

# The Struggle of Democratisation against Authoritarianism in Contemporary Africa



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## CHAPTER ONE

# APPROACHES TO DEMOCRATISATION: THE LEVELLER ASPIRATION FOR POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY; AND ATHENIAN PARTICIPATORY REALITIES 508-322 BCE

### **An Introduction to Democracy and Democratisation**

Democratisation is understood here as a process and a society that may grow out of it where ordinary people make the decisions on matters affecting them. Secondly, it is an unending struggle for such rights and power. Evidence abounds that those who hold power resist giving it up or sharing it, and do so grudgingly, partially and deceptively. Thirdly, the contending classes are essentially the poor and weak majority, and an elite of wealth, education, status and power: 'the few and the many' in British Labour Party parlance today. Fourthly, democratisation is often a matter of aspiration and impulse, by determined men and women, which fail more often than they succeed, yet reappear again in other times and places. A prominent Leveller leader, 'Freeborn John' Lilburne, said at the end of the 1640s that, though they fail, their principles would shine on in the future: as they did with the Chartists 180 years later, whose supporters were in turn harshly suppressed.

Fifthly, it is also an ideology and historical record intentionally filled with obscurities, deceptions and lies. The insistence that ordinary people are incompetent, incapable and irrational, and that only elites able to think for them are fit to rule. On one side in history, 'the idle mob', the 'turbulent mob', men as Oliver Cromwell sneered 'with no interest other than in breathing'; and on the other, men with 'a permanent fixed interest', as Ireton stressed, 'responsible men', oligarchs with landed and commercial interests, and the African National Congress's 'Struggle Heroes' of contemporary South Africa. This suggests too that democracy is essentially in the gift of Great Men who sometimes come together in almost 'miraculous' circumstance, like Nelson Mandela and F.W. De Klerk, circa 1990-1994, to

confer good government on their fortunate people. These are repeated experiences. In smashing Chartism in the 1840s the oligarchy in Westminster intended to obliterate even the memory of the many men and women who had been highly active socially and politically up and down the country for over a decade. From the late 1980s, the political and military elites of the ANC tried to erase the memory of the United Democratic Front and the thousands of people in community groups associated with them.

Sixthly, two main forms of democracy are in broad contention. A representative, liberal model revolving around free elections in which people as voters periodically choose those who decide in their name, or more realistically, where competing elites 'get themselves elected' making good use of their wealth and celebrity. This form achieved pre-eminence in Britain and the United States, but is now under threat from its own dysfunctions, and the alienation of its citizens from its elitist, patently self-serving values and institutions. And there is a participatory model, first developed in Athens, 508-322 BCE, where a strong ideology of equality, and an elaborate institutional array, upheld the capacity of uneducated, poor citizens to govern themselves actively and directly.

The liberal capitalist system has failed in many places, and in a few it has prompted the re-appearance of participatory forms and practices: in Iceland, the greed of some 30 leading individuals brought about the near collapse of the financial system in the early 2000s, but the other 300,000 people have been re-constructing their government in innovative, participatory ways reminiscent of Athens. Emerging from autocracy, Tunisians since 2010, progenitors of a supposed 'Arab Spring', facing big problems from corruption and terrorist violence, have been utilising participatory, deliberative methods. Principles within this model, the belief that large numbers of randomly chosen citizens are better able to consider complex issues than a few experts, have been applied in Ireland recently, where large Assemblies have deliberated positively on the complexities of abortion laws.

### **Democratisation Attempted: The Leveller Revolutionary Aspiration.**

The Leveller's movement arose in the 1640s during the clash between powerful political and economic forces. A dying feudalism was being confronted by an emerging capitalism, and absolute monarchy was facing rising parliamentary power, where parliament represented not the people but



landowners and merchants, the Grandees. King Charles initiated war, which became the bloodiest in British history. Vallance suggests that some 85,000 died in the fighting, a further 100,000 died from wounds or disease, and 120,000 became prisoners of war. England's population at the start of the 1600s may have been around four million. Horspool says that half a million died in conflict in the three kingdoms, England, Ireland and Scotland. It was an early form of total war, where food was plundered and grazing land destroyed by the armies. People were hard hit by food scarcity and price rises in towns like London. War affected people intellectually and politically. Intense religious conflict over laid all. The printing and distribution of pamphlets soared.<sup>1</sup> Despite censorship, printed titles of all kinds reached over 3,500 in 1642. The number of newspapers alone grew from 59 in 1642 to 70 in 1648, and print shops in London totalled 40 in 1649 (each with some 70 presses). Rees says that it was the 'coordinated use of print for political purposes' that first marked the Levellers out as 'an effective organisation.'<sup>2</sup>

