

THE MANY ATHENS-ES OF MODERNITY: SOME REMARKS ON
A NEW VOLUME ON THE RECEPTION OF ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY*

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1. The study of the reception of Athenian democracy through the centuries, and particularly in European and 'Western' political thought, is in better health than ever. This is not a new field, of course,¹ but there is no denying that the publication of the monumental *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Athenian Democracy* (Leiden 2021) by Dino Piovan and Giovanni Giorgini has put this entire field of investigation on firmer footing. Not only that: it has clarified what is left to be done, and the nature of what has been done. The editors said it explicitly: the aim was «to open new avenues of research and to show what remains to be done in a field of study» (p. 21). It is then particularly welcome that Ugo Fantasia and Luca Iori have already accepted this 'invitation' and produced an excellent volume which engages with, probes, and attempts to go beyond, what has been achieved in the *Companion*.

The *Companion* had succeeded, through coverage and through the depth of the individual analyses, in clarifying the sheer extent of the engagement with Athenian democracy in political theory and thought from the Renaissance to the twentieth century. It had painted a trajectory of this engagement and mapped the presence of Athens throughout the development of European and Western political consciousness. The essays in Fantasia's and Iori's volume reflect on this 'map' and supplement it in a number of ways. Some essays do so by addition, covering corners of the relevant territory that escaped the (wide) scope of the companion. Some do so by probing the depth of that engagement at different points in time, tracing shifts and tensions in the modern understanding of Athens either by analysing multiple detailed readings of specific (influential) Athenian texts, or by exploring the effects of objective advancements in our knowledge

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¹ I avoid, in what is meant as a review-essay, extensive references to all relevant past works, and I point to the introduction of Fantasia's and Iori's edited collection for full bibliographical references and a topography of sorts of relevant works.

base on widely popular Athenian political myths. Other essays turn the table, as it were, and, instead of establishing the presence and importance of the Athenian model in certain authors and debates, use the engagement with the Athenian model (taken as read) as a key for unlocking a better understanding of those authors and debates, and even to resolve modern scholarly disagreements and combat misguided readings and theoretical assumptions.

2. The essays by Giovanni Salmeri, Kinch Hoekstra and Dino Piovan all, in different ways, pursue this last approach. Salmeri's chapter analyses the historical and intellectual context behind Carlo Sigonio's *De republica Atheniensium* (1564), the first major modern work on Athenian constitutional history. The 'occasion' of the essay is, in a sense, the treatment of this very text by Gabriele Pedullà in Piovan's and Giorgini's *Companion*. Pedullà read Sigonio as well disposed towards, if not altogether enthusiastic about, the popular element in Athenian democracy. Salmeri fundamentally disagrees and thus, superficially, his essay 'reflects' on the *Companion* by correcting, as it were, one of its interpretations. Salmeri argues instead that Sigonio was deeply critical of the *popularis respublica*, particularly in its more democratic phase beginning with Cleisthenes and continuing through figures like Aristides, Themistocles and Pericles. This perspective, in Salmeri's reconstruction, was shaped by Sigonio's connections to Venetian aristocratic circles and the influence of Gasparo Contarini's idealized account of Venice's mixed constitution. Sigonio's work – which, as Salmeri demonstrates comprehensively, was built on an impressive range of ancient sources and relied on a deep understanding of Aristotelian political theory – presented Athens as an anti-model to Venice's stability. My own impression is that Sigonio's attitude towards Athens was rather more ambivalent: Athens was indeed a counterpoint to Venice, but not a fully negative one – Sigonio had no sympathy for the inclusion of the *infima plebs* in the constitution, but was also not a fan of the degree of exclusion increasingly experienced in his time by the wider *populus* in Venice and in other Italian cities (and was rather open about the achievements of Athens). Be that as it may,² Salmeri's essay is a wonderful example of how Athens can provide a key to penetrate particular historical moments and debates. Using Athens as a way in, his essay provides a most enlightening discussion of the place of Sigonio's scholarship within both the Renaissance humanist tradition and contemporary Venetian political debates, illuminating, in the process, also the importance of a form of republican political Aristotelianism to these debates. Sigonio's scholarship and 'antiquarianism' is revealed as intensely political, fully integrated in contemporary debates on the best constitution.

