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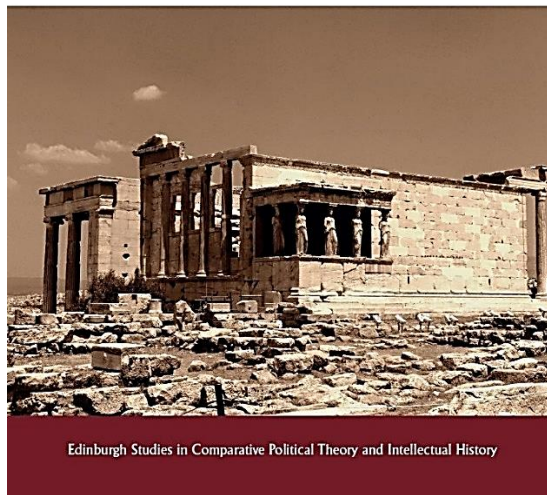
What is Prometheanism?

Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism

ANCIENT GREEK DEMOCRACY AND AMERICAN REPUBLICANISM

Prometheus in Political Theory

Michail Theodosiadis



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What is Prometheanism? How is Prometheus related to human politics? Does Prometheanism offer an answer to the political problem? Human creation was flawed from the beginning. Epimetheus - brother of the Titan Prometheus - undertook to distribute the properties to living beings before their exit into the world. But afterward, he reflected on his actions; he realized that he had given every creature remarkable abilities to survive, except for man. This is also represented by the symbolic meaning of his own name. Epimetheus had forgotten men entirely, granting them no special power at all. While all creatures could survive, men remained alone, unarmed and inadequate, condemned to certain annihilation. Prometheus was stunned by the mistake of his unwise brother and undertook the task of saving man (ἀπορία οὖν σχόμενος ὁ Προμηθεὺς ἥντινα σωτηρίαν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ εὔροι). In order to achieve this, he had to transgress, that is, steal fire and wisdom of technique from the gods, giving it to humans (κλέπτει Ἡφαίστου καὶ Ἀθηνᾶς τὴν ἔντεχνον σοφίαν σὺν πυρὶ). Thus, humans, with the sponsorship of Prometheus, became related to the gods, as they could construct through fire and the wisdom of technique all kinds of artefacts (clothes, houses, languages, weapons, etc.) that replaced natural deficiencies (Cf. Plato, *Protagoras*, 320c-323c).

Man with the gift of Prometheus became responsible for his fate. Only he was responsible for the right use of these gifts, he could succeed or fail, he was responsible and therefore absolutely free from good and evil. So, Prometheanism is related to the free human choice between good and evil and liberation from any heteronomy. But still, people could not behave politically, as they did not possess political art, and therefore, they annihilated each other, motivated by their natural individualism and hedonism. Political art came later as a result of the awareness of man's responsibility as part of the political community (Cf. Vavouras, 2025, pp. 10-11). Individual self-preservation and happiness pass only through the political state. Prometheanism precisely reflects man's responsibility towards himself, which has no substance without the well-being of the political community. Responsibility for my choices also means responsibility for the common good. Without the common good, there is no individual good (Vavouras, 2024).

Introduction

Theodosiadis' *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism* (2025a) presents a nuanced and thought-provoking contribution to the study of democratic traditions, bridging ancient Greek thought with American political history. His political Prometheanism does not only imply political participation; it also challenges "concealed" or "apocalyptic" optimism, rooted in the idea of endless progress and/or human perfection. The author also calls into question pessimistic (or despotic) worldviews, such as those promoted by Thomas Hobbes and Sir Robert Filmer. Instead, he advocates for a melioristic – or hopeful – approach to democracy, which emphasises self-limitation and prudence, as safeguards against moral transgression in democratic governance. This perspective is built upon a thorough examination of philosophical insights from Aristotle, Thucydides and Plato. The author moves on, explaining in a convincing way how this "melioristic" (in his own words) spirit that we identify in ancient Greek democratic strands of political philosophy influenced American republicanism.