One of the beliefs that distinguished Cromwell as a successful commander was his recognition that the war had to be fought until victory, and another was his preference for a committed army based entirely on military merit, his famous "russet-coated captain that knows what he fights for, and loves what he knows".<sup>3</sup> Well-trained, hymn singing Ironsides gained notable victories and an awareness of their political identity and innate equality, despite the fact that half of the army's foot soldiers were pressed men. Authority in the New Model Army was based on the principle of the sovereignty of the rank and file, enshrined in the 'Solemn Engagement' signed by the officers and the soldiers' agents at Newmarket on 5 June 1647. Important agreements were made, that the army would not be disbanded nor the officers separated from their men until conditions concerning pay and non-deployment to Ireland were met,<sup>4</sup> and later broken. But big institutional advances were made: they created a General Council of the Army, consisting of the general officers (notably Sir Thomas Fairfax, Cromwell and Henry Ireton), plus significantly two officers and two soldiers from each regiment as 'agitators'. This body became the forum in which decisions

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Vallance, *A Radical History of Britain*, (2009) 148; David Horspool, *The English Rebel* (2009) 251; Pauline Greg, *Free-Born John: A Biography of John Lilburne* (1961) 94.

<sup>2</sup> John Rees, *The Leveller Revolution* (2016) 69.

<sup>3</sup> Parts of this section are extracted from Good (2014) 23-25.

<sup>4</sup> The soldiers' arrears of pay stood at 1.3 million pounds in May 1649 Vallance (2009) 125.

were made in the army over the next year. It was nothing less than ‘the most powerful and democratically representative body in English history.’<sup>5</sup>

The election of the Agitators itself was ‘a momentous turning point in the revolution’. No army had ever done this before, says Rees. The election of directly accountable agents—what ‘agitator’ meant—from across the Army, first in the eight cavalry regiments, then in the foot regiments too, ‘provided a new popular impetus’ to the Revolution. Two years earlier, men and women grouped around Lilburne in London, known as Levellers, were ‘recognisable’, ‘coherent and purposeful’ in their programme and acknowledgement of his leadership. He was a notable pamphleteer, as was his wife and comrade Elizabeth, and his *England’s Birth-right Justified*, created popular excitement. Freeborn John had two years experience in the army as Captain and Lt-Colonel, and half of the rest of his life (1615-57) was to be spent in prison and exile. He acknowledged near the end of the 1640s, that the most detailed Leveller organisation was achieved by the Army.<sup>6</sup> But as the Army’s military dominance increased, and they moved closer to London, the rift between the Levellers and the grandees widened on the key issue of relations with King Charles.

Popular sovereignty directly confronted elite privilege at the Putney debates within the Army in late October and early November 1647. A primary proposition was that the sacrifices of the soldiers in a just war, and the people of London in supporting them, demanded reward in political inclusion. The cry of ‘what have we fought for?’ was widely heard: if they were now denied political rights, they would be no better than mere mercenaries. With the articulate Lilburne in the Tower, much of the debate for the majority fell on Edward Sexby, an Agitator in Fairfax’s cavalry, in close contact with civilians in London, and on Thomas Rainborough, colonel in a foot regiment, the strongest proponent of manhood suffrage. This was coupled by the Levellers with the notion of consent to government. Rainborough was famously explicit: “the poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the greatest he...every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government”. For Ireton, in sharp contrast, no person had a right to vote who had not a permanent fixed interest in the kingdom, and for Cromwell, manhood suffrage ‘must end in anarchy’. The principle that all, including the King and the Grandees, were subject to the law, was forcefully expressed. King Charles must be charged with treason, for making war on his own people,

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Foot, *The Vote: How it was Won and How it was Undermined* (2012) 39.

