

# Conclusion

Autor(en): **Murray, Oswyn**

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## CONCLUSION

The last time that I came to Vandœuvres was by train in April 1974. It was the height of the Cold War, and this was the only institution in the West that classicists from the Eastern bloc were permitted to visit. For that generation from the East it was a lifeline, while we from the West learned for the first time how the bonds that united the *République des Lettres* were the most important of all, transcending both nationality and ideology. I recall visiting the *Fondation Bodmer*, with its museum built as a reinforced bunker so as to preserve a few documents for civilisation in the not unlikely event of nuclear war. And I recall most of all evenings in the Baron's library, drinking the last of his whisky, and discussing with the Polish papyrologist Zbigniew Borkowski what incredible youthful folly had caused him to join the Communist Youth, and me to join the British army in order to fight communism, as we searched in vain for the Red Star in the night sky. Now the Fondation Hardt serves a different purpose in a better world, and it is a delight to find it once more flourishing, after a period of uncertainty, under the genial leadership of its inspiring director, Pierre Ducrey.

So it seemed to me especially appropriate to be discussing the relations between ancient and modern democracy in this setting, and at a time when a recently triumphant democratic ideology is once again entering the difficult process of discovering its limitations and its problems. Mogens Hansen, who has done more than any other living scholar to revive the study of ancient Greek democracy, called us together to consider, as he explains in his introduction, the relationship between Athenian institutions and those of modern democratic states; and I think

our papers and their discussions, carefully planned by him, covered many of the most important institutional aspects of this relationship.

In his introduction Hansen has concentrated on the extent to which the modern world has been influenced by, or can make use of, ancient examples to clarify modern problems. This is of course an important part of the questions we were called upon to address, and one which many of his contributors (myself included) specifically approached. But I think that most (perhaps all) of those who took part in these discussions recognised that we were not professional politicians or political scientists or political philosophers. We were students of the ancient world with a sincere interest in the problems of the modern. Whatever we may have contributed to the understanding of the origins of modern democratic thinking, this is not and cannot belong to the core of our expertise.

In the course of this week of intensive discussion I believe that, rather than coming to conclusions about the influence of the ancient on the modern world, many of us found ourselves reflecting on the inverse relationship, of the influence of the modern world on the ancient. For in the study of Athenian democracy, as in all historical research, we have to begin from our own experience; and the questions that we ask derive not so much directly from the evidence itself as from our reflection on that evidence. I will give three relevant examples of how this inverse relationship has worked.

It has recently once again been reasserted that the origins of our study of the ancient *polis* derive from the insights of the great contemplative Swiss historian, Jacob Burckhardt.<sup>1</sup> It was

<sup>1</sup> K. VLASSOPOULOS, *Unthinking the Greek Polis* (Cambridge 2007) following the lead of W. Gawantka in 1985; although both these writers think that this vitiates the fundamental insight. It is clear that I take a more positive view.

he who saw the central importance of the phenomenon of the *polis*; and the reason that he was able to perceive this, as no professional ancient historian had been able to do, was precisely because he lived in an age when nationalism had recently become the dominant ideology, and in the peripheral non-nationalistic society of the little city of Basel.<sup>2</sup> His negative insight derived from his distaste for Prussian nationalism after 1870, while his positive message was related to his own experience as a member of the Basel ruling elite in the fundamentally oligarchic but libertarian merchant and agrarian society of nineteenth-century Switzerland. Without Basel the Greek *polis* would never have been discovered, and Mogens Hansen's great Copenhagen Polis Centre would never have happened. It is important to reflect that our modern knowledge of Greek democracy depends ultimately on two individuals who lived respectively in Switzerland and Denmark — two small and in global terms insignificant, but very democratic, societies, not so very different from the Greek city-state.

Again the strength of the studies of Moses Finley derives from his continuous and problematic involvement in American affairs. The history of the study of ancient slavery from Marx to Finley is the history of the impact of the modern on the ancient world. Finley himself viewed slavery in the way that he did because of the similarities and differences between ancient slavery and the still burning question of slavery in the American southern states. That would indeed be a fascinating subject to pursue in some future *colloque*. But his book on *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (London 1973), which provides the intellectual starting point for our own meeting, is also marked by his concern for the impact of modern democratic thought on our perception of the ancient world. He began from the contemporary theory that indifference, apathy or acquiescence

<sup>2</sup> L. GOSSMAN, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt* (Chicago 2000).

was the most important attribute of the modern electorate, and proceeded to show that the opposite was true of ancient Athens; so his emphasis was on the importance of participation in democracy. But behind this insistence on the importance of the modern citizen standing up to be counted lay his own experience at the hands of the supine and corrupt political system called democracy in the age of that archetypal demagogue, Senator McCarthy. If he had not been driven into exile in Europe on the basis of false accusations, he would never have written with such passion on Athenian democracy.