In Hoekstra's chapter, Hobbes' interest and direct engagement with Athenian democracy, particularly in his translation of Thucydides (the topic of Io-

² I offer my own interpretation in a forthcoming essay, to appear in a volume edited, appropriately, by Salmeri and Iori: M. Canevaro, *L'Atene classica nel Cinquecento: antiquaria, riflessione costituzionale e battaglia religiosa e politica*, in *Antiquaria, storia e politica dal XVI al XVIII secolo*, ed. by L. Iori and G. Salmeri.

ri's chapter in Piovan's and Giorgini's *Companion*), is not so much a subject of investigation as a starting point. How can Hobbes' perspective on Athens – he was deeply critical of Athenian democracy, viewing it as inherently unstable and prone to demagoguery – be reconciled with recent, popular interpretations of Hobbes as a (proto-)theorist of modern democracy, and particularly with Richard Tuck's influential theses? Hoekstra argues – to this reader, convincingly – that it cannot. Rather than seeing Hobbes as a democratic innovator, Hoekstra demonstrates that his conception of democracy was fundamentally shaped by his understanding of ancient Athens, even in those texts which do not discuss Athens explicitly. While Hobbes recognized democracy as a legitimate form of sovereign power, he argued that democracies inevitably become *de facto* aristocracies or monarchies, as power concentrates in the hands of skilled orators. Paradoxically, Hobbes's theory of absolute sovereignty was influenced by the Athenian model of unchecked popular power, though he saw this as a warning rather than an ideal. His suggestion that democracies might preserve stability by delegating their powers was likely intended to encourage democratic regimes effectively to abolish themselves (in a move inspired by Aristotle's advice on stabilising tyrannies in *Politics* 5). Far from being a founder of modern democratic theory, Hobbes used his analysis and understanding of Athenian democracy as an argument against democratic governance, while simultaneously developing a theory of absolute sovereignty partially modelled on Athens's unrestrained *demos*.³ Hoekstra's chapter is a good example of the turning of the tables that I mentioned above: rather than providing an investigation into Hobbes' engagement with Athens, he uses this engagement as a key element to adjudicate between modern interpretations of Hobbes.

Piovan's essay – a companion piece to another that he has recently published in «Quaderni di storia»⁴ – performs a similar operation on more recent thinkers (Berlin, Dunn, Rancière and Graeber). Piovan analyses how these contemporary political theorists have reconsidered Athenian democracy in the twentieth and (particularly) twenty-first centuries, identifying three distinct approaches. First, Isaiah Berlin's Cold War-era liberal critique saw ancient democracy as fundamentally opposed to modern individual liberty, arguing (along the lines of Benjamin Constant's influential ideas) that Athens represented a totalizing form of politics that subordinated private life to public demands. John Dunn and Jacques Rancière offer a second perspective, arguing that while ancient direct democracy cannot be replicated in modern states, Athens provides a vital model of political equality. For them, Athens' significance lies not in its specific institutions but in establishing democracy as a principle that challenges traditional hierarchies and power relations. They see Athens as demonstrating how equality can structure all social relationships within a political community. David Graeber presents a third,

³ For how alien such a theory actually is to Athenian ideology and institutional design, see Esu 2024, 9–11 and *passim*.

⁴ Piovan 2022.

anarchist critique that challenges the notion of democracy as a uniquely Western invention originating in Athens. He argues that consensus-based democratic practices existed in many non-Western societies and that modern representative democracy betrays rather than inherits traditional democratic ideals. In Graeber's account, Athens owes its centrality in the history of Western political thought to the fact that it prefigures, as it were, modern betrayals of traditional democratic ideals and practices. To make this case, Piovan argues, Graeber oversimplifies Athenian institutions and mischaracterizes Athens as purely majoritarian, rather than consensus-seeking.⁵ Piovan here shows that the Athens of this or that modern theorist is designed to perform a role in a theoretical construct which is quite independent from the 'reality' of historical Athens. Through the lenses of Athenian engagement, we see these theoretical constructs more clearly, but do we see Athens more clearly? This question is an important one (and I come back to it below). The further, equally important, question inspired by Graeber's treatment has to do with the very role of Athens in Western political thought. Piovan's final argument is that, while we should reject simplistic claims about democracy's exclusively Western origins, Athens remains uniquely significant for democratic theory due to its sophisticated institutional arrangements and its stimulation of theoretical reflection on democracy.