<sup>6</sup> Gregg (1961) 94-98.

as “a man of blood”. After Rainborough was killed in a surprise attack by royalist units, his funeral in London demonstrated Leveller support: some 3,000 mourners moved through the city wearing ribbons of his regimental colour, sea-green.

Specific events vividly expressed the deeply democratic impulse within the Army at this time. That concerning Cornet George Joyce in June 1647 especially. In a plan originating with the Agitators, which had Cromwell’s assent, Joyce and 500 troopers would ‘secure the person of the King’ from others of dubious allegiance. When the King’s existing garrison demanded to know who was in command in the relieving force, the answer was strong and ‘unanimous: All commanded.’ Early next morning, the King found Joyce’s 500 troopers mounted and ready to escort him away. In a final attempted evasion, Charles demanded under what commission Joyce acted: the Cornet said he acted to ‘prevent another war’ and, further, that his commission came from “the Soldiery of the Army”. When another person close to parliament and to the King, demanded to know if all the troops agreed with Joyce, their reported reply was ‘All, all’. The troop escorted the king away, ‘sounding their trumpets with echoes of triumph’ as they rode out. Joyce was an Agitator, a Cornet was the lowest-ranking officer in the army, and Joyce was ‘a tailor by trade’. Nonetheless, ‘on the authority of having been elected by his fellow troopers’ he had taken custody of the king, in precarious, potentially counter-revolutionary circumstances. Rees sees little doubt that the origins and execution of the initiative ‘lay with the rank and file’. People seemed to have agreed: ‘within days the pamphleteers had Joyce’s account of his exploits circulating on the streets.’<sup>7</sup>

The revolution pressed forward. The king was executed on a scaffold in Whitehall on 30 January 1649. Never had a ‘democratically driven movement of the people publicly tried their monarch for treason and put him to death.’<sup>8</sup> England became a republic, and the House of Lords was abolished.

But in the field effective and strong power lay with the commanders. Soon after Putney, Cromwell initiated an assault on the Levellers in the army, dispersing the soldiery, and seizing and executing those who opposed the disbandment of the army, or its deployment to Ireland—key pledges of the ‘Solemn Engagement’ of June 1647. The generals enjoyed the respect of many soldiers after years of hard fighting, and military discipline in the field

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<sup>7</sup> Rees (2016) 184-186.

<sup>8</sup> Rees (2016) 285.

enforced unquestioned obedience. The General Council ceased to exist, and the strength of the Agitators was irreparably weakened by their separation from one another.<sup>9</sup> General Fairfax had the soldiers' support, and told them that the main issue was the unity of the army: all that the Army had achieved together could be lost in ideological disputes, he claimed. When soldiers appeared at a large rendezvous wearing papers in their hats declaring 'England's Freedom! Soldiers' Rights', three were singled out, summarily charged and convicted. They were forced to throw dice for their lives: the loser was shot in front of his regiment by the other two.<sup>10</sup>

One of the largest acts of resistance ('mutinies') in the Army involved 1,200 soldiers at Burford in May 1649.<sup>11</sup> Four were sentenced to be shot in front of the others. The shooting of Robert Lockier (or Lockyer) was an exemplar. He was 23 and had served since he was 16. He had been an Agitator, opposed service in Ireland, and actively supported the Levellers. In his last words to the crowds on 27 April 1649, he hoped that his death would encourage others. The Levellers accorded him the funeral honours of a General. Sea-green ribbons were prominent among the following crowds.<sup>12</sup> A petition demanding the release of four imprisoned Leveller leaders, Lilburne, William Walwyn, Thomas Prince and Richard Overton, had been reportedly signed by 10,000 women the previous year.<sup>13</sup> Rees' thinks that the numbers involved in the Leveller mutinies totalled over 2,500 men.<sup>14</sup>

Lilburne's last published work, *England's New Chains Discovered*, appeared in London bookstalls in March 1649. He went on trial for high treason at the Guildhall in October. His supporters heavily outnumbered those of the government. He repeatedly contested points of law and fact with the judges and witnesses. On the evening of the second day of the trial, the Foreman of the jury loudly declared that Lilburne was not guilty of all charges: a huge shout went up from the people in the court, and bonfires were lit in the streets. A commemorative medal was struck by the Levellers showing the head of Lilburne on one side and the names of the jurymen on the other, and the words: 'John Lilburne saved by the power of the Lord and

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Robertson, *The Levellers: the Putney Debates*, (2007) 52.