I could go on with examples of the reciprocal relationship between the ancient and the modern worlds, and how the modern world has enabled us, and continues to enable us, to understand the ancient world better. But I will simply recall another lesson from a time of adversity, when that archetypal wandering Jew, Jules Isaac, a great educator dismissed from office by his colleague, the collaborator Jérôme Carcopino (who to the shame of the French nation was later elected to the *Académie Française*) was roaming the roads of Vichy France with two manuscripts in his battered briefcase. The first, *Jésus et Israël*, was to make him famous throughout Europe when it was published in 1948 after the war, and to cause him to be received in his 82<sup>nd</sup> year by Pope John XXIII. The second manuscript, *Les Oligarques: essai d'histoire partielle*,<sup>3</sup> was a lament for his beloved Athens, betrayed by the oligarchs in collaboration with the Spartan enemy, as France had been betrayed in the modern world. His book closes with an expression of hope:

J'écris ces lignes ultimes, quelque part en France — en ce qui fut la France, — le samedi dix-sept octobre mil neuf cent quarante-deux: les 'bons' sont toujours aussi malfaisants; savoir si les 'méchants' seront aussi magnanimes.

<sup>3</sup> The book was first published after the war in 1946 (Les éditions de Minuit, Paris); I have used the edition published by Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1989.

The old adage *historia magistra vitae* has in our age more than ever before been transformed into a new one, *vita magistra historiae*. At the end of these days of study, that is for me the most important lesson, and the ultimate reason for comparing ancient and modern democratic practices. It is clear that we create our insights through self-selection, as a result of our own experience in attempting to overcome a number of weaknesses that we perceive in modern democratic politics. And we come to understand the ancient world more clearly because it is or is not like the modern. Sometimes we discern genuine patterns in the ancient evidence as a result of modern experience, sometimes we misunderstand the ancient world; but that is a risk that must be taken. It is absolutely essential to attempt to use modern parallels in order to construct our ancient world. And it is our ability to understand better antiquity, or our recognition that we cannot understand antiquity, that has been revealed in these discussions. For that reason I suspect that our book will be ultimately be read with greater profit by those who wish to conduct research into the ancient world, and to understand the nature of its problems, than by those professional social scientists who for the most part do not need, or do not think they need, the insights of the past.

Thus, taking the inverse view of our deliberations, and leaving aside the more general papers of P. Pasquino and myself, we have attempted to understand the question of how teleological is the Greek political experience, how far would the ancient world have accepted the Aristotelian analysis based ultimately on the example of Athens (Chr. Mann). We have looked at the Athenian conception of citizenship, not as a legal status, but as a privilege and a right involving also a duty to society (K. Piepenbrink).<sup>4</sup> We have considered a new and

<sup>4</sup> This is of course the subject of P. LIDDEL, *Civic Obligation and Individual Liberty in Ancient Athens* (Oxford 2007).

hitherto unnoticed revolutionary principle of ancient democracy, that of self-selection (*ho boulomenos*), whose importance has been brought to our attention for the first time by C. Farrar as a result of her work on participation in modern democracies. We have reflected on the advantages of judicial interference in the democratic process in Athens, and its problematisation once professional lawyers rather than ordinary citizens become involved (A. Lanni). We have recognised the close relationship between imperialism and democracy in ancient Athens (as in ancient Rome, early modern England and the modern USA), which runs so contrary to the pipe dreams of modern theorists (E. Robinson). We have considered the continuities and discontinuities in the ancient and modern conceptions of liberty, and some of us have even come to question whether liberty is necessarily always a good (M. Hansen). And finally we have once again come up against the difficulty of placing both ancient religion and modern religion in any conception of a democratic political system (P. Schmitt Pantel).

These seem to me some of the more important issues which our discussions have raised. Beyond that we have, I would suggest, emphasised the complexity of the relations between ancient and modern ideas and the difficulty of positing clear parallels, the absence of influence from Athens to the modern world, and the differences between ancient and modern democracy, despite the apparent similarities in terms of institutions, vocabulary and practices. We have, I hope, made it a little more difficult to assert glib generalisations like 'the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of democracy'.

In our discussions I can detect only one glaring omission, which I have already alluded to. It relates to the current impoverishment of political debate in consequence of the collapse of Marxism as a responsible political theory. We have completely failed to discuss the role of the economy in the creation and maintenance of democracy, in a way that would have amazed

our eighteenth-century predecessors from Montesquieu and Adam Smith onwards.<sup>5</sup> Surely the economy and democracy are essentially related to each other, they would have said. And surely the most important economic element in ancient democracy is slavery, and in the modern economy the exploitation of wage labour, which, as Marx saw, is so akin to it. In this respect we have fallen into the same trap as George Grote and John Stuart Mill, who preferred not to talk about anything as democratically embarrassing as slavery. But it is too late to rethink our colloquium, and where would we find a scholar in the present age prepared to tackle such a theme? We must be content with what we have managed to do.

Oswyn Murray

<sup>5</sup> These questions have most recently been raised in relation to Athenian democracy in the book of A. MORENO, *Feeding the Democracy: the Athenian Grain-supply in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.* (Oxford 2007).



