virtues and defects, in practice and in theory, of different forms of government in their relation to both antiquity and the modern age.

I have written elsewhere at length about views of the Spartan system, and do not wish to repeat my views here.[9] But two aspects of the arguments in favour of Sparta over Athens are significant. The first is that the majority of proponents of Sparta were not actually interested in proposing a Spartan model, but were rather engaged in undermining the relevance of antiquity to the modern age: they were 'crypto-moderns' arguing against the use of ancient models. As a result they spent a great deal of time admitting the defects of the Lycurgan constitution — its cruelty, its abuse of slavery in the helot system, its use of terror and so on. Its chief advantages were the alleged stability and permanence of its constitution, the sense of discipline and courage encouraged by its education, its economic primitiveness and the absence of such undesirable features of modern political life as the culture of polite society and the arts. But very few of the protagonists of Sparta actually wanted to return to this primitivist dream, although it could be idealised as a form of primitive polity similar to and suitable for rugged Highland peoples like the Scots. These models belong to a nostalgia for the primitive that is recognised as having little to offer modern polite society apart from an image of military virtue.

[9] O. MURRAY, "British Sparta in the Age of Philhellenism", in *The Contribution of Ancient Sparta to Political Thought,* ed. by N. BIRGALIAS, K. BURASELIS, P.A. CARTLEDGE (Athens 2007) 345-89; but I would no longer espouse all the interpretations put forward there.

The second feature of the arguments in favour of Sparta that seems to me relevant is that most of these accounts are deliberately offered as paradoxical or unconventional opinions. This is of course especially true of Rousseau's extravagant views, which were often derided. The protagonists of Sparta usually assume (perhaps correctly) that they represent a minority arguing against a conventional opinion that sees Athens as the more appropriate model for the modern world. So they can argue against both Athens and the use of ancient models at the same time, using Sparta to assert their own originality and independence as well as attempting to undermine the ancient model.

One of the more extreme claims of recent writers has been that the word 'democracy' itself was even avoided in the eighteenth century because of its connotations with Athens.[10] But this again is a simplification. One of the champions of Athens, William Young, wrote of himself in 1777:

> A warm advocate for the liberties of mankind (liberties which political institution ought surely to medicate with the tenderest hand, not wantonly corrode or amputate), I may perhaps appear bold in asserting that a democracy, in the high perfection of its establishment, is the state best calculated for general happiness.[11]

Even after two Revolutions, the American and the French, Young modified this view only slightly, substituting "the free state of Athens" for the word 'democracy', and adding "that any true and good objection to it is founded, not on the immediate vices of such constitution of government, but in *the presumptive brevity of its career.*"[12] This is a view that George Grote and John Stuart Mill would be happy to espouse in their own generation.

[10] J.T. ROBERTS, *op. cit.* (n. 6), 208-9.

[11] W. YOUNG, *The history of Athens politically and philosophically considered, with the view to an investigation of the immediate causes of elevation, and of decline, operative in a free and commercial state* (London 1777), 63.

[12] ID. (London 1804), 85.

The conception of Athenian democracy in the eighteenth century was indeed based on evidence completely different from that available to us. Any description of the Athenian constitution rested of course on Plutarch's *Life of Solon*: it would be a hundred and fifty years before the Aristotelian *Athenaion Politeia* was discovered. Epigraphy did not enter Greek history until long after George Grote, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[13] Consequently the Golden Age of Athens lay between the Persian Wars and the reforms of Ephialtes, in the age of Cimon. This again is an interpretation derived from Plutarch's *Lives*. Moreover one of the obsessions of eighteenth-century thought was the phenomenon of 'decline and fall': it was generally agreed by all writers that the radical democracy represented a decline from an earlier democratic form of government; and Pericles in particular is often cast as the villain who began the decline of Athens. But what was it that made Athens great and how was this greatness maintained?

This question can best be approached by citing what seems to be the earliest serious full-length history of Greece by one of the most original of eighteenth-century historians, the long-forgotten Irishman John Gast.[14] Gast was in his day an important figure: an Anglican clergyman educated at Trinity College Dublin, he devoted his intellectual powers to Greek history. His first work, *The Rudiments of the Grecian History* of 1753 is perhaps the earliest representative of the great upsurge of critical narrative history that occurred in the mid century in the British Isles: for strictly his work is earlier than any of the famous triumvirate of British historians, William Robertson,

[13] O. MURRAY, "Ancient History, 1872-1914", in *The History of the University of Oxford, vol. VII. Nineteenth Century Oxford, Part 2*, ed. by M.G. BROCK, M.C. CURTHOYS (Oxford 2000), 333-60.

[14] See my article "Ireland Invents Greek History: the Lost Historian John Gast", in *Hermathena* 184 (2008). I quote from the earlier text of 1753, with cross-reference to vol. I of the composite two-volume edition of 1793 *The History of Greece* edited by Joseph Stock, both published in Dublin.