<sup>10</sup> Foot (2012) 39-40.

<sup>11</sup> Good (2014) 27.

<sup>12</sup> Gregg (1961) 276-278.

<sup>13</sup> Stevie Davies, *Unbridled Spirits: Women of the English Revolution, 1640-1660*, (1999) 73.

<sup>14</sup> Rees (2016) 299.

the integrity of the jury who are judges of the law as well as fact.’ Lilburne was then 31. He went into exile three years later.<sup>15</sup>

The Leveller’s immediate achievements were notable. On 6 January 1649 the House of Commons acted on the army’s resolution at Putney, when they passed an Act on their own volition establishing the court which would try, and sentence King Charles soon after: this was an assertion of the Commons’ supremacy, giving substance to the notion of popular sovereignty. A vote of 4 January declared that ‘the people under God are the origin of all power’. Early that year, *The Agreement of the People*, which the Levellers may have seen as a possible future English constitution, had reached a third draft, and it had been stated that the basis for parliament’s supremacy was the sovereignty of the people.<sup>16</sup>

The Levellers won the support of common men and women in London, a large but inchoate mass within the narrow social and infrastructural limits of early capitalism. Here apprentices and printers were important: when printers were arrested their wives often continued their work (a core element of ‘those bonnie Besses in their see-green dresses’). But the New Model Army was their only organisational base, and here they agitated precariously under the weight of military discipline. Having abolished absolutism by 1649, Cromwell turned against his earlier Army ally, the common man, now an incipient anarchist. As their suppression began, the Levellers, said Hill, were beginning to win support in the North and West.<sup>17</sup>

Their long-term achievements were probably even greater. The Putney Debates over two days were a foretaste of participatory democracy in England. At the tactical and strategical levels, they pioneered many aspects of modern protest politics: quick pamphleteering; mass petitioning; large public demonstrations. They ‘created a popular base’ and ‘pioneer[ed] revolutionary political organisation’.<sup>18</sup> Their ideas, about sovereignty, legitimacy, accountability and democratisation, were peerless. Over more than a decade in warfare, when both armed and unarmed, they spoke for and with the people. Their endurance and integrity were strong, and their strengths and weaknesses were perhaps one and the same. Petegorsky says that ‘the political and social programme of the Levellers was far in advance

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<sup>15</sup> Gregg (1961) 294-301.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Braddick, *God’s Fury, England’s Fire* (2009) 568, and David Petegorsky, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War* (1999), Introduction.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, (1972) 97.

<sup>18</sup> Rees (2016) 348.

of their time',<sup>19</sup> but they failed to anticipate the intent and ruthlessness of the new ruling class. Cromwell's wrath was given full vent after August 1649 in Ireland, in war crimes, religious persecution, ethnic cleansing, famine and disease.<sup>20</sup> Lilburne believed he was speaking for 'posterity' which would 'reap the benefits of our endeavours'. Two centuries later, the Chartists arose embedded within an industrialising urban working class. But they too underestimated the determination of the ruling oligarchy to crush them.

### **Democratisation Achieved: Athenian Participatory Democracy, 508-322 BCE: Empowering the People and Controlling Elites**

Athenian democratisation was not a gift from a benevolent elite, but grew from the collective decision of ordinary men who had begun to conceive of themselves as potential citizens.<sup>21</sup> The democracy which emerged victorious from the Persian invasion--first in 490 BCE then again in 480-479, not 30 years from its outset--was 'revolutionary, dynamic and innovative, both radically exclusionary in its definition of the citizenry, and even more radically inclusionary in the political predominance it accorded to the poor majority of citizens.'<sup>22</sup> It endured for 186 years despite the prevalence of warfare for three out of every four years of its life, and it was 'constantly' at risk of destruction.<sup>23</sup>

Athenian democracy was erected in a class society within a pre-capitalist economy with very limited energy resources. The polity was some 2,500 square kilometres in size, comprising the city, the port of Piraeus and the surrounding countryside of Attica. Its population around 400 BCE was some 220,000 (but it had been 335,000 thirty years earlier), making Athens roughly comparable in size to contemporary Iceland, with its population of 311,000 and an area of 103,000 square kilometres, or to the size of the city-state of Singapore of 639 square kilometres. The year 400 came just four years after the 27 years-long Peloponnesian war, which drastically reduced

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<sup>19</sup> Petegorsky (1999) 118-119.

