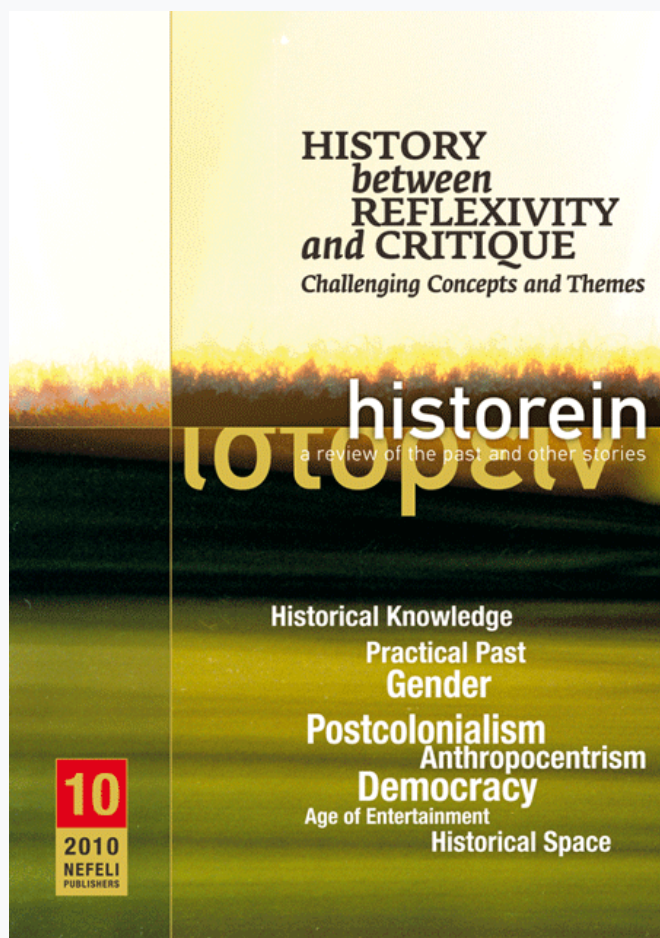


Historein

Vol 10 (2010)

History between Reflexivity and Critique



Historiographical Estrangement as Critique: The Divided History of Demokratia

Alexandra Lianeri

doi: [10.12681/historein.12](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.12)

Copyright © 2012, Alexandra Lianeri



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Lianeri, A. (2011). Historiographical Estrangement as Critique: The Divided History of Demokratia. *Historein*, 10, 131–143. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.12>

The past thirty years or so have witnessed a return of the notion of critique in the human and social sciences, especially in the field formulated in the same period under the name “theory”.¹ There have been at least two contexts for this movement. First, it pertains to a certain moment in the history of western politics: that of the crisis of democracy, both in the sense of liberal representative politics and in the sense evoked by dominant articulations of Marxism claiming to have realised the ideal of real democracy. Secondly, the return of critique belongs to a more theoretical context, in which it is manifested as a crisis of representative narratives, including historiography, and of the Enlightenment’s reflection on the limits and possibilities of knowledge.

Michel Foucault’s 1978 essay “What is Critique?” evokes both of these contexts and indicates their interconnection. The essay argues that critique, by its very nature and function, needs to be seen as parasitic, condemned to dispersion, dependency and pure heteronomy:

After all, critique only exists *in relation to something other than itself*: it is an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be; it oversees a domain it would want to police and is unable to regulate. All this means that it is a function which is subordinated in relation to what philosophy, science, politics, ethics, law, literature, etc., positively constitute.²

The crisis of representation implied by the idea of the truth that can be neither known

Historiographical Estrangement as Critique: The Divided History of Dēmokratia

Alexandra Lianeri

University of Thessaloniki

nor realised has its roots in a political question which goes back to sixteenth-century Europe: the question of “how not to be governed” or “not being governed quite so much”. Critique, according to Foucault, was then crystallised in the Enlightenment as a challenge to governmentalisation – the movement through which individuals are subjugated to a social practice through the mechanisms of power adhering to a certain idea of truth, in other words a politics of truth.³ This voluntary insubordination was central to Foucault’s attempt, after the 1970s, to deploy critique against the oppressive politics of truth and power underwriting modern liberal democracy, on the one hand, and the “proletariat democracy” evoked by an increasingly Stalinist Soviet politics, on the other.