In this book Theodosiadis discusses a political tradition that emphasises civic responsibility and active participation in political decision-making. This tradition is often tied to the concept of populism. For Theodosiadis, this very idea found clear expression in the American cooperative movement (otherwise called "the Populists") of the late nineteenth century. The author develops his views on American Populism by considering Christopher Lasch and the works of other significant scholars, such as Lawrence Goodwyn and Gene Clanton. In addition to construct a "populist" narrative based on the ancient Athenian example of Greek democracy, Theodosiadis reflects on Hannah Arendt's interpretations of Aristotle. He follows Lasch's critique of the optimism of "modern liberalism," that is, the contemporary obsession with unlimited economic expansion and to individual liberty (pp.5-6), which he considers detrimental to the civic spirit of democracy.

The Promethean human: and human agency and limits

Prometheus symbolises human agency and self-governance (p.1). The author elaborates on Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, as well as on Protagoras' version of the myth (15-16). At the same time, he reflects on other classical tragedies, including Euripides' *Trojan Women*, *Medea*, *Orestes*, and finally on Aesop's fables. Echoing Arendt and Lasch, Theodosiadis calls into question contemporary interpretations of Prometheus, such as those pursued by Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon Lord Byron. In the liberal and Romantic imagination, Prometheus is considered an archetype of resistance against absolutism (p.4-5). According to the myth, the Titan who stole fire from the gods and gifted it to humanity, enabling humans to protect themselves from destruction (as in the Protagoras myth), is punished by Father Zeus. In the liberal imaginary, this act of punishment reminds us of the cruel means of repression employed by absolute rulers against those who defy their power and strive for social justice. Therefore, freedom fighters between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe are portrayed as "Promethean" martyrs against political oppression. (ibid.) However, Theodosiadis highlights another aspect of the myth: borrowing perspectives from Arendt and Castoriadis, he reminds us that Prometheus does not exclusively symbolise resistance to authority; the fire of Prometheus was the fire of political freedom, that is, of political knowledge and inclusion (pp.15-6). By considering this, Theodosiadis defines the concept of tyranny beyond the liberal/contemporary understanding of the term; the tyrant is not simply the one who imposes absolute power and restricts individual liberty; tyrants prohibit political interaction; they remove the people from the political realm, and render themselves absolute owners of the *politeia* (pp.4-5, pp.83-87). According to this minograph, this civic idea of political inclusion and participation is vividly echoed in the American colonial experience, particularly in northern states of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To a degree, this emphasis on direct involvement in the

process of decision-making was (for Theodosiadis) one of the main ideas behind the American Revolution.

As explained earlier, Theodosiadis' so-called political Prometheanism does not only advocate self-government. The author elaborates on Lasch's scepticism of the idea of progress. He reflects on Lasch's intense rejection of optimism, espoused by ideologies advocating moral perfection or endless and uninterrupted progress (as noted earlier). Thus, he constructed a view of political Prometheanism anchored in a "tragic vision" of life. The fire Prometheus gifted to humanity "was excessive (*āgan*) for the nature of the mortals (*thnatous*). Because of this, Prometheus created in the minds of men and women false promises ('blind hopes'), "that they can set up ambitious plans which their frail (human) nature could barely afford." (p.19). Hence, Theodosiadis (echoing Lasch and Castoriadis) highlights the importance of obtaining a moderate perspective on democracy, suggesting that humans when they are free to act without being supervised by an absolute ruler, who can restrict their freedom to make decisions, are capable of committing atrocities, the so-called *hubris*. This term refers to "arrogance and imprudence," or to "the frantic impulse for exaggeration, which leads to the violation of all moral limits." (p.18). But more importantly, *hubris* leads to "major injustices and atrocities, such as the concentration/extermination camps or the enslavements of peoples" and often describes "the exaggeration of the *demos*, specifically its potential slide into insanity." (ibid.). This second aspect of political Prometheanism owes a lot to Friedrich Nietzsche's interpretation of the myth: human reason has its limits. Therefore, the development of an ethic of self-limitation and a hopeful (or melioristic, according to Theodosiadis' terms) – rather than optimistic – view of life and human reason is necessary. In one of his previous works he wrote the following: "[w]hat prompted the Gods of Mount Olympus to chastise Prometheus is not simply his act of theft as such." (Theodosiadis 2021, p.74) The gift of fire, an "archetypal symbol of god-like power, knowledge and intellectuality, according to Bachelard ... allowed humanity not simply to overcome the dread of suffering and violent death. Simultaneously, it shaped the illusion of human perfectibility, that (for