David Hume and Edward Gibbon. His second work, *The History of Greece, from the Accession of Alexander of Macedon, till its final subjection by the Roman Power* (1782), was indeed presented by John Murray the publisher as a rival to the great publishing success of the first volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* in 1776, and in the National Library of Scotland there is an extensive and fascinating collection of letters from Murray to Gast on how best to approach his theme; I cannot resist quoting this programmatic statement for the new historiography:

> I have observed that all our successful historical writers, particularly Hume, Gibbon and Robertson, have reduced their works to the level of the understanding of common readers. They interrupt not their narratives either with deep learning or with profound criticism. They preserve the thread of their story from interruptions of all kinds; they heighten its interest, and carry their readers to the conclusion impatient to unwind the chain of events, and to enjoy the catastrophe... I do not mean that references to Authorities should not be given; these we find in the authors I have mentioned and should be given in a similar manner. I only contend that an historian should render his work as interesting to the reader as truth will permit. Affect the heart properly, and the business is accomplished.

Gast's second work had a long life on the continent, being translated into German and French, and surviving as the only serious account of the Hellenistic world available for fifty years until Droysen (1833-43), whose account while more enthusiastic offers little historical advance on Gast, as far as the history of Greece 'properly so called' is concerned (though Droysen's work of course covers also Syria and Egypt).

As is very clear from both of Gast's volumes, his knowledge of French antiquarian scholarship was almost as profound as that of Gibbon; and this is not surprising. For Gast belonged to the Huguenot refugee community settled in Dublin from the late seventeenth century onwards; his father had fought in the campaigns of Queen Anne before settling in Dublin, and was a doctor by profession. Gast himself was bilingual, and

began his career as a pastor in the French-speaking veteran settlement of Portarlington. But more important for his intellectual formation was the fact that his mother was a close relative of the Baron de Montesquieu, from whose family he inherited wealth later in life. Gast's historical vision is indeed steeped in the work of Montesquieu, both his most popular work, the *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734), a book that supplies the theoretical structure of Gast's second work, and the *Esprit des Lois* (1748).

Gast's earlier work, *The Rudiments of Grecian History*, is written as thirteen dialogues between three characters, 'a master, a scholar who has made some progress in ancient history, and a novice'. It is this curious literary device that enabled Gast to write the first truly critical account of Greek history in terms both of scholarship and of personal and political opinions. For the pupils are made to repeat and defend the conventional narrative as it appears from a careful but literal study of the ancient sources, while their Master continually explains to them that there is another reality behind the texts that they have misunderstood.

In this earlier work of 1753 he describes the Athenian assembly:

> There was also the Great Assembly, in which every Citizen, not declared Infamous, had a Suffrage. — So that in *Athens* the poorest Member of the Commonwealth was immediately interested in the Public Fortune. In despotic States, it matters not, at least to the meaner Ranks of Men, who has the Power; and Revolutions of Government only bring on a Change of Masters. But here, the lowest *Athenian* had a Country, in the properest sense, to fight for; he was one of the Lords of the Commonwealth; he had real Rights and Privileges; and could not give up the Constitution without being a Traitor to himself. (1753 p. 359; 1793 p. 274)

This earliest of all the political interpretations of Athenian history highlights the assembly as the source of Athenian achievements, both political and cultural. In particular it encourages us to look far beyond the modern obsession with

institutions to the values that they promote. The prime advantage of direct democracy is that "the lowest *Athenian* had a Country, in the properest sense, to fight for; he was one of the Lords of the Commonwealth; he had real Rights and Privileges; and could not give up the Constitution without being a Traitor to himself"; in contrast, the representative or republican governments that in Gast's day were still in the process of formation, excluded all but the elite from participation in politics.

It is possible to distinguish four strands of argument in the defence of Athenian democracy, all of which are already present in Gast, and which run through eighteenth-century views of Athens. The first and most obvious is the relationship between the Athenian democratic political institutions and the ideal of liberty, conceived of as the freedom of the individual; initially this did not involve a contrast between ancient and modern liberty (although many writers come close to expressing the views that we tend to associate with Benjamin Constant's famous lecture, *De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes* of 1819),[15] and was therefore a theme well suited both to the attempt by the *philosophes* to liberalise French political institutions and to the English Whig conception of the role of parliament in the Glorious Revolution. It was only with the American War of Independence (1776-83) that this conception of the relation between ancient and modern liberty began to become controversial, when it was shown that modern peoples could behave like ancient Athenians, and be inspired by the idea of liberty to fight for their independence.

The second strand derives from Montesquieu. For him the essential characteristic of successful popular government was "virtue"; as he says in the section *Du principe de la démocratie*:

> Dans un état populaire, il faut un ressort de plus, qui est la vertu.

[15] See for instance W. YOUNG, *op. cit.* (n. 11).