What critique was called on to challenge was faith in a history that could act to desubjugate man through traditional revolutionary praxis.⁴ However, over the next decades Foucault also noted the indispensability of the democratic tradition – which he distinguished from liberal democracy – to the practice of critique. His genealogical explorations of ancient democracy served to codify this tradition and insert its categories into modern politics. From this perspective, Foucault approached the Athenian democracy in order to explore how practices associated with it, such as that of *parrhēsia*, frank speech in the public realm, constituted an agonistic democracy, which allowed citizens to continuously challenge established politics in the name of truth.⁵ Likewise, Foucault read tragedy and the performance culture of the Athenian democracy as a frame for comparing ancient and modern ideas of participation in politics and construction of citizenship, exposing the domineering allegiance between power and knowledge sustaining modern democracy.⁶

This essay turns to this critical dimension of ancient democracy in order to explore its genealogy as an estranged heritage inscribed into the margins of the western history of democracy. The tradition of *dēmokratia*, it argues, came to signify a conflict in the history of democracy. On the one hand, there is the democratic heritage going back to the Roman idea of *civitas popularis* and implying an effacement of the idea of democracy as political domination of the (common) people; while on the other, there is the return of a category that was suppressed for two millennia and which offered a radical vision of democracy as the forceful entry into the realm of politics of those who are deprived of political status. *Dēmokratia* entered historical thought as a silence that generated a critique of democracy grounded in what Jacques Rancière aptly described as “anarchical government”, based, paradoxically, on nothing other than the absence of every title to govern.⁷ This critical heritage, however, cannot be identified with Athens as such, but with a historiographical relationship between ancient and modern democracy producing a peculiar genealogy of indebtedness and alterity.

A founding conflict: dēmokratia vs. civitas popularis

When Cicero failed to offer a Latin term for *dēmokratia* in the *De Republica*, he established a lexical gap which was to be maintained for thirteen centuries and a historiographical silence, which was to define the concept of democracy for the next two millennia. A Latin word could have appeared when Cicero described the three main categories of government codified in Greek political thought, *monarchia*, *aristokratia* and *dēmokratia*:

Quare cum penes unum est omnium summa rerum, regem illum unum vocamus, et regnum eius rei publicae statum. cum autem est penes delectos, tum illa civitas optimatum arbitrio regi dicitur. illa autem est civitas popularis (sic enim appellant) in qua in populo sunt omnia.⁸

And so when the control of everything is in the hands of one person, we call that one person a king and that type of commonwealth a monarchy. When it is in the control of chosen men, then a state is said to be ruled by the will of the best men. And that in which everything is in the hands of the people is a “popular” state (that is what they call it).⁹

The Greek names correspond to the terms *regnum*, *civitas optimatum* and *civitas popularis*. But, with regard to *dēmokratia* in particular, the Latin indicates the measure of the distance between the Roman and the Greek political tradition.

The most evident change is the loss of the name *dēmokratia* and the meaning attributed to the Latin equivalent, *civitas popularis*. In the Latin excerpt, the notion of the people refers both to the lower classes and the political community as a whole, precisely as the Greek term *dēmos* conveys both of these meanings. However, unlike *dēmokratia*, which suggests a notion of popular sovereignty, the people in Cicero’s text are not a subject which exercises political power, a sovereign body. The phrases *penes unum* and *penes delectos* convey the idea of the control of things, of a political foundation of government or political *archē*, in the dual sense of legitimating principle and power. Yet in the last sentence, where one would have expected Cicero to have referred to the *archē* of the people, he simply says *in populo*, thus suppressing the role of the people as an active political subject. Along the same lines, the use of the preposition *in* contrasts with the direct naming of the single ruler, the king (*rex*) and the best men (*optimates*, *delecti*).¹⁰ The people, Cicero says, are not the subject of political authority. It is only that a certain kind of authority is claimed by the people; but, as we shall see, this is an illegitimate claim, as it remains meaningless outside the frame of popular power.

Attached to this change is the suppression of the claim to power, implied by *dēmokratia*’s latter component, *kratos*. In Greek the word *kratos* conveys the notion of conquest, of power exercised against an opponent.¹¹ So the second component of *dēmokratia*, *kratos*, cannot refer to the power of the people as a unified citizens’ body, without concomitantly evoking the term’s second meaning, the conquest of political power by the common people or the lower classes. With regard to *dēmokratia* there is ambivalence, first of all, about the subject of the democracy, for the people are a master at once restricting (the lower classes) and unifying (the citizens’ body); and, secondly, about the way this master exercises its rule in the form of conquest or the form of law followed by all. It was thus impossible for *dēmokratia* to expunge from its limits the conflict implied by the division constituting the notion of the *dēmos* – even though the Athenian democracy consistently deployed the term as a means of ideological dissipation of conflict in politics. By contrast, the term *civitas popularis* not only suppresses the notions of conflict and empowerment – of *kratos* – but reconfigures the conceptual space of the political in such a way that it becomes impossible for the category of popular authority to be accommodated in this space, in the sense of a viable form of government. The advent of “the rule of the people”, Cicero suggests, signifies the collapse of po-