instance) knowledge and common effort could constitute men and women capable of living the eternal and indestructible life of the Gods.” (ibid.) This assumption merits further interpretation. As Northrop Frye (1964) argued, Prometheus’ fire “symbolizes the raising of the human state to a quasi divine destiny, becomes more purely a “Prometheus complex.”” (p.viii) The Prometheus complex, we read in Bachelard, (1964) is the human tendency which impels us to know “to prove decisively that we have attained the intellectual level that we have so admired in our parents and in our teachers.” (ibid.) In the same way, humans who receive the divine *thnatos āgan* knowledge are sometimes propelled to imitate the gods, or to overcome them, as Theodosiadis (2025) argued by making references to Nietzsche and Nasr. (pp.19-20)

The French and the American Revolutions: hope (meliorism) vs optimism and pessimism.

By considering this argument, the author “corrects” Arendt, for whom it was the “social question”, namely, poverty and economic deprivation, the main reason behind the authoritarian shift of the French Revolution (pp.31-46). Instead, Theodosiadis argued that the Great Terror in France owes more to the “philosophical optimism” of the intellectual elites, who laid the ideological foundations of the revolution. This optimism advocates perfection; it was a “secular utopia” (p.46), standing at odds with the melioristic (or hopeful) worldview of political Prometheanism. This take on the French Revolution, plagued by optimistic illusions about human reason, is far from novel. It has much in common with the conservative critics of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre, who – as Theodosiadis does – accused Jean Jacques Rousseau’s theories and the secular agenda of the French Revolutionaries for shaping mindsets in which political terrorism found immediate justifications, thus facilitating the Revolution’s Jacobin turn (p.163). In his own words, “Rousseau’s theory” played an important role “in establishing the groundwork for the emergence of this ‘apocalyptic’ optimism,” and “created the appropriate conditions for

the justification and glorification of mass violence.” (p.50). His “philosophy was widely read and disseminated to the public by militant leaders (including Marat, Robespierre, Brissot and so on)”, who “borrowed from the same philosopher viewpoints of practical use for their attempts to construct an anti-absolutist and anti-royalist narrative.” (p.51). To substantiate his position, Theodosiadis places due weight on the secularisation process, and (more importantly) on the dechristianisation policies of the Jacobins, who rejected the notion of “original sin,” replacing it with Rousseau’s natural goodness, which (as the Genevan philosopher claims) is always corrupted by the means of society, that is, by the institutions of the *ancien régime*, in the context of France (p.165, p.170) However, to claim that “the institutions of the *ancien régime* corrupt and deprive man’s perfect goodness, often leads to troubling assumptions. One could consider the defenders of the aristocracy – and even worse, those who were wrongly accused of siding with the aristocracy, as, for instance, the moderate liberal Girondin group – not simply as political opponents whose objectives must be questioned and/or condemned; they may be labelled as “conspirators” and “traitors” who mislead “the citoyens,” or more importantly as “enemies of the human species (*hostis generis humani*) to use Jacobin terminology,” who have to be exterminated through brute force.” (p.170). The novelty of Theodosiadis’ work rests firstly on the perspectives upon which he bases his critique: the French Revolution, he assumes, was anti-Promethean. In short, it dismissed Aeschylus’ warning that political knowledge is *thnátous āgan* and, therefore, should always be accompanied by an ethic of meliorism and self-limitation. While conservative thinkers in the light of the violence and destruction spread by the Revolution itself criticised Rousseau and condemned democracy as a ticket to chaos and instability, Theodosiadis (2025) emphatically argues that moderation (or meliorism) is *sine qua non* of democratic thinking itself. (p.164) Democracy is bound to “ethical memory” and *parrhesia* (the right to speak in the assembly, to denounce falsehood and reveal the truth) (p.16, p.179). That is, democracy – as a vivid expression of political Prometheanism – rests on dialogue and understanding, on *action* – as Arendt (1998)