<sup>20</sup> Michael O Siochru, *God's Executioner: Oliver Cromwell and the Conquest of Ireland*, (2008) 1-2 and 223.

<sup>21</sup> Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution* (1999) 34-38.

<sup>22</sup> Good (2014) 1.

<sup>23</sup> Cartledge, Thermopylae (2006) 6, and Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge* (2008) 80.

the population.<sup>24</sup> Athenian class relations, however, remained much the same. Economic and social inequalities were deep, but under an active, participatory democracy their pervasiveness was not allowed to extend into the political realm.

### *The Democratising Society*

Data suggests there were c. 400 BCE, some 120,000 free men, women and children; some 70,000 slaves; 30,000 resident foreigners or *metics*; and 30,000 male citizens.<sup>25</sup> Though women performed what Cartledge calls ‘public citizenship roles as priestesses’, they were denied participation in politics. Such exclusion was a world-historical phenomenon until the late nineteenth century democratisation brought the vote for women in New Zealand in 1893 and in Australia in 1902; Britain only extended the vote to all women in 1928, and Swiss democracy excluded women until 1971. Slavery existed almost world-wide until 1838, when some 800,000 black men, women and children became officially free in the British empire, leaving the system firmly in place elsewhere.<sup>26</sup>

The denial of political rights to *metics* was anomalous. This quasi-elite social category included many of those most active in the commercial, entrepreneurial, and intellectual life of the city—Aristotle, for one, was a metic—whose contribution helped lift Athens to leadership in the eastern Mediterranean. Their exclusion related to the city-state’s citizenship rules; initially it was accorded to a person with one parent born in Athens, but tightened by Pericles in 451 BCE. But flexibility was shown in practice to the political rights of *metics* over time.

Socio-economic inequalities were extensive in Athens. There were 1,200 men whom Waterfield terms ‘super-rich’ who were liable to liturgies, or extremely expensive and mandatory benefactions to the state, for example, funding the command and operational costs of a *trireme* warship, each with 170 oarsmen, for a year (some 6,000 drachmas).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, *A War Like No Other* (2005) xiv.

<sup>25</sup> This section extracts and develops key points from Good (2014) 2-17.

<sup>26</sup> Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains* (2006) 348-9.

<sup>27</sup> Six obols equalled one drachma; four drachmas equalled one tetradrachm, and 6,000 drachmas equalled one talent. Ober, frontispiece, *Democracy and Knowledge* and Robin Waterfield, *Why Socrates Died* (2010) 14.

Below this wealthy elite totalling some 7,200 men, there were about 14,000 small farmers owning and living with their families off some ten to fifteen acres of land,<sup>28</sup> with income sufficient to be *hoplites*, the heavy infantry backbone of the military. And below this rich peasantry, were some 9,000 *thetes*, or small peasants and manual workers, reliant on wages and other income worth about 300-350 drachmas a year around the 480s BCE. Such a class of poor peasantry, artisans and shopkeepers, with little or no property, who worked at or near subsistence levels, says Ste Croix, and constituted the majority of the citizenry.