litical *archē*. With the establishment of *civitas popularis*, government is only *in populo*: it displays no recognisable political subject or source of political authority, but for those who institute it, the common people – hence the final phrase *sic enim appellant*, “that is what they call it”.

Engaging with the genealogy of western humanism and political modernity, Martin Heidegger alerted us to the importance of the Roman appropriation of the Greek tradition:

[We] need to reflect more thoughtfully on this Roman transformation of Greece. That the Occident still today, and today more decisively than ever, thinks the Greek world in a Roman way . . . is an event touching the most inner centre of our historical existence. The political, which as *πολιτικόν* arose formerly out of the essence of the Greek *πόλις*, has come to be understood in the Roman way. Since the time of the *Imperium*, the Greek word “political” has meant something Roman. What is Greek about it is only its sound.¹²

The history of the category of the political was shaped by the epoch-shifting effect of the Roman encounter with Greece. Every subsequent engagement with antiquity, and especially the modern turn to the Greek polis, was mediated by this move: it was the Roman translation which offered the founding moment of humanism and the politics of the democratic state associated with modernity. As a consequence, both humanism and modern democracy, according to Heidegger’s genealogy, have been formulated around a silence – a certain suppression of the Greek tradition – generating an inextricable link between western political thought and Rome’s imperial project.¹³

The history of the western encounters with *dēmokratia* affirms Heidegger’s genealogical contention. From the Roman period up until the late eighteenth century, *dēmokratia*, as a historical category associated with Athens, failed dramatically to attain an afterlife. It was not only that the term designated a politics considered to bestow power on those devoid of any authority to claim it; it was also that democracies were perceived as a threat to the very survival of societies, since they were bound to explode from within and be torn down by the powers they sought to liberate. Their historical existence was thus repudiated so thoroughly and systematically that even what in the next century came to be seen as the “first democracy”, Athens, was peculiarly disassociated from its name.

This effacement was not centred on the name, even though we must note that *dēmokratia* entered Latin in the thirteenth century, through William of Moerbeke’s translation of Aristotle’s *Politics*, and the vernaculars between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries. What was, however, more crucial was the genealogical meaning of the concept of democracy, which evoked two mutually opposed, yet also interrelated, pasts: the Athenian democracy and the democratic element sustaining the Roman republic. As we shall see, the former of these pasts was estranged from the history of democracy and forcefully expunged from the limits of western politics, while the latter came to define the (democratic) republic as an alternative to the feared Athenian paradigm. The modern history of democracy was thus structured around two concepts which continued to confront one another. On the one hand, there was an insurrectionary claim to conquest of political power by the common people traced back to the Greek tradition and, on the other, an idea of inclusive politics allowing the common people to participate in government.

It was this opposition that enabled *dēmokratia* to offer a distinct field for the critique of modern democracy after the nineteenth-century legitimization of the democratic imperative. *Dēmokratia* in the sense of insurrectionary conquest of power remained strange to the western history of democracy and politics, even when a certain vision of Athens was appropriated as the founding moment of modern democratic thought. It was strange not in the sense of the past that resisted comprehension but in the sense of a past that was both recognised and expelled from the limits of historical time. It was this historiographical silence that allowed the return of *dēmokratia* in the form of critique shaped as, what Heidegger called, repetition: the reciprocal rejoinder to the past, which is simultaneously a disavowal of what “today” is working itself out as the past, and “a moment of vision” linking the newly disclosed past to the future.¹⁴ The critique of modern democracy that is enabled by *dēmokratia* has its roots in the act of estrangement. It is not the product of recovery, but the act of moving back to the possibilities that *dēmokratia* disclosed against the established genealogical meaning of democracy and thus moving forward to the inscription of these possibilities into the future.