And again:

> Les politiques grecs qui vivoient dans le gouvernement populaire ne reconnoissoient d'autre force qui pût le soutenir que celle de la vertu. Ceux d'aujourd'hui ne nous parlent que de manufactures, de commerce, de finances, de richesses, et de luxe même. (Book III, chapter III)

Much of the historical thought of the period is concerned with how to define, create and preserve this conception of political virtue. William Young was an avowed follower of Montesquieu, and his work *The Spirit of Athens*, first published in 1777,[16] is centred on this problem, which he defines as one of patriotism:

> *Then* the interest of the whole was deemed that of each; now the inverse is adopted, and each would operate on the whole. The genius of patriotism, which animated every breast, no longer exists; nay the very instances of its existence are questioned: we wonder at past transactions and ancient stories; we doubt that the Greek Codrus, or Roman Decii devoted themselves; and that the elder Brutus should sacrifice the dearest ties of nature, to a sentiment we so little know the force of, now seems singular, if not impossible. (1804 p. 11; 1777 p. 9)

This remained a central theme in the interpretation of Athenian democracy down to George Grote, who defined in very similar terms what he called "constitutional morality":[17]

> A paramount reverence for the forms of the constitution, enforcing obedience to the authorities acting under and within those forms, yet combined with the habit of open speech, of action

[16] There were two further editions with substantial alterations in 1786 and 1804; see the excellent account of P. LIDDEL, "William Young and the Spirit of Athens", in *Reinventing History: The Enlightenment Origins of Ancient History*, ed. by J. MOORE, I. MACGREGOR MORRIS, A.J. BAYLISS (London 2008), 57-85. I quote for the most part from the 1804 edition of Young, which is more widely available. It is quite false to view Young as an opponent of Athenian democracy at any date.

[17] A term picked up by N. URBINATI, *Mill on Democracy. From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government* (Chicago 2002), although Mill himself refers rather to "the unwritten maxims of the Constitution — in other words the *positive political morality* of the country", J.S. MILL, *Considerations on Representative Government* (New York 1861), chapter V.

> subject only to definite legal control, and unrestrained censure of those very authorities as to all their public acts — combined, too, with a perfect confidence in the bosom of every citizen, amidst the bitterness of party contest, that the forms of the constitution will be not less sacred in the eyes of his opponents than in his own.
> (*History of Greece,* Part II, ch. XXXI [1888], vol. III, 372)

According to Grote this morality is difficult both to establish and to preserve: apart from the post-Clisthenic Athenian democracy, "it may be found in the aristocracy of England (since about 1688) as well as in the democracy of the American United States", but not (he claimed) in the Swiss cantons nor in the French Revolution.

A third strand was more controversial, the importance of commerce and manufacture. Montesquieu had, as the quotation above demonstrates, deprecated the tendency to connect freedom and commerce; yet since Adam Smith 'natural liberty' has included both economic and political libertarianism, to the extent that capitalism and democracy are in the modern age now thought to have a natural affinity. Once again it is remarkable to find in John Gast, writing about the same time that Adam Smith began lecturing in Glasgow, a fully developed emphasis on the importance of commerce in the creation of Greek civilisation. The question of the ancient economy is controversial for two reasons. The first is the question whether Athenian and modern commerce could truly be compared; the second is whether commerce (ancient or modern) might lead directly or indirectly to luxury and therefore decline. For William Young Athens and eighteenth-century England were directly comparable: the Athenian empire was related to the idea of 'the dominion of the seas'; but "with the same haste a commercial nation accedes to empire, it speeds to dissolution". For commercial activity brought luxury, which inevitably led to corruption and decadence. Once again this is a theme common to almost all thinkers of the period, and served as one

of the chief explanations for the decline of Athens, which in turn provided a lesson for the modern age.[18]

Finally, as Gast claimed, the working of the Athenian democratic assembly is essentially connected with the development of a popular culture which was capable of supporting the highest level of creativity and education, both among the intellectual elite and in the audience who was called on to appreciate it:

> *Liberty*...was also the principal Cause of this; for Science and Arts are always the Attendants of *Liberty*. *Genius* is, as it were, licentious; it loves to sport itself after its own wanton manner, neither exposed to the Jealousies of Tyrants, nor to the Threats of Laws. It is then only, that the Mind becomes capable of the *wide-expatiating* View, and of the *bold-towering* Thought. — Thus it was at Athens. There, Imagination knew no bounds; and all the Excess of Liberty was fully indulged, except when the Religion of the Superstitious People happened to be wounded. (1753 p. 363; 1793 p. 274)
>
> Another Cause, that contributed to the Advancement of Literature at *Athens*, was *the Form of Polity*. All Matters were referred to the great Assembly of the People; and, as I have told you, neither Domestic Regulations, nor Foreign Alliances, neither Peace, nor War, could be ultimately determined on, till their Consent had given ratification. On these accounts, *Persuasion* was among the principal Instruments of the *Athenian* Government; and the lowest Citizens were accustomed to be addressed by Persons, exercised in all the Arts of Speech. Now this not only made Oratory necessary for those, who were desirous of appearing to advantage in the Public Councils; but also by these means the People themselves were rendered *nice* and *critical Hearers*. (1753 p. 365; 1793 p. 279)