He notes also that the possession of property, primarily in land, represented the social and economic power of the upper class, and which, before the advent of democratisation, ‘gave them command over the labour of others’ and the many advantages that flowed from that—a good and comfortable life, politics and military command, and intellectual or artistic pursuits. They provided part of the Greek armies which defeated the might of the Persian empire—some of the *hoplites*, all of the cavalry (the preserve of the ‘very wealthiest citizens’)<sup>29</sup>, and after the 480s, the commanders, or ‘trierarchs’, of the new and almost invincible navy. Athens fielded perhaps some 9,000 hoplites against Persia, or some one-fifth to one-third of the total citizenry then. The cost of hoplite weaponry and armour in the late sixth century was some 30 drachmas (a sum well beyond the earnings of a worker-peasant). Slave ownership was similarly class-based. The price of a slave in the late fifth century and over most of the fourth century was about 200 drachmas, about half of an artisan’s annual income.<sup>30</sup>

‘Substantial economic inequalities’ existed between the elite and the poorer two-thirds of citizens, and ‘endemic tensions’ prevailed between ordinary citizens and elites. But these were normally controlled by a prevailing ideology of over-riding political equality.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Political Institutions: Local and National***

Local or community government was based on two new social units, introduced in the first generation of the democracy, which fostered unity and cohesion among the geographic and economic diversity of the city-

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<sup>28</sup> *Democracy and Knowledge* (252).

<sup>29</sup> *The Athenian Revolution* (159).

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981) 114, 227, 479 and 490.

<sup>31</sup> Ober, *The Athenian Revolution*, 181 and *Democracy and Knowledge*, 182.



state; the deme and the tribe. The former was either a village, a suburb or a district, and a tribe was not a primordial entity but an artificial grouping of three demes, one urban, one from the hinterland of Attica, and one from the coastal region, ten in all. It was the basic socio-political unit. The Council of 500, charged with the implementation of the decisions of the Assembly, was composed of 50 men from each tribe.

Athenian participatory democracy was built on the revolutionary belief that all citizens, regardless of wealth or education, were equally capable politically, and that growing up in Athens constituted something of an education in itself, in the diversity of experience in public office that the average citizen acquired. Closely related was the idea that decision making by large numbers of participants was sounder than those made by the few.

The Assembly, or *ecclesia*, was the decision-making body on the big issues of war and peace; the confirmation of officials or their removal from office; finance and taxation; and virtually all issues of civic concern.<sup>32</sup> It was open to all citizens and it normally met around 40 times a year with some 6,000 in attendance; decisions were made by a simple majority on a show of hands.

Political institutions were designed to bring together different groups of citizens in multi-layered arenas and institutions, and the whole system, says Ober, articulated and aggregated individual knowledge. This was achieved in the Assembly and in the Council of 500 (or *Boule*). The latter body was responsible for the daily administration of public affairs, and for ensuring that the Assembly's decisions were properly implemented. It reviewed the performance of out-going magistrates, some 700 annually, and it prepared the agenda for the Assembly and chaired its meetings. The latter was a task of the *Epitaste* or President-For-a-Day, who chaired the Council, and held the keys to the treasury. Council membership was effectively structured to promote circulation and democracy. A citizen could serve on the Council for only two annual terms and never consecutively. The frequency of its meetings—daily except when the Assembly was meeting--and its large and rotating membership, gave most citizens experience in political office, while the rotational requirements prevented the Council from acquiring a

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<sup>32</sup> Donald Kagan, *Thucydides* (2009) 108.

strong and possibly elitist institutional identity.<sup>33</sup> It remained ‘the servant of the Assembly’.<sup>34</sup>

The People’s Courts (or *dekasteria*) were based on the annual random selection of 6,000 citizens over 30 years to serve as a panel of jurors and judges, or *dikasts*, 600 from each tribe. The courts like the Council met every day and jurors were assigned to specific courts and cases. Jury size varied around a figure of 501: large juries were believed to reduce the possibility of bribery or partiality. The jury decided the outcome and voted by secret ballot. Kagan says that the system was open, simple, and understandable to the citizenry. It placed no barriers of legal technicalities or expertise between the citizens and their laws, relying ‘as always on the common sense of the ordinary Athenian.’<sup>35</sup>

Waterfield adds that the jury constituted a fair cross section of the citizenry, in terms of age, wealth and employment. *Dikasts* received state pay for their frequent attendance; since the 420s, this was three obols a day, ‘enough to improve the quality of a poor man’s life.’<sup>36</sup>