Estranged dēmokratia

In his *Discourses on Livy*, completed in 1531, Machiavelli spoke of the different kinds of republics in the light of their temporality of finitude. Drawing on Polybius, he formed a conception of the republic as finite: a political form that enters historical time at a certain moment and sooner or later has to face its death.¹⁵ The whole life of the republic, according to Machiavelli, is thus organised as a struggle against death, a fight against an imminent and inevitable fate. Politics is both the weapon used in the battle for prolonging survival and the terrain in which the republic's struggle takes place and is ultimately lost. But as a weapon, certain forms of politics are more powerful than others. Thus, in talking about the Roman republic and Sparta, Machiavelli saw a politics that allowed them to defeat death and approach “perfection”. By contrast, the Athenian popular government established by Solon had for him a different fate:

The contrary happened to Solon who ordered the laws in Athens: by ordering only the popular state (*lo stato popolare*) there, he made it of such short life that before he died he saw the tyranny of Pisistratus born there. His heirs were expelled after forty years and Athens returned to freedom, yet because it took up the popular state again, according to the orders of Solon, it lasted no more than a hundred years. To maintain it [Athens] made many constitutions that had not been considered by Solon by which the insolence of the great and the licence of the collectivity were repressed. Nonetheless, because it did not mix them with the power of the principality and with that of the aristocrats, Athens lived a very short life.¹⁶

Solon's democracy did not even outlive a human life and its restitution had to moderate the democracy, that is to say, it had to restrict popular power (as well as that of the principality and the aristocracy) in order to reach a mere hundred years. What the Greeks called democracy, Machiavelli says, was condemned to nearly instant death; it could not enter the course of history.

Along the same lines, histories of antiquity written after the mid-sixteenth and up until the eighteenth centuries presented *dēmokratia* as a form of government that was incidental to an era. Or

more accurately, what was considered as incidental and unable to enter historical time was the democracy implied by the Greek notion of *kratos*, the regime based on the sovereign power of the common people. Thus, even when these works focused specifically on Athens, as was the case with the earliest historical accounts of Greek past, written by the French writer Guillaume Postel in 1541 and the humanist thinker Carolus Sigonius in 1565, their subject matter was not the Athenian democracy, but the Athenian republic. Indeed, both works used the term republic in their titles and drew several comparisons between the Athenian and the modern Italian republics, with which the authors were personally affiliated.¹⁷ The late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century world histories did not alter this framework. We see, for example, that Raleigh's highly influential *History of the World* did not use the term democracy, despite the fact that it devoted several chapters to Greek history.¹⁸ This was also the case for another approach to the subject advanced by the Oxford historian Degory Wheare in *The Method and Order of Reading both Civil and Ecclesiastical Histories*, first published in Latin in 1625. Wheare narrated world history from the viewpoint of past historians, whose work he summarised. Yet in his two chapters devoted to Herodotus and Thucydides, the word democracy appeared only once, to describe how "the democracy of the *Athenians* [was] changed into an Oligarchy" in 411 BC.¹⁹

We must note here that the question of whether writers deploying the idea of the republic engaged *in fact* with democracy, and the Athenian democracy in particular, depends on how we define the terms in question. Such an enterprise is therefore qualified by its starting point in the present. Fergus Millar has investigated the history of the reception of the Roman republic in political thought to contend that we cannot properly deny the republican tradition "a place in the history of democracy".²⁰ Thus Millar examined the strand of republican thought that Skinner described as the neo-Roman theory of free states and liberty, formulated by James Harrington, John Milton, Marchamont Nedham, Henry Neville and Algernon Sidney over the period of the English Civil War, to trace a genealogical account of democracy taking Athens as its starting point. However, Millar deployed a concept of democracy which explicitly incorporated the notions of mixed government and representation in a way that distinguished it from the Athenian paradigm of direct popular participation in government. Hence he argued that Harrington's plan for a constitution in the *Oceana* "is in essence that of 'representative' democracy, with rights, but limited positive participation for its citizens".²¹

Such a notion cannot be rejected as foreign to the history of democracy. On the contrary, it is impossible to expunge from that history the republican appropriation of *dēmokratia* going back to Rome without simultaneously disregarding those aspects of the concept that survived through the neo-Roman republican thinkers, the French Enlightenment and the American founding period to play a key role in the ways we understand the term today. Yet, as Skinner notes, the key concept for the neo-Roman theorists was liberty, rather than democracy, and among them "few exhibit any enthusiasm for giving what Nedham called 'the confused promiscuous body of the people' any direct share in government . . . The right solution, they generally agree, is for the mass of the people to be represented by a national assembly of the more virtuous and considering, an assembly chosen by the people to legislate on their behalf."²² It is at this moment that the concept of "pure democracy" codifies the division between the Athenian and the Roman political traditions. Posited as pure democracy, *dēmokratia* is not repudiated, but, following Machiavelli's

argument, it is expunged from the course of history. As Sidney wrote, concerning “pure democracy, where people in themselves, and by themselves, perform all that belongs to government, / know of no such thing; and if it be in the world, have nothing to say for it.”²³