would argue –, whose ultimate objective is the *eudaimonia* and the *eu zein* of the *politeia*. (p.15) Through dialogue and experience, Theodosiadis explains in Chapter 4, democracy erects fences against *hubris*. Moreover, by reflecting on American republicanism, Theodosiadis argues for a nuanced religiosity to provide solid moral grounding against the prevalence of *hubris* in the political realm (pp.143-7). Echoing Lasch and Tocqueville, he criticises Castoriadis’ secularism (p.61), assuming that transcendent values provide concrete anchoring to moral thinking. More importantly, dialogue – or *parrhesia* – could lead to practical wisdom (or prudence), as Aristotle argued (p.35). Political experience (or “ethical memory”) “often contains moral lessons, which in order to be fully construed “[t]here must be public discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted”, Theodosiadis argues (2025, p.16) by citing John Stuart Mill (1998, p.23). For Aristotle, “[t]o be human is to thrive in a polis, a political society, discussing the good and the bad, the just and the unjust” (Rubin 2018, pp.9-10). Dialogue “sheds light on aspects of an experience, which often contain important moral lessons. In the absence of *parrhesia*, these lessons could be left concealed.” (Theodosiadis 2025a, p.17) As Aristotle argued, “speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong” (Politics 1252a. 14-16).

As we see, Theodosiadis’ intense scepticism to optimism in the context of political Prometheanism does not philosophically justify pessimism, which he associates with political despotism and authoritarianism. In short, political pessimism is attributed predominantly to Hobbes and regards the mistrust of popular rule and democracy in his political philosophy (Cf. Vavouras, 2016). More particularly, these assertions are built upon critical reflections on Arendt’s and Leo Strauss’ views on Hobbes (pursued in Chapter 2). Theodosiadis considers Lee Ward’s (2002, p.18) approach to the English philosopher. For Ward, Hobbes’ ideal commonwealth is founded on a unity “of the representer,” that is, of the Sovereign themselves, with those represented. This unity, Theodosiadis (2025a) explains, comes at the expense of the represented. (pp.68-9) This type of “political representation,” according to the author, is a form of

substitution. It replaces participation and self-government with managerial expertise and authoritarian rule. Therefore, Theodosiadis' critique of optimism is rooted in a melioristic (or "hopeful," as Christopher Lasch would have framed it) view of life and humanity. Such an approach to democracy can be identified in the republican mindsets not only of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and others who laid the foundations of the American Revolution. "[T]he American Founding Fathers," in Theodosiadis' words, "did not share Rousseau's enthusiasm for the innate benevolence of men and women, nor did they endorse the idea of total emancipation of mankind." (p.52) The French, in contrast, shared "'Rousseau's belief in innate human goodness', which (in their view) was undermined by the corrupt and oppressive *ancien régime*." (p.169) For Rousseau, the natural goodness of man "is always corrupted by means of society." (p.170) Therefore, the French leaders attempted to bring into existence a new society "within which Rousseau's natural love and benevolence would be able to manifest itself." (p.171). Theodosiadis quotes Camus (2000), who assumed that the leaders of the Revolution (by drawing on Rousseau) pursued "the final liquidation of the principle of divinity," (83) "under the supposition that the world could be remodelled in a way that man's angelic goodness would become a living reality." (Theodosiadis 2025a, p.168). The "'tyranny and injustice of men shall have banished from the earth'" (quoted in Hampson 1983: 144) and "all men would live as brothers" (Hampson 1983: 263).