3. The excellent essays by Maurizio Giangliulio and Ettore Cinella enrich our picture of the reception of Athenian democracy by bringing into the fold moments, authors and aspects that were left behind in the *Companion*, despite its impressive coverage. But their contribution goes beyond filling gaps, and the corners of Athens' reception that they investigate end up problematising the mainstream trajectory of that reception. Giangliulio's essay, in particular, challenges the established historiographical view that democracy played little role in European political thought before the late eighteenth century – the 'age of democratic revolution'. Through a meticulous examination of democratic discourse between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England, the Netherlands and France, Giangliulio reveals a complex landscape where Athens, while not always explicitly mentioned, provided an implicit but crucial 'subtext' for democratic thinking. Particularly significant is Giangliulio's recovery of overlooked moments of appreciation of Athenian institutional practices such as sortition, rotation of offices, widespread accountability, wide popular participation and deliberative assembly processes. The essay brings to light forgotten or marginal voices – from Robert Spry and the de la Court brothers to the remarkable cases of John Gast and Cornelius de Pauw (explored also by Oswyn Murray in several

⁵ Piovan relies here on Musti 1995, XVII–XVIII and *passim*, as well as, more analytically, on my own work: Canevaro 2018 and 2019. Unsurprisingly, I agree with his assessment, although of course the debate on the consensual and deliberative credentials of Athenian democracy is very much alive – I point particularly to Daniela Cammack's forthcoming *Demos. How the People Ruled Athens* (Princeton), which presents, conversely, a very majoritarian picture of the Athenian political system (again, unsurprisingly, I disagree with her assessment).

essays and in *The Muse of History*, London 2024) – who developed sophisticated understandings of Athenian democracy's deliberative dynamics and extolled the political capabilities of its poorer citizens. Gast's and de Pauw's works, though quickly forgotten after their deaths, provided strikingly positive assessments of Athenian democratic institutions and of the political agency of common citizens that were unmatched until Grote and, to a significant extent, in Grote himself. Their perspectives are particularly valuable in highlighting aspects often obscured both in the traditional anti-democratic narrative and in the later liberal rehabilitation of Athens: the deliberative qualities of the Assembly beyond the role and treatment of famous orators, and the virtues of poor citizens as political actors. By concentrating on these 'roads not taken', as it were, Giangiulio not only enriches our understanding of democracy's intellectual history but also shifts our perception of what was found, at various points and not only in more recent years, compelling in the Athenian model: the deliberative qualities of its institutions, the degree of popular control, and the political agency of its common citizens.

Cinella's essay performs a similar operation to Giangiulio's in recovering a neglected but significant chapter in the reception of Athenian democracy: its study in pre-revolutionary Russia. Through an examination of scholars like Vasilevskij, Miščenko, and especially Vladislav Petrovič Buzeskul, Cinella reveals how Russian classicists developed sophisticated interpretations that sometimes pushed the democratic appreciation of Athens even beyond Grote's influential liberal reading. Particularly significant is Buzeskul's 1909 *History of Athenian Democracy*, which emphasized the role of the masses in building democratic institutions over that of individual leaders, highlighted the social welfare aspects of Athenian democracy (something that is almost unparalleled before Arthur Rosenberg's interventions), and paid careful attention to the conditions of subordinate groups such as slaves and women – in all these respects, proving to be well ahead of its time. While sharing Grote's admiration for Athens' 'constitutional morality', Russian scholars emerge from Cinella's analysis as clearly more attuned to class dynamics and social conflicts. This distinct perspective stemmed partly from their liberal-democratic political orientation, which differed significantly from Western liberal traditions, and partly from their attention to economic and social history.