The same contention was made by Harrington, when he observed that “if there be such a thing as pure Monarchy, yet that there should be such a one as pure Aristocracy, or pure Democracy, is not to my understanding.”²⁴

The neo-Roman republican tradition, to use Skinner’s term, did not simply repudiate Athenian democratic politics, but approached it through the viewpoint of the Roman tradition; while simultaneously articulating a return of the repressed notion of the *kratos* of the common people inscribed in the category of pure democracy. Yet this category did not represent a mere form of the (democratic) republic, but rather its opposite: it was the form of politics that remained outside historical time and estranged from the language of politics. Thus Nedham, who tended more than other republicans to support the Athenian democracy, only focused on Solon’s moderate version of the regime, which prefigured the balance of powers achieved by the Roman republic. Along these lines Nedham defended people’s liberty “against Anarchy” (in other words, against pure democracy) by combining “the Unitive Vertue (but nothing else) of *Monarchy*, the admirable Council of *Aristocracie*, the industry and Courage of *Democracie* . . .”²⁵

The tradition of *dēmokratia* represented as pure democracy continued to be posited as strange to the European past, not only in Montesquieu’s juxtaposition of ancient and modern republics but also in the most radical version of republicanism formulated by Rousseau. In discussing republics Montesquieu followed Machiavelli in positing both aristocracy and democracy under the category of the republic. His consideration of the democratic republic in the *Spirit of the Laws* (1748) recognised that the key to the survival of the democratic republic was virtue: “There need not be much integrity for a monarchical or despotic government to maintain itself . . . But in a popular state there must be an additional spring, which is virtue.”²⁶ The democratic republic is in principle capable of attaining virtue, which is for Montesquieu the devotion to the common good. Yet this involves the controlling of the anarchical potential of democracy through institutional measures that moderate the regime. This principle cannot, in any case, alter the radical character of the democratic republic which is always in danger of corrupting virtue. The condition for this corruption is the form of equality associated with *dēmokratia*: virtue is corrupted, Montesquieu argues, when extreme equality undermines the authority of those who command and *libertinage* challenges the hierarchies that sustain public order.²⁷

The two political genealogies of the democratic republic, the Athenian and the Roman/Spartan, approached one another in Rousseau’s writings, wherein the ancient political tradition was deployed in order to criticise the modern identification of freedom with the bourgeois pursuit of private interests and the freedom of the market. As he wrote,

The ancient peoples are no longer a model for the modern. They are too foreign in every respect . . . You are neither Romans nor Spartans; you are not even Athenians. Leave aside these great names that ill suit you. You are merchants, artisans, bourgeois, always occupied with private interest, work, business, and gain; people for whom *freedom itself is only a means of acquiring without obstacle and possessing with security*.²⁸

Rousseau attributed this category to modern societies. At the same time, as Vidal-Naquet and Loraux have argued, he also discerned forms of tyranny grounded in private interests in the Athenian republic²⁹ – hence his view that Athens was a tyrannical aristocracy where learned men and orators misled the people as to its real interests. Consequently his political vision was projected onto Sparta, rather than Athens, and in that respect it continued the political tradition going back to Machiavelli, for which it was Sparta, alongside republican Rome, that offered the political model for the constitution of liberty.³⁰

Aspects of the Spartan regime have been considered as democratic since antiquity; and this conception has been central to the category of the democratic republic.³¹ But no one, from the Spartans and other Greeks through Machiavelli to Rousseau, has called the city a democracy. It is no doubt possible to argue that, despite this absence, the semantic field covered by the word republic was largely equivalent to that delineated by the reinvention of democracy after the American and French revolutions, and hence that prerevolutionary evocations of Spartan politics are not radically different from nineteenth-century accounts of the Athenian democracy.³² But such a view suggests that an entire political tradition swapped one word for another, and one historical genealogy for another, without quite meaning to do so. It thus ends up in the paradoxical position of denying not merely that that change of political and historiographical vocabularies was historically meaningful but even that what was most evidently an intellectual event over which historical actors fought, agonised and often despaired ever happened at all. Yet even if all other differences between these genealogies were to be erased under the pen of historical analysis, there is one that would have to remain. Unlike subsequent writers who recognised Athenian politics as democratic, Rousseau did not see any democracies in antiquity and deployed this historical observation to draw a crucial political conclusion. As he stated in the *Social Contract*: “In a strict sense of the term a genuine democracy never has existed, and never will exist. It is contrary to the natural order that the greater number govern and the smaller number be governed.”³³