From the middle of the fourth century BCE, 700 magistrates were annually selected by random lot, to serve on boards or committees supervising, with the assistance of a small staff of public slaves and working citizens, the operations of key institutions like the army and navy, and activities like the management of public works, and the disbursing of welfare payments; orphans of men who fell in battle were raised by the state, and their daughters given dowries. Very strict accountability procedures were enforced upon magistrates both before and especially after their year of service.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Empowerment of the Poor Majority***

Over the years, the empowerment of the majority was achieved in good part through the promotion of wide political participation by poor citizens: 500 citizens sat daily on the Council where the detailed work of government went on; 6,000 were enrolled annually as jury members available in the

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Valley, ‘Democracy: Whose Idea Was This?’, *Independent Online*, 12 May 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Kagan (2009) 109.

<sup>35</sup> Kagan (2009) 111-13.

<sup>36</sup> Waterfield (2010) 4.

<sup>37</sup> Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge*, 156-7 and 256.

People's Courts, while another 700 held magisterial positions; thousands attended Assembly meetings many times a year. Rotating memberships, with limited tenure, ensured that two-thirds of citizens served at least once on the Council, while some one-quarter became President-for-the-Day. Through the Assembly, Council and the courts, says Raaflaub, 'the people controlled the entire political process', involving a very large proportion of citizens constantly in public business.<sup>38</sup>

Wide majoritarian participation was furthered and deepened significantly by the reliance on random selection for office. Both as an extension of the principle that all citizens were equally capable politically, and a reflection of the belief that elections were an 'aristocratic method' which inherently favoured elites of wealth, status and education. An allotment (or randomization) machine called a *kleroterion* selected citizens to serve on the Council and assigned hundreds of jurists daily to specific cases and courts, virtually eliminating tampering and bribery.<sup>39</sup> An exception was made for military command, where ability and experience were vital, and Athens' 10 generals were annually elected for extendable terms.

Random selection among all citizens, sortition, was deemed vital to democracy by Athenians. "It is accepted as democratic when public offices are allocated by lot, and as oligarchic when they are filled by election", Aristotle affirmed. Sortition 'both embodied and enabled transparent and participatory governance'. It embodied radical principles and practice, summed up for Bridle, in the idea "diversity trumps ability": solutions to knotty problems are 'best found by starting from the greatest number of different viewpoints', from as wide a selection of people (citizens) as possible. Cognitive diversity, he says, leads potentially to more effective solutions.

Democratisation based on sortition has potentially wide application. Studies have shown that 'random selection from a large group produces better answers to complex problems than through the appointment of a narrow group of experts'. Today in functioning liberal, representative democracy, sortition survives in jury selection. But it has re-appeared in its broad participatory form in societies in transition recently: Iceland, around 2012-

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<sup>38</sup> Kurt A. Raaflaub, 'Introduction', in Raaflaub, Ober and Robert W. Wallace (eds.), *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece* (2007) 5 and Vallyly (2010).

<sup>39</sup> Sterling Dow, 'Aristotle, the Kleroteria, and the Courts,' chapter in P.J. Rhodes, *Athenian Democracy* (2004) 62-94, and Raaflaub (2007) 4.

2013,<sup>40</sup> and in Ireland in 2016, where a citizens' assembly was formed to consider a number of big questions. Selected at random from the electoral roll, 99 complete strangers, met over a series of weekends to learn about, debate and vote on issues like abortion rights and climate change. The citizens' assembly has been credited with 'providing the momentum for the legalisation of abortion', and it 'voted overwhelmingly' for measures to cut greenhouse emissions 'that politicians had dismissed as unworkable'. The Irish Assembly, selected at random from the entire population, thus truly representative, included, for example, citizens who were pro-abortion, and anti-abortion and those who were indifferent, yet through 'a careful and deliberate process of education and debate', it was possible to change minds, reach consensus and to progress towards 'workable and even radical solutions'. The possibilities for progress in Ireland's Assembly were similar to what was achieved on a wider, regular scale in Athens.<sup>41</sup>

Payment for office facilitated the participation of poor citizens there. In the 420s BCE, dikasts were paid three obols daily by the state. Payment for attendance at the Assembly began around 410, at the same level as for jury service. It was doubled to one drachma, around 340 BCE, and then tripled to nine obols for the ten 'principal' Assembly meetings of the year. The annual costs of democratic government in Athens were then about 100 talents, and most of that amount was devoted to payment for office.<sup>42</sup>

In the military affairs of the imperialistic city-state, popular participation was even greater. From age 18 to 60 years, every citizen was on stand by for service in a branch of the military appropriate to his class and wealth, the very rich historically in the cavalry, and a middle-income man, or rich peasant, as a hoplite; the percentage of citizens mobilised in the latter category at critical times, was almost one-third.