Giangiulio's and Cinella's essays give us glimpses of the possibility of more popular – more populist? – approaches to the Athenian political system, which read it as (to a significant extent) controlled by, and expressing the will, virtues, and interests of, the common people. It is a significant and lamentable, even paradoxical, feature of the mainstream reception of Athens in the last few centuries, as well as of much of its most influential historiography, that recognising the pre-eminence of the popular masses – and the degree of control they exercised directly, above and beyond even the political agency of their democratic leaders, let alone of anti-democratic elites – has been mainly a feature of anti-democratic and anti-Athenian accounts. Direct and extensive lower-class control of democratic institutions has loomed large, over the centuries, in works which

have stressed the incompetence, envy, greed and volatility of the masses, as a warning against democracy or democratic extremes in the present. As for liberal, pro-democratic approaches – from Thirwall and Grote all the way to Hansen and Ober –, they have insisted that *demos* means all (not the poor), and that the functioning, effective, stable and pacified democracy of Athens was characterised by a balance between popular participation and elite guidance, rather than by popular preponderance or class conflict between the two. One wonders whether the almost complete lack of working-class voices throughout the reception of, and the development of the historiography on, Athens has something to do with this. Demographics matter.

Paulo Butti de Lima's epilogue is in fact extremely helpful in thematising precisely this paradox. He focuses on how the revolutionary nature of Athenian democracy became a key interpretative battleground. While conservative critics emphasized Athens' revolutionary violence to discredit democracy, liberal interpreters like Grote deliberately downplayed this aspect, recasting democratic revolution as peaceful transformation of consciousness. This sanitization served to make Athens a more palatable model for moderate liberal reform. Ironically, it was mainly in contexts outside the Western liberal mainstream – like pre-revolutionary Russia – that Athens' revolutionary character could be appreciated positively, as expressing genuine popular sovereignty and social transformation, rather than being either demonized or obscured (some attention to the Spanish-language and South American historiography on Athens – another 'marginal' tradition, as it were, in the mainstream of the engagement with Athens –, I suspect, would also provide similar insights). A fuller appreciation of this paradox – and fuller analysis and discussion of its institutional, ideological and social reasons – is a strong desideratum for any historian working on ancient Athens today. It should be at the core of any attempt by the discipline of Classics to come to grip with its exclusionary entanglements, as much as the more fashionable focus on decoloniality already is.

4. Iori's and Fantasia's essays are particularly enlightening in that they attempt to bridge the gulf between political-theoretical reception of Athens and historiography and textual analysis proper: they probe, on the one hand, how political and theoretical debates played out in the readings of key ancient democratic texts, and, on the other, how the growth of our evidence base and of our actual, historical understanding of Athens impacted long-standing Athenian political myths and interpretations. Iori's essay examines how minute attention to readings and translations of Thucydides 2.37.2 can illuminate key shifts in modern democratic theory, focusing on Grote and Stuart Mill's interpretations of the Periclean praise of Athenian tolerance. Through careful philological and contextual analysis, Iori traces how Grote's translation choices – particularly his explicit introduction of 'tolerance' where the Greek text only implied it – helped shape Mill's evolving thoughts on democracy and individual liberty. The progression from Grote's historical commentary to Mill's theoretical works reveals how close

engagement with classical texts could generate new political concepts: starting from philological examination, moving through historical reconstruction and culminating in modern democratic theory. While this process often involved creative misreadings that obscured differences between ancient and modern contexts, these very ‘distortions’ proved theoretically productive. This granular focus on textual reception complements broader histories of democratic ideas by revealing the concrete ways in which classical texts were mobilized in developing modern political concepts.

Fantasia’s essay examines how the ‘myth’ of Aristides as democratic reformer – based on Plutarch’s account of his initiative to open up magistracies to all citizens after the Persian Wars – persisted from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, until it was definitively disproven by the discovery of the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians* in 1891. Through careful analysis of interpretations from Sigonio to Grote, Fantasia shows how this putative democratic reform became a key reference point in debates about democracy’s development and merits. Conservative critics saw it as the moment when Athens fatally undermined Solon’s balanced constitution; liberal interpreters like Grote viewed it as the prudent recognition of social changes wrought by naval warfare. Fantasia demonstrates how attention to now-discredited elements in the reception of Athenian democracy can illuminate both the development of democratic thought and, indeed, our own appreciation of certain pieces of ancient evidence. It is paradoxical that the ‘myth’ of Aristides was eventually disproven by the *Constitution of the Athenians* – a text which actually presents a more consistently democratic portrait of Aristides than the biographical tradition which discusses his reform concerning access to magistracies. This paradox highlights the complex relationship between reception, historiography and the expansion of our evidence base in shaping our understanding of ancient democracy, a point on which I shall comment further in the following paragraphs.