Dēmokratia as a field of critique

Between the eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, democracy returned at once to political life and historiographical narrative. The conjunction is not incidental. For despite the gap between the participatory model of the Athenian democracy and those pertaining to representative government, those fighting over “democracy” in the modern world could not avoid the encounter with the ancient name. They first had to encounter the negative connotations that *dēmokratia* brought on its modern readings and equivalents. Yet more crucially, they had to encounter the strangeness of a name that would make all later claimants strive ardently, but also half blindly, for adequate equivalents. *Dēmokratia* reached the eighteenth century as a foreign word. It was foreign not only in the sense that the social world linked to it was different from that designated by its modern counterpart but also in the more radical sense of being *absent* from the past that modern thinkers had created for themselves. There was no historical account of *dēmokratia* before the twilight of the eighteenth century. There was nothing to provide a predecessor and an inaugural moment, nor any narrative line that could claim to direct the fate of democracy in the present. We may say that the Athenian democracy did not, hitherto, exist, insofar as its story had not been told in terms of the possibilities generated by its own name.

When it entered historical narrative, in the last decade of the eighteenth century,³⁴ *dēmokratia* continued to evoke a peculiar historical time. Yet the historiographical engagement with Athens qua democracy offered a space for articulating this peculiarity, even though no one would claim the viability of popular rule in contemporary politics. So by maintaining the idea of democracy as conquest of power, this encounter introduced into modern political thought a more radical vision of popular rule than those formed by the subsequent positing of *dēmokratia* as the starting point of modern democracy. Instead of naming this conquest as the annihilation of politics, alongside the Roman category of the political and its subsequent reiterations, two British historians began to recognise it as the foundation of Athenian history and politics: John Gillies, the historiographer royal of Scotland, whose history of Greece was published between 1786 and 1778, and William Mitford, writing between 1784 and 1818. While both of them attacked popular rule, Gillies and Mitford shifted the focus of their histories from the categories of republic and commonwealth to that of democracy in the sense bequeathed to them by the political tradition going back to Rome. In doing so, they not only gave *dēmokratia* a space in western historical time but also made it the central axis of Athenian history. Thus at the outset of his work, Gillies declared that the thread unifying not merely Athenian but also Greek history is to be found in the danger of democracy:

The History of Greece exposes the dangerous turbulence of Democracy, and arraigns the despotism of Tyrants. By describing the incurable evils inherent in every form of Republican polity, it evidences the inestimable benefits, resulting to Liberty itself, from the lawful dominion of hereditary Kings, and the steady operation of well-regulated Monarchy.³⁵

Likewise, Mitford's attack on democracy in his history of Greece set the terms for conceptualising the emergence of the Athenian democracy as a totality of political, cultural and social conditions, rather than a corrupt form of government that could not be maintained in time. Thus in accounting for early Greek history, Mitford spoke of "*Those vigorous principles of democracy*, which had always existed in the Grecian governments, began to ferment; and, in the course of a few ages *monarchy was everywhere abolished*."³⁶

When he later spoke about fifth-century Athenian history, he noted that: "Athens, become [sic], within a few years, from the capital of a small province, in fact, though not yet in avowed pretension, the head of an empire, exhibited *a new and singular phenomenon in politics, a sovereign people*."³⁷

From this perspective Mitford could speak of this "remarkable *revolution* among so many independent little states"³⁸ – a statement that, some fifty years later, allowed the utilitarian historian George Grote to describe the birth of the Athenian democracy as "a real and important revolution".³⁹

The historicisation of *dēmokratia* posits the problem of the status of the concept used in order to account for Athenian history. Democracy, as a category that would unify narratives of the Athenian past, does not straightforwardly emerge from previous encounters with the Greek sources. Moreover, given the ambiguity of these sources with regard to appraisals of democracy and the overall absence of a corpus of Greek democratic theory, the question we need to ask is not why it took modern historians so many centuries to consider *dēmokratia* as part of western history but why they engaged with the subject in the first place. A key to answering this question is of-

ferred by the very coinage of the term “*ancient* democracy”, which was attested in Mitford’s history. The adjective “ancient” immediately evoked a modern counterpart, “the new vocabulary of modern democracy”, as it was put in the same period, which began to appear with reference to the American and, especially, the French revolutions advocating the newly proclaimed “right of insurrection”.⁴⁰ Mitford was himself preoccupied with the French Revolution throughout his history. He drew several parallels between the affairs of Greece and the current situation in France, noting, for example, that “France has gone beyond all ancient example in illiberality and ferocity” or that “what has passed in France, in our own time, will assist to make . . . transactions [taking place in antiquity] more readily and extensively intelligible”.⁴¹