The connection between artistic creativity and liberty was a common theme in eighteenth-century thought; and it is such a

[18] I. HONT, "The Luxury Debate in the Early Enlightenment", in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. by M. GOLDIE, R. WOKLER (Cambridge 2006), 379-418.

prevalent view that it is difficult to trace it to any individual thinker.[19] It served as a general explanation of the preeminence of Greek art and Greek literature. As Winckelmann said, "In Absicht der Verfassung und Regierung von Griechenland ist die Freiheit die vornehmste Ursache des Vorzugs der Kunst";[20] or as William Young put it towards the end of the century:

> Free states (it hath by many been observed) are the best nursery-bed of the arts; and other states (it will be observed) have run a career somewhat similar to Athens; and have known a period when emulation, sickening in the stagnation of public services and duties, might be supposed to invigorate in others scenes of employment (1804 p. 9).

This view again remained part of the general conception of Athenian democracy down to the age of Grote and Mill, and would indeed probably be endorsed by many of us to this day.

Nevertheless Athens had declined, and had begun to do so at the height of her democratic power, if the connection between Pericles and the decline and fall were to be maintained. As Gast said, with Ephialtes and Pericles, Athens entered a period of luxury and decline: "What a Patriot, what a Blessing might this Man have been! but Ambition is a treacherous guide." (1753 p. 471; 1793 p. 365):

> Thus affairs went on, till at length the growing vanity, the haughtiness, and ambition of the *Athenians*, on the one hand, and the envy and various resentments of the *Grecian* States, on the other, brought on a war, which tried the strength of this specious *Fabric*, and has left to succeeding Ages this instructive lesson, that *there is not any Empire can be lasting, but what is founded on Moderation, Justice, and Virtue*. (1753 p. 492; 1793 p. 385)

[19] But see now the discussion after this paper provoked by Pauline Schmitt Pantel.

[20] J.J. WINCKELMANN, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (Dresden 1763); M.H. HANSEN, *The Tradition of Ancient Greek Democracy and its Importance for Modern Democracy* (Copenhagen 2005), 14.

Young's view is the same:

> Perhaps it had been well for the republic, had he never been born! But his death was equally fatal to it, as his life, for none other knew how to redress the evils which he had occasioned. He had accustomed the people to the voice of a demagogue... On his death, a thousand pretenders arose, and with rival arts and equal weakness perplexed the public councils, disunited the people, and led them to ruin and destruction. (1804 p. 255)

But Young also had a more contemporary criticism:

> But a free commonwealth hath too seeds of dissolution proper to itself.
>
> In such [a] state, the primary authority is resident in the many; but, of course, the executive power must be delegated to the few. The *first* is in the hands of the people, whose will being once determined and promulgated, necessity from day to day more rarely calls for their interposition: the *second*, entrusted to their agents, requires unremitted exertion. As the one power becomes dormant, the latter increases in vigilance; till at length the importance of the state yields to the consequence of private men, and the servant of the public directs the legislation he should obey. (1804 p. 86)

The consequence is a natural tendency for the executive to usurp the functions of the state.

There are two criticisms of Athenian democracy that eighteenth-century writers tend to ignore or at least play down. The first is the trial of Socrates, which for the German tradition since at least Hegel has always been the turning-point of ancient civilisation. Although Gast for instance devotes a long discussion to it, he does not regard it as an accusation against the Athenian state, or as evidence for a conflict between the state and the individual conscience; rather for him Socrates is a proto-Christian and his death is a simple example of martyrdom in the service of a higher religion. In general (apart from extreme interpretations like that of De Pauw, who regards the execution of Socrates as fully justified) it seems that eighteenth-century historians chose to ignore the episode as an example of inconvenient religious or ethical enthusiasm.

Even more surprising in an age when slavery was becoming ever more problematic, eighteenth-century writers prefer not to comment on Athenian slavery. That is an attitude they share with both Grote and Mill — who have far less justification for their silence, since both of these later thinkers were fully committed to the anti-slavery movement. It is as if for them Athens must be so perfect that neither the existence of slavery nor the oppression of women can be allowed to shadow the picture.