5. «Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back». When John Maynard Keynes wrote these words (in his masterpiece, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, London 1936, 383), he was arguing against those (politicians and policymakers) who considered his ideas impractical, impossible, ‘a visionary hope’.⁶ Duly retooled, they hold true as a denunciation of all forms of positivism. Oswyn Murray’s definition of ‘positivism’ (in his recently published *The Muse of History*, London 2024, 426) echoes Keynes’ words: «positivism is not history without theory, but simply history in which the theory has been forgotten or suppressed».

The publication of Piovan’s and Giorgini’s companion, and now of this first – engaging, sophisticated and productive – volume of post-companion

⁶ This insight has now been revived in economics in Paul Krugman’s notion of ‘zombie ideas’, see Krugman 2020.

studies and reflections edited by Fantasia and Iori, make all the more apparent the vacuity of any claim of writing the history of Athenian democracy *without* theory or ideology. The self-reflective (perhaps even self-conscious) historian of ancient Athens – certainly, this historian of ancient Athens – comes close to feeling a sense of vertigo after engaging with the essays in these volumes. Not that the long history of the engagement with Athenian democracy was unexplored before, but the coverage, the subtlety and sophistication, and the level of detail found in these new edited collections underscores the sheer variability of what can be (and has been) said about the Athenians, and of what can be (and has been) done with their experience and example.

One cannot help but wonder, in the end, what exactly *we* are doing with them – today – and why. What is new and what is really not. What «academic scribbler[s] of a few years back» we are parroting when we insist, for instance, on the epistemic or deliberative credentials of the assembly and the institutions of the *demos* (as *all* citizens) or, conversely, on the role of a ‘political class’, a ‘political elite’ (kept in check by the *demos* or otherwise); on the formative dimension of elite competition or, conversely, on the centrality of class struggle (if only someone was actually insisting, coherently, on that...).⁷ When we argue about the extent to which the Athenians abided by principles akin to modern notions of the rule of law or, conversely, insist on the volatility of the masses in the lawcourts (and beyond) and read legal disputes as forms of feuding. Even when we shift focus from Athenian democracy to Greek democracy and then (as a new prototype) to Hellenistic democracy (the *telos*, ultimately, of John Ma’s new *Polis*, Princeton 2024).

At its best, this variability is (and has long been) an opportunity. It provides ever-new, ever-changing angles, questions, perspectives, and our picture of Athens emerges from it enriched – multifaceted, nuanced, all the more productive for new engagement, for new appropriations. It even allows us to recognise long-standing blind spots in our own engagement with Athens: I have gestured above towards the absence of what we might call a genuinely working-class perspective on the Athenian experience, which is probably a result of the demographics of the theoretical and historiographical engagement with it. The rediscovery of forgotten corners of the reception of Athens – as those explored particularly by Giangiulio and Cinella (and by Murray in his studies of John Gast, Cornelius De Pauw and Edward Bulwer-Lytton) – ends up being, from this perspective, the more enriching. The roads not taken may be less indicative of the overall trajectory of the modern reception of Athens, but are the most surprising and productive for modern historians of Athens attempting to remove their blinders and find (or rediscover) new avenues of investigation.