Yet, far from arising as an established framework that could appropriate *dēmokratia*, the network of concepts that defined modern democracy was itself formulated by reference to the ancient concept. At the time of Mitford’s writing, there was no established category of democracy that would designate a historical timeframe and nominate an unfolding new age. What was conceivable was an emerging new group, the common people, whose conceptual position was still largely unspecified, but whose entrance into the political sphere made visible a social antagonism bearing the *possibility* of epochal change. In this sense the French Revolution, as an irruptive event, did not automatically generate a new period, but posed the need to reformulate the stretching in time and space of an existing one, as well as to invent the terms that would define its successor. Accordingly, *dēmokratia*, as a concept, was not assimilated to an already existing conceptual or narrative framework. It was rather that this framework began to be defined as such through the recognition of the Athenian democracy as a historical presence in its own right. For it was the act of historicising *dēmokratia* that opened up a new conceptual space, wherein the various levels of an unfolding modern period could be apprehended and brought together under the sign of one name.

The peculiar status attributed to *dēmokratia* underlay this turn to antiquity, even when, in the next decades, modern representative democracy began to be established as a legitimate political claimant stretching back to Athens. The use of the name democracy to account for Athenian history indicated that the democratic imperative remained irreducible to what was signified by the new historiographical genealogies which approached Athens through the Roman tradition in order to seek in *dēmokratia* the origin of modern representative democracy. Already in 1826, a future historian of Greece, Grote, set forth such a genealogy by not only introducing *dēmokratia* into the European past but also by grounding its politics in a principle of distinction associated with aristocracy. Arguing for the centrality of Athens to Greek heritage, he wrote that “it is to democracy alone (and to that sort of open aristocracy which is, practically, very similar to it) that we owe that unparalleled brilliance and diversity of individual talent which constitutes the charm and glory of Grecian history.”⁴²

“Democracy alone”, however, still evoked the idea of unqualified claim to power made by the common people – hence Grote qualified the term through its links to aristocracy. But the assimilation of the two names could not simply efface the conflict that had hitherto defined their meaning. Grote sought in antiquity a politics that was similar to the conjunction of aristocratic and democratic elements that defined the Roman republican tradition. Indeed Paul Rahe has

drawn a parallel between Grote's (and J.S. Mill's) deployment of the Athenian democracy and Machiavelli's turn to the classics to formulate his notion of the republic. Well over three centuries had intervened, Rahe observes, between Machiavelli's deployment of antiquity and the publication of Grote's volumes, "but, in one respect nothing had changed: classical antiquity continued to exercise a powerful and even determining influence over the imagination of Europe's ablest minds."⁴³ But did the shift from the republican fascination with Rome and Sparta to the liberal engagement with Athens imply nothing more than a modest change of historical referents? Did not the need to qualify *dēmokratia* as an aristocratic polity imply that one could now read the history of Athens against its historiographical presence, in other words, against the principle of distinction introduced into European politics by the Roman republican tradition?

When one recalls, in conclusion, the genealogical link between ancient and modern democracy formed over the last two centuries, one begins to wonder whether a quest for breaking with the illusions of the modern democratic equality may be served by those genealogies which estranged *dēmokratia* and set it outside the established traditions of western politics. Could the notions of *kratos* and struggle, which sustained this estrangement, be reiterated as central to the democratic imperative? *Dēmokratia*, in the sense of political *archē* of the common people, rather than an element in a mixed constitution, used to be "a pariah word", as John Dunn put it, which was proved to be grossly illegitimate in theory and every bit disastrous in practice.⁴⁴ At the same time, this pariah status put forth a political vision which remained critical of all attempts at assimilating popular to aristocratic rule; and which prevented the reduction of democracy to its historically manifested forms, either ancient or modern. This vision did not arise from the Athenian democracy. It arose from a historiographical relationship with Athens setting modern democracy in a twofold genealogy of indebtedness and alterity, and situating its temporality in the aporetic conjunction of repetition and projection.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Yorgos Avgoustis, Antonis Liakos, Kostas Vlassopoulos and Hayden White for their critical comments on previous drafts of this work.
- 2 Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007, 42.
- 3 Ibid., 44, 45–47.
- 4 Lawrence D. Kritzman, "Foucault and the Politics of Experience", in Barry Smart, *Foucault: Critical Assessments*, vol. 1, London/New York: Routledge, 1994, 25–36 (26).
- 5 Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001. See also Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- 6 Simon Goldhill, "Programme Notes", in Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne, *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999, 1–29 (16–17); Miriam Leonard, *Athens in Paris: Ancient Greece and the Political in Post-war French Thought*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