In this respect William Mitford does not deserve the scorn and contempt that was heaped on him by his radical critics. He might have been a proponent of constitutional monarchy, and a fierce critic of the Athenian political system; but his most convincing criticism of both Athens and Sparta in relation to the modern British constitution was the absolute dependence of both Sparta and Athens on slave labour. The Utilitarians chose to ignore his defence of liberty for the individual in their fury at his disapproval of democracy.[21]

Another forgotten English historian offers a transition to the nineteenth century.[22] Bulwer-Lytton is nowadays dimly remembered as the author of the romantic novel *The Last Days of Pompeii*; and perhaps as the author of two of the most famous phrases in the English language, "Poverty makes for strange bedfellows", and "The pen is mightier than the sword". In his day he was commercially the most successful novelist in Britain between Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. Having antagonized his mother by making an unsuitable marriage, his allowance was cut off; he decided to follow the footsteps of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Archer, and save himself from bankruptcy by writing novels and buying himself a seat in the

[21] See the defence of Mitford against his critics in the preface by his brother Lord Redesdale to the posthumous New Edition of his *History of Greece* (London 1835), esp. xviii-xxiv.

[22] See my introduction to the bicentenary edition of E. BULWER-LYTTON, *Athens: Its Rise and Fall* (London 2004).

House of Commons. Within a decade (1828-37) he had recouped his fortunes. He was a reforming Member of Parliament from 1831 to 1841; he became a prominent member of the group of the philosophical radicals, a friend of the Utilitarian philosophers around James Mill, and a colleague in parliament of the future historian of Greece, George Grote, then a banker and M.P. for the City of London (1832-41), although, despite being colleagues in the same Radical parliamentary group, towards the end of their time in Parliament he and Grote seem to have become more distant. In 1838 Bulwer-Lytton made his most famous speech, advocating the abolition of the last vestiges of slavery — a speech so brilliant that it silenced all opposition. He also had family connections with the Philhellenes; for in 1824 his elder brother Henry ("a silly supercilious young man" according to William St Clair) had volunteered to oversee the transfer of £130,000 in gold sovereigns to the provisional Greek government in Nauplion from the London Greek Committee, in order to finance the War of Independence.

As a young man Bulwer-Lytton was a figure of considerable social style, a lover of Byron's former flame, Lady Caroline Lamb; with his youthful looks and "glitteringly golden hair that, worn in ringlets, played about his shoulders", he had cut a swathe through the salons of Paris. He invented the concept of the 'dandy':

> A fop, a philosopher, a voluptuary and a moralist — a trifler in appearance but rather one to whom trifles are instinctive, than one to whom trifles are natural — an Aristippus on a limited scale, accustomed to draw sage conclusions from the follies he adopts, and while professing himself a votary of pleasure, desirous in reality to become a disciple of wisdom.[23]

[23] E. BULWER-LYTTON, *Pelham: or The Adventures of a Gentleman* (London 1848) preface to edition, iv.

In later life he became a Conservative politician, and under Disraeli his political career flourished. It was in fact Bulwer-Lytton who sent Gladstone into exile as governor of the Ionian Islands in 1858, and in 1862 on the abdication of King Otto of Bavaria, he was even offered the throne of Greece, which (along with many others) he declined. In his day Bulwer-Lytton, "Poet, Essayist, Orator, Statesman, Dramatist, Scholar, Novelist" (*The Times*, 1873) was described as "not only the foremost novelist, but the most eminent living writer in English literature" (*Quarterly Review* 1873). He was buried in Westminster Abbey, with a sermon by Benjamin Jowett on "one of England's greatest writers and one of the most distinguished men of our time". His descendants have included a Viceroy of India, and a Governor of the Bank of England; they have acquired an Earldom, and their family seat of Knebworth is now "the stately home of Rock", where all the greatest modern rock bands have performed.

In 1837, in his Radical phase and almost a century after John Gast, Bulwer-Lytton composed a work with the traditional Montesquieu title, *Athens: Its Rise and Fall.* This unfinished work (he completed only the *Rise*) was designed as the first Radical Utilitarian history of Greece, long before Grote; and it was a book that, because of its author's reputation as a novelist had wide circulation even among the general public. Bulwer-Lytton shows the continuity with eighteenth century thought by echoing Gast's praise of the Athenian assembly in fine romantic prose:

> [...] we cannot but allow the main theory of the system to have been precisely that most favourable to the prodigal exuberance of energy, of intellect, and of genius. Summoned to consultation upon all matters, from the greatest to the least, the most venerable to the most trite — to-day deciding on the number of their war-ships, to-morrow on that of a tragic chorus; now examining with jealous forethoughts the new barriers to oligarchical ambition; — now appointing, with nice distinction, to various service the various combinations of music; — now welcoming in their forum-senate the sober ambassadors of Lacedaemon or the