At its worst, this variability results in a catalogue of incommensurable Athens-es which tells us a lot about those who engaged with Athens but compara-

⁷ I hope I shall be forgiven this slightly coy reference to the new UKRI/ERC project on *Class Struggle in Ancient Greek Democracy* which I am leading in Edinburgh.

tively less about Athens itself. The intellectual historian of (particularly European and Western) political thought is enlightened; the humble historian of the ancient *polis* feels a bit lost, and aimless. For the historian of Athens (and even more for the theorist coming to grips with Athens), this initial vertigo can easily turn into (conscious or unconscious) relativism: Athens is whatever we want to make of it. Recent and less recent uses of Athens in political theory (as investigated for instance in Piovan's chapter and in his wider work) are often examples of this, whether they admit it or not. And there is a growing cottage-industry of political-theory works on Athens which are only in appearance historical interventions and are in fact (almost exclusively) theoretical and political ones – Piovan, Giorgini, Fantasia and Iori provide us with a long genealogy of this tendency. Are 'historical' works – as in: written by historians – any better? Should they be?

I am afraid I have, at this stage, mostly questions, and very little in the way of answers. One tentative answer, in line with what Murray advocates in the last chapter of *The Muse of History* (and with what historians like Arnaldo Momigliano and Carlo Ginzburg have long argued), is that a rejection of positivism cannot be (and should not be) a rejection of empiricism. And hard-core empirical research and high-level technical engagement with sources and artefacts old and new can in fact help discriminate between interpretations, between Athens-es. Some have aged better than others, just as some new approaches hold water better than others in the face of our (growing) evidence base and of our historian's tools for analysing them (and this is true even as we allow that not even empirical research can be 'neutral': we are still asking questions, and these are our questions). Several essays in Fantasia's and Iori's volume (particularly those by Giangiulio, Piovan, and by the two editors) combine helpfully an appreciation of the episodes of reception they set out to investigate *in their own rights* with an explicitness about what is right and what is wrong, what is tenable and what is no longer tenable (or altogether untenable) in what has been said about Athens. This is as welcome and as productive for the historian of Athens delving into its reception as it is rare in intellectual history and reception studies. We need that orientation and we need that discrimination, even as we appreciate the intellectual value of certain episodes of reception quite apart from their historiographical and empirical merits – the questions are different but not incommensurable.

Another tentative answer is that, side-by-side with a history of the reception of Athenian democracy – of modern theoretical and political engagement with its model and experience –, we need a history of the historiography on ancient Athens qua historiography. This is still, to a certain extent, a desideratum. Such an endeavour would, of course, significantly overlap with what we have now – in these volumes – but would not be identical. The logic of the twists and turns in the historical study of Athenian democracy has at times matched that of political theory and reflection *with* and *through* Athens (the main topic of Piovan's and Giorgini's *Companion*) – this has been the case most notably with certain key figures: Hobbes and Grote above all. But it has also often been independent from, or parallel to, it. Wider political, philosophical and historical trends have

interacted with institutional factors (e.g. the academic or non-academic setting of historiographical work, tenure procedures, requirements of innovation at all costs), with issues of scholarly validation and prestige (schools, authoritative teachers, national traditions, demographics and demands of social reproduction, social and cultural investment in a particular elite *syllabus*), with the chance discovery of key texts such as the Aristotelian *Athenaion politeia* and hundreds of inscriptions, and with the rhythm of their 'digestion' by scholars and of their integration into the standard evidence base (in textbooks, reference works, teaching etc.).

Fantasia (p. 142) makes the point that «il passo della ricezione non è lo stesso di quello della storia degli studi» and strives to keep both into focus in his chapter without conflating them. For the historian of ancient Athens – particularly in the fragmented yet deceptively unified scholarly landscape of contemporary (English-dominated) transnational ancient history – it is essential to come to grip both with the vagaries of the reception of Athenian democracy in its interaction with political theory and thought, and with the development and trajectory of its historical study proper (again, also in its institutional and 'social' aspects). The way out of the current vertigo – if there is one – might be there. Fantasia and Iori (reflecting and building on Piovan and Giorgini) help us see that, and some of the essays in their volume show us the way. Thinking hard about their proposals and results is not only relevant for intellectual historians and students of reception, but also for historians of ancient Athens *tout court*. Momigliano, as often, said it best. In 1940, at the end of his first lecture on *Peace and Liberty in the Ancient World*, he wrote: «No real understanding of history is possible where it is no longer possible to discover the meaning that past generations gave to the facts we are studying. [...] We must know the meaning of the problems, from which our problems derive».⁸

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⁸ Momigliano 2012, 16.