The contemporary relevance of Theodosiadis' "Political Prometheanism"

In Theodosiadis's eyes, a "populist hope" conveys the authentic message of political Prometheanism. This view was also espoused by those who laid the foundations of the "Populist Movement", of the so-called "the second declaration of independence." (Theodosiadis 2025a, p.219, p.231) Moreover, Theodosiadis places paramount importance on the role of cul-

tural memory and tradition in his analysis. Emphasis on cultural memory, he explains, is one of the third elements of political Prometheanism (p.1).¹ Specifically, as elucidated in Chapter 5, he argues that the rise of the Populist movement is attributed to cultural heritage, namely, the enduring values and norms that sustained the republican ethos of political engagement, originally transported to the New World by the colonists through the Mayflower Compact. The French Revolution, on the other hand, thanks to its ardent optimism, attacked cultural memory and property, unleashing an uncompromising violence that corrupted and destroyed the political freedom its architects aspired to materialise. In our contemporary world, where tradition and cultural memory are often associated with “reactionary conservatism,” Theodosiadis reminds us that emancipatory politics must be anchored in a cultural past. They are, in other words, manifestations of inherited ideas that find direct expression in social mobilisations.

Furthermore, Theodosiadis incorporates abolitionist and feminist approaches to political Prometheanism. In his words, “the Populists were not exclusively concerned with wealth redistribution, but also with issues related to democratisation, including female suffrage, the secret ballot, eight-hour working day initiatives and public referendums” (p.229). Here, the author presents the movement as an example of how politics and economics can go together, challenging Arendt’s view on the social question. More importantly, Theodosiadis provides a description of a movement that attempted to challenge prevailing social norms on gender, expanding therefore the “blaze of Prometheus’ fire” to include women and blacks, whose access to the political realm was denied or marginalised (as he emphatically writes in Chapter 5). We see, for example, the female Populist orator Mary Lease writing in the *Kansas City Star* that the “Wall Street owns the country . . . It is no longer a government of the people, for the people, by the people, but a government of Wall Street, for Wall Street, and by Wall Street. The great common people . . . are slaves, and monopoly is

¹ As we have already explained, the first principle revolves around the notion of human agency and potential, and the second on the inherent limits of human action respectively.

master.” (Quoted in Clanton 1991, p.44; cf. Theodosiadis 2025a, p.234). The inclusion of abolitionist and feminist perspectives also makes it relevant to contemporary debates, as we understand how deprived groups have historically fought for their voices in participatory – or Promethean (in Theodosiadis’ terms) – politics.

Finally, Theodosiadis (2025a) clarifies that his version of Prometheanism “is not anti-liberal at heart; it does not necessarily advocate for conservative communitarianism, radical egalitarianism or anarchism; nor does it generally align with anti-parliamentary politics.” (p.10) In other words, political Prometheanism is a flexible concept. It does not advocate a specific political agenda and “can be compatible with a type of liberalism that (1) does not sacralise modernisation and unlimited economic expansion; (2) does not approach these notions with unwarranted optimism, as if they represent the ultimate achievement of social perfection or infinite progress; and (3) does not adhere to “political representation” in such a way as to denounce direct participation (action).” (ibid.) In this regard, political Prometheanism may integrate, as the author seems to imply, concepts of contemporary liberalism, and more importantly, non-western cultural elements. As the Theodosiadis argues, “political participation is not highlighted only in Western philosophical systems of thought, rooted in modern interpretations of the Athenian *polis*.” (ibid.) He, thus, briefly mentions one of his previous studies (2022; cf. 2025b) on Byzantium, suggesting that this book is “part of a series of monographs and articles” he is “planning to publish on the concept of political Prometheanism,” and that “[most of these monographs/articles] will “explore systems of popular involvement beyond classical Greece and Western modernity.” (Theodosiadis 2025a, p.10.) We have also seen the author directing our attention to native American cultures (pp.195-6), a normative claim that probably materialised very little in American republican history. Theodosiadis’ recurring critique of the western exceptionalism in a field that is rarely encountered is more than welcome.