jewelled heralds of Persia, now voting their sanction to new temples or the reverent reform of worship; compelled to a lively and unceasing interest in all that arouses the mind, or elevates the passions, or refines the taste; — supreme arbiters of the art of the sculptor, as the science of the lawgiver, — judges and rewarders of the limner and the poet, as of the successful negotiator or the prosperous soldier; we see at once the all-accomplished, all-versatile genius of the nation, and we behold in the same glance the effect and the cause: — every thing being referred to the people, the people learned of every thing to judge. Their genius was artificially forced, and in each of its capacities. They had no need of formal education. Their whole life was one school. [...] All that can inspire the thought or delight the leisure were for the people. Theirs were the portico and the school — theirs the theatre, the gardens, and the baths; they were not, as in Sparta, the tools of the state — they were the state! Lycurgus made machines and Solon men. In Sparta the machine was to be wound up by the tyranny of the fixed principle; it could not dine as it pleased — it could not walk as it pleased — it was not permitted to seek its she machine save by stealth and in the dark; its children were not its own — even itself had no property in self. Sparta incorporated under the name of freedom, the worst complexities, the most grievous and the most frivolous vexations, of slavery. And therefore it was that Lacedaemon flourished and decayed, bequeathing to fame men only noted for hardy valour, fanatical patriotism, and profound but dishonourable craft — attracting, indeed, the wonder of the world, but advancing no claim to its gratitude, and contributing no single addition to its intellectual stores. But in Athens the true blessing of freedom was rightly placed — in the opinions and the soul. Thought was the common heritage which every man might cultivate at his will. This unshackled liberty had its convulsions and its excesses, but producing unceasing emulation and unbounded competition, an incentive to every effort, a tribunal to every claim, it broke into philosophy with the one — into poetry with the other — into the energy and splendour of unexampled intelligence with all. Looking round us at this hour, more than four-and-twenty centuries after the establishment of the constitution we have just surveyed, — in the labours of the student — in the dreams of the poet — in the aspirations of the artist — in the philosophy of the legislator — we yet behold the imperishable blessings we derive from the liberties of Athens and the institutions of Solon. The life of Athens became extinct, but

> her soul transfused itself, immortal and immortalizing, through the world. [24]

When two decades later in the 1850s George Grote in turn took up the theme of Athens, he was the heir to a long tradition, which he chose to ignore in favour of attacking the favourite target of the radicals, the historian William Mitford. Grote's only original touch is in fact his preference for Clisthenes over Solon as the founder of democracy — that is, for the radical parliamentary reformer over the eighteenth-century philosophic lawgiver. Similarly his friend John Stuart Mill, writing on liberty (1859) and on representative government (1861), is echoing an essentially eighteenth-century view, that democracy was not an end in itself, but a system of government that, unless it could be combined with a form of mass education and the creation of a sense of civic virtue, was likely to be incompatible with personal liberty.

Thus the nineteenth-century radical view of history espoused by Grote and Mill was not a new departure, as they liked to claim, but a continuation of the mainstream liberal conception of Athenian democracy. It was only in the brief period of transition, or the *Sattelzeit* as Reinhart Koselleck has called it, from the American to the French Revolutions, that the tide turned away from Athenian democracy with the much overrated Scotsman William Gillies and the far more interesting William Mitford in Britain, with the American founding fathers (whose chief interest was the preservation of property and the continuation of slavery) and with the French Revolutionary thinkers under the influence of Rousseau, Mably and Saint-Just, though each group approached the Spartan theme in very different ways. The only new developments that the High Victorian generation of Grote and Mill can offer are the new positive interpretation of Pericles, who is no longer seen as the demagogue responsible for the decline and fall of Athens, and Grote's

[24] E. BULWER-LYTTON, *Athens: Its Rise and Fall*, Book II, chapter I, XVI.

inspired and at the time highly controversial perception that it was Clisthenes not Solon who had created Athenian democracy.[25] The first development is a result of the renewed nineteenth-century interest in Thucydides as a model for the writing of history. And the second was of course a direct consequence of the political experience of George Grote as a Radical Member of Parliament in the newly democratic local electoral system of the Great Reform Bill of 1832. But these are simply minor twists in the continuing dialogue between ancient and modern democracy.

The eighteenth and nineteenth-century debates on the virtues of Athenian democracy cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to an understanding of the ancient world, or to modern political doctrines; like all attempts to understand and to learn from the past, they combine a proper attention to antiquarian research with a philosophical approach, and a recognition that all history that offers any interpretation at all is ultimately contemporary history. But the necessary desire to be relevant to contemporary society, while it is admirable in itself, should not allow us to neglect the interpretations of previous ages. For they have the power to liberate us from the short-term passions of contemporary politics.

I conclude with the lessons that we can perhaps learn from the debates that began with Montesquieu in the eighteenth century, and continued uninterruptedly until the age of Mill. Democracy is not a universal ideal, or even necessarily the best form of government in all circumstances. As Mill saw, it has two preconditions for its successful establishment. The first is universal education to the highest possible level. The second is that constant in democratic thought, the *vertu* or 'constitutional morality', that binds together a community in the pursuit of common political ends, and that is threatened by any

[25] I owe this observation to the undergraduate thesis (2007) of my former pupil Mohan Rao of Magdalen College, Oxford.

form of sectarian, religious or tribal divisions. Both these preconditions have been ignored or called into question in the modern drive towards universal democracies.