- 7 Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran, London: Verso, 2007, 41.
- 8 Cicero, *De Re Publica*, ed. James E.G. Zetzel, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995, 1.42.1.
- 9 Cicero, *On the Commonwealth; and On Laws*, ed. and trans. James E.G. Zetzel, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999, 19, translation modified.
- 10 On the parallels, see James Zetzel's comments in Cicero, *De Re Publica*, 131.
- 11 See Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The Birth of the Political", *Thesis Eleven* 60 (2000): 87–91.
- 12 Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992, 45.
- 13 On this link, see William V. Spanos, *Heidegger and Criticism: Retrieving the Cultural Politics of Destruction*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 132–81 and *America's Shadow: An Anatomy of Empire*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 66–67. I am grateful to Mina Karavanta for this reference.
- 14 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, 437–38.
- 15 J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003 [1975].
- 16 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1531], 13.
- 17 See Carmine Ampolo, *Storie greche: La formazione della moderna storiografia sugli antichi Greci*, Turin: Einaudi, 1997, 16–18.
- 18 Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World, in Five Books*, 11th edn, 2 vols, London: G. Conyers et al., 1736.
- 19 Degory Wheare, *The Method and Order of Reading both Civil and Ecclesiastical Histories in which the most Excellent Historians are Reduced into the Order in which they are Successively to be Read*, trans. Edmund Bohun from the revised 1637 edn, London: R. Bonwicke et al., 1710 [1625], 60.
- 20 Fergus Millar, *The Roman Republic in Political Thought*, London: University Press of New England, 2002, 6. Emphasis in the original.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 87, my emphasis.
- 22 Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998, 31–32.
- 23 Algernon Sindey, *Discourses on Government*, 3 vols, New York: Richard Lee, 1805, 2: 179, my emphasis.
- 24 James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana and A System of Politics*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 25.
- 25 Marchamond Nedham, *A True State of the Case of the Commonwealth in England, Scotland and Ireland*, London: Tho. Newcomb, 1654, 28–29.
- 26 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller and Harold Stone, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989, 22.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 112–30.
- 28 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, in *Œuvres Complètes* (1959–69), 4 vols, Dijon,

1962, letter 9, 284, my emphasis.

- 29 Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Nicole Loraux, "The Formation of Bourgeois Athens", in Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Politics: Ancient and Modern*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, 82–140.
- 30 Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, vol. 1, *Classical Republicanism and the American Constitution*; vol. 2, *New Modes and Orders in Early Modern Political Thought*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992–94, 1:136–38; Elizabeth Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1969, 139–242.
- 31 See for instance Plato, *Laws* 3.693d–e; Aristotle, *Pol.* 1294b13–41.
- 32 On this argument, see Millar, *The Roman Republic*.
- 33 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, (1997) [1762], 91, my emphasis.
- 34 Such an assertion depends, of course, on the meaning of *dēmokratia* and has been the object of debate among historians.
- 35 John Gillies, *The History of Ancient Greece, Its Colonies and Conquests; from the Earliest Accounts, till the Division of the Macedonian Empire in the East*, 3 vols, Dublin, 1786, my emphasis.
- 36 William Mitford, *The History of Greece*, 3rd ed., 6 vols, London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1795 [1784–1818, 8 vols], 1:282–83, my emphasis.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 2:375, my emphasis.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 1:283, my emphasis.
- 39 George Grote, *A History of Greece. From the Earliest Period to the Close of the Generation Contemporary with Alexander the Great*, 8 vols, London: John Murray, 1862 [1846–56], 3:109.
- 40 Samuel Horsley, *A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, London*, London: Ann Rivington, 1793, 26–27.
- 41 Mitford, *The History of Greece*, 6:287 and 6:305.
- 42 George Grote, "Institutions of Ancient Greece", *The Westminster Review* 5 (1826): 269–331 (280).
- 43 Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 2:20.
- 44 John Dunn, *Democracy: A History*. London: Atlantic, 2005, 71, 15.