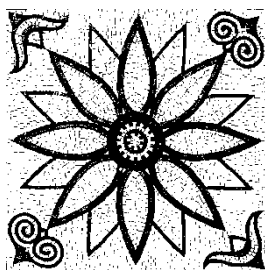
Conclusion

Theodosiadis' *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism* (2025a), demonstrates a remarkable capacity to engage with an extensive corpus of literature while critically evaluating different arguments and viewpoints in a balanced and nuanced way. The book adds greatly to our understanding of the range of democratic possibilities, based on ancient and modern paths taken (or not taken at all). The author offers a compelling critique of contemporary liberalism's faith in unrestrained progress. In this way, he goes on re-evaluating the philosophical underpinnings of the French Revolution, whose destruction is attributed to rampant and exaggerated optimistic worldviews, rather than to economic deprivation. Moreover, he revisits the republican ideology of the American Revolution and moves on to the Populist movement, shedding light on its underappreciated democratic potential. Crucially, Theodosiadis values the role of cultural memory and tradition in political Prometheanism. He underscores the role of religion in sustaining an ethic of self-limitation, breaking thus from the commonly held view in the West that democracy is inherently rooted in radical secularism. By incorporating abolitionist and feminist perspectives, the book makes the concept of Prometheanism particularly relevant to ongoing debates about inclusion and political agency. Theodosiadis' political Prometheanism, with its emphasis on hope, dialogue and ethical memory, aspires to challenge the impasse of "modern liberalism."

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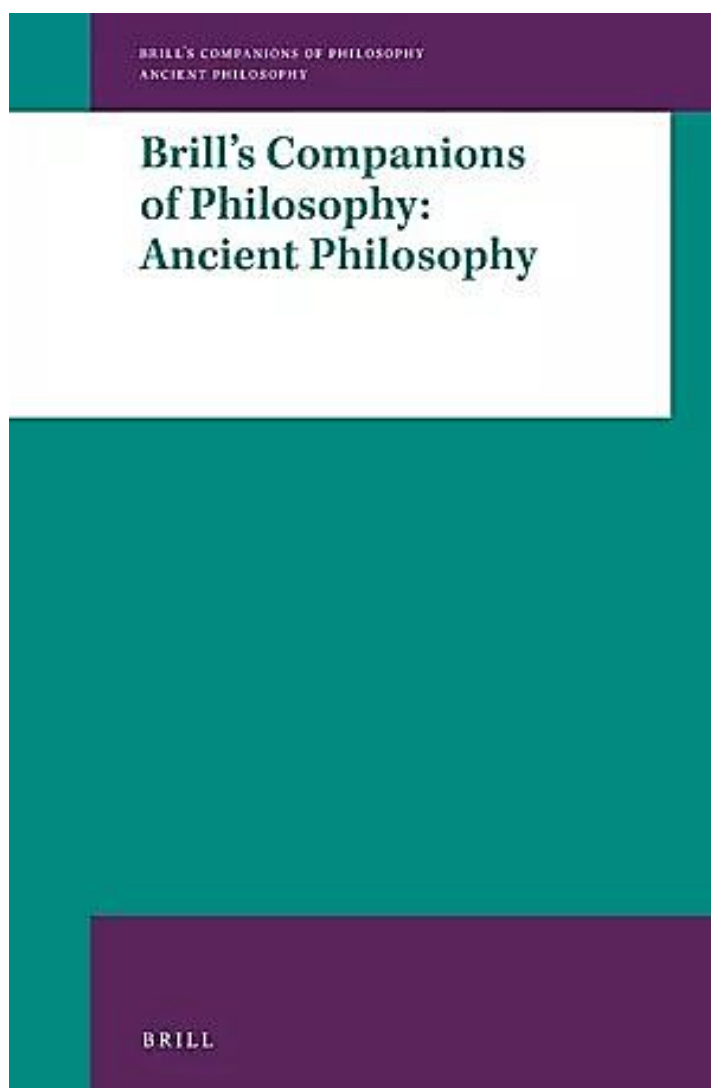
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