If, but only if, these conditions exist, a democratic system has significant advantages: it can lead to forms of personal liberty that allow economic progress, artistic creativity, and a sense of personal self-esteem. But it also involves constant vigilance against potential dangers — the usurpation by the executive of the powers belonging to the community, the threat of populist leadership or demagoguery, exercised whether by rhetoric or by television (what difference is there, an Italian friend recently remarked, between Cleon and Berlusconi?), and most dangerous of all the threat to minorities from majority rule. Perhaps finally, with our contemporary version of the South-Sea Bubble, we should consider the corruption that is brought to a free society by luxury, and the failure to pay sufficient attention to its consequences, whether for other societies or for the environment itself. These are all important modern issues which can only be obscured by ignoring past debates and the philosophical interpretation of historical events.

DISCUSSION

M. Hansen: You hold that "within a decade [after World War One] the word [democracy] disappeared from practical political discourse". On the whole I agree but I think you exaggerate. There were strong supporters of democracy in many western countries. In Austria democracy was defended by Hans Kelsen who wrote the Austrian constitution of 1920, and some years later he published his book *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie* (Tübingen 1927). In Czechoslovakia Tomas Masaryk, the president of the new republic until 1935, was almost the symbol of democracy. In Belgium the fascist Rexist party was a serious threat to Belgian democracy in the 1930s. But the Rexists were defeated in 1937 by prime minister van Zeeland and his government. Thorvald Stauning, the Danish prime minister 1929-42, advocated democracy in his electoral addresses in 1935. In the Spanish civil war (1936-9) a large section of the 'Republicans' or 'Loyalists' were liberal democrats who fought alongside socialists and communists. Finally, Franklin D. Roosevelt was a loyal democrat and in December 1940, a year before Pearl Harbor, he delivered one of his most famous speeches in which he declared USA's determination to aid Great Britain and stated what became the catchword of the speech: "we must be the great arsenal of democracy", etc.

In my opinion democracy did not "disappear from practical political discourse" during the interwar period; but it became indeed a much contested form of constitution with adversaries and adherents, just as it was in ancient Greece. And democracy came under attack from two sides: from Marxists and socialists to the left and from fascists and nazis to the right.

O. Murray: I agree of course that there were voices raised in defence of forms of liberal democracy in the twenties and thirties; but my point is rather one related to practical political discourse, that is the normal discourse of politicians: at least in origin totalitarian and Marxist regimes declared themselves to be (and often were) true democracies in the sense of embodying the will of the people; and they often retained large parts of the pre-existing parliamentary institutions and ideologies: particularly in central Europe it would have been difficult to draw a clear distinction between 'democratic' and 'undemocratic' regimes. In general political discussions among the liberal elite during this period the word 'democracy' tended to be avoided, and 'liberty' replaced it as the central concept, because the freedom of the individual citizen was directly threatened by class-based, nationalist and totalitarian ideologies, whether or not they claimed to be democracies. The reasons for this are well brought out in Mark Mazower, *op. cit.* (n. 2).

P. Schmitt Pantel: Dans votre présentation de la réflexion de John Gast sur la démocratie vous soulignez qu'il attribue à la démocratie athénienne le développement d'une "culture du peuple" (*popular culture*) et vous remarquez que le lien entre l'activité créatrice et la liberté est un thème commun à la pensée du 18ème siècle. Est-ce que ce lien est, dans la pensée du 18ème chez John Gast et chez d'autres auteurs, précisé, explicité? Et si oui en quels termes, avec quels arguments? Je pose cette question car dans les dernières décennies ce thème a été repris et abordé par différents chercheurs à propos de plusieurs domaines de la culture athénienne, le théâtre par exemple ou encore l'iconographie monumentale. Le lien entre démocratie et culture est bien sûr aussi un problème très contemporain.

O. Murray: Your question is fundamental, and I do not at present have a completely satisfactory answer to it. I believe that the origin of this claim of a relationship between liberty and artistic creativity lies in the last chapter (44) of Longinus

On the Sublime, which became famous throughout Europe through Boileau's translation and his accompanying treatise of 1674. Here Longinus discusses "the well-worn view that democracy is the kindly nurse of great men, and that great men of letters have flourished only under democracy and perished with it". Although Longinus himself argues against this view, it is clear that the cult of the Sublime embraced it whole-heartedly. In Britain this became a standard literary and political doctrine of the Whig revolution: in a recent survey Jonathan Lamb refers to the critics William Wotton, Sir Richard Blackmore, Leonard Welsted and John Davies, and says: "These men approach Longinus with a strong Whiggish belief in Revolution principles, and interpret his life and work as unremitting opposition to arbitrary rule, both in the spheres of politics and of literature. They read the last section of his treatise, where the mutualities of liberty and eloquence, and slavery and decadence, are loudly affirmed, literally as a defense of democracy, 'the Nurse of true Genius'". (J. Lamb, "The Sublime", in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, vol 4 The Eighteenth Century*, ed. by H.B. Nisbet and C. Rawson [Cambridge 1997], 396).

Certainly the footnote to the passage of Gast that I have quoted justifies his claim specifically with reference to Longinus: it runs, "Vide *Longinum* de Sublimi. Sect. 44. Vide etiam *Quint.* de Instit.Orat L. 10 C. 1" (Gast 1753, 363).

This view derived from Boileau was still fundamental to libertarian thought in the Romantic age, and Mill wrote in 1859: "Genius can only breathe freely in an *atmosphere* of freedom. Persons of genius are, *ex vi termini*, more individual than any other people — less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character" (*On Liberty* ch. III.). I do not know exactly how this interpretation found favour on the continent of Europe; but it was clearly widely accepted in both France and Germany by the mid eighteenth century, in the age of Voltaire and Winckelmann.

In other words the positive interpretation of Athenian democratic institutions began not among historians and antiquarians, but as a consequence of the theory of the Sublime, which led to a positive re-evaluation of Athenian art and literature, and particularly of tragedy from the middle of the eighteenth century: it was the literary and artistic achievements of Athenian culture that the German tradition especially admired from Winckelmann onwards, through Goethe and Schiller to Humboldt and Hegel; and critics naturally attributed the genius of the Athenians to the stimulus of freedom and democratic political institutions. So the increasingly positive evaluation of Athenian literature and art was actually the cause rather than a consequence of the renewed emphasis on liberty as a political ideal. There is of course a certain irony in such conceptions, given that the eighteenth century was above all the age of successful royal and aristocratic patronage of the arts.

Modern interpretations of the relation between freedom and the arts seem to be completely unaware of this earlier debate, but they too involve a similar implicit contradiction. The two prevalent theories of artistic creativity, the importance of patronage in its production, and the importance of the autonomy or freedom of the artist, are of course strictly incompatible. Modern attempts to claim that public or state institutional patronage somehow does not inhibit freedom in the way that private capitalist patronage does, are specious (one need only cite the experience of Shostakovitch), but widely accepted by artists hungry for state (or private) subvention and by culture-mad administrators of public funds. This is the background to contemporary attempts to claim that it was Athenian democratic institutions that caused the development of great art. In fact of course there is no relationship (or rather often a negative relationship) between democracy and art; and although there may be some connection between personal freedom and artistic innovation, there are plenty of contrary ancient and modern examples of tyranny and persecution producing great art.

P. Pasquino: Speaking of Montesquieu, an extraordinarily influential figure in the political thought of the Enlightenment, both in Europe and in the New World, you quote a very important text: "Les politiques grecs qui vivoient dans le gouvernement populaire ne reconnoissoient d'autre force qui pût le soutenir que celle de la vertu. Ceux d'aujourd'hui ne nous parlent que de manufactures, de commerce, de finances, de richesses, et de luxe même" (livre III ch. III). Grote was right: it seems extremely difficult to combine what the author of *De l'esprit des Lois* called *vertu* and what the Scottish social philosophy defined as "commercial society". This tension is at the origin of Sieyès' political theory of the representative government. In his famous speech against the King's veto held in The French Constituent Assembly on September 7th 1789, the *abbé*, who by the way in his manuscripts praised the Athenian political regime, claimed that democracy (which for him was the same as Athenian democracy) could not be the political form that the constitution had to establish in France since "les manufactures et le commerce" made impossible the participation of citizens into public life; instead elected and accountable professional politicians had to be in charge of the government. 'Representation' rather than 'virtue' became the name of the new regime.

O. Murray: Yes I agree; the concept of *vertu* was seen early on as difficult to define; and there was a shift from 'virtue' to 'representation' as the central problem in democratic thought in this period, which is very important. It is somehow combined with the idea that the chief difference between ancient and modern societies is the greater development of modern economic structures: that was already seen by Montesquieu, and of course goes right through to Benjamin Constant on ancient and modern liberty and beyond: the great battle among twentieth century economic historians of the ancient world was precisely that between the modernists and the primitivists like Moses Finley in his book on *The Ancient Economy*.

Yet as I quoted him, Grote still believes that political virtue is important in the creation of the possibility of democratic government; and so too does John Stuart Mill in his *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), where he discusses those societies unsuited to particular forms of government (ch. I) and the prerequisites for representative government (ch. IV). So in the Old World at least the need for a *koinonia* or a common sense of unity was still felt to be important, as it is today in communitarian interpretations of democracy. Once again the continuities are as revealing of the central issues of democratic theory as the apparent changes in historical interpretation.