But the important role of the military as a vehicle for both development and democratisation was transformed when a large navy of some 200 advanced

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<sup>40</sup> Sortition was combined with participatory forms to write a new constitution in Iceland. Random selection produced a new National Assembly of 950 citizens, and a 25-member Constitutional Council to convert the Assembly's resolutions into a coherent bill. This process was assisted by over 300 submissions from the public plus many more on the Council's interactive website. After four months work, the Council unanimously approved the bill. But parliament was also involved, where strong conservative interests delayed ratification. Good (2014) 236-237.

<sup>41</sup> James Bridle, 'How Can we Break the Brexit Deadlock?' *Guardian Online* (26 December 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Dow (2004) 63, 65 and 68.

triremes was introduced in the early fifth century, utilising both Athens' new silver resources and the foresight of its poorer citizenry.

Powered by 170 oarsmen in three tiers, with the lowest level seated just above the waterline, the highly manoeuvrable trireme could maintain a speed of ten knots over a full day. Themistocles, as elected chief archon for 493/2 BCE, had 'inaugurated the turn to the sea', and when the silver revenues became available ten years later, he proposed to the Assembly that the new wealth should be devoted, not to the gratification of immediate consumption, but to the building of a new and large fleet, with Piraeus as both Athens' main naval base and commercial harbour.<sup>43</sup>

The costs and consequences of the new naval force were both large. Even under fleeting peacetime conditions, keeping some 60 triremes at sea for an eight-month year cost 480 talents, and required a crew of some 12,000. The Athenian democracy passed a large part of the naval costs on to the less than one-third of very wealthy citizens, who were encouraged to compete publicly with each other in the number and value of their annual trierarchies.<sup>44</sup>

The navy produced imperial wealth and defrayed its costs of construction and maintenance. By around 430 BCE, Athens controlled some 160 subject city-states, bringing wealth worth 6,500 talents annually. The rise of the navy was contemporary, notes Ober, with the 'flowering of Athenian democracy.' As naval power became increasingly decisive, the poorer majority of citizens 'took a correspondingly larger role in the governance of the state.'<sup>45</sup>

### ***Decision Making in the Democracy***

The Despatching Decree to establish a naval base and colony in the Adriatic in 325/4 BCE, to protect commerce in the area both Athenian and foreign, was recorded and preserved in detail in stone. It shows how the democracy had taught its citizens in the Assembly how to think through complex issues; how the various rotating offices chosen by lot, the institutions of local

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<sup>43</sup> Cartledge (2006) 97-98.

<sup>44</sup> John Hale, *Lords of the Sea* (2009) Introduction and 126-7.

<sup>45</sup> Ober, *The Athenian Revolution* (64-65) and Victor Davis Hanson, *A War Like No Other* (2007) 27.

government, the army and navy, were able to work cooperatively together, to produce new information and knowledge with speed and efficiency.

The primary decision-making body was a principal meeting of the Assembly, of approximately 8,000 citizens. The motion was moved by Cephisophon of the deme Cholargos, an otherwise unknown individual citizen who had chosen to speak out and move the successful motion. The motion specified both incentives and sanctions for malfeasance in the operations, where punishments in the form of crippling fines stand out, together with the Assembly's promotion of a competitive, elitist 'race to the docks', where the carefully graded winners of notable honours would be those trierarchs who could most quickly assemble the skilled and experienced crews on well-equipped ships for despatch from Piraeus.

Much of the work of the operation, and overall responsibility was, on Ober's summary, assigned to the Council of 500, who were simultaneously responsible for a great deal of other work, assisted by ten temporary Dispatchers. Most of the rest of the work was to be done by collegial boards of magistrates chosen by lot and from among the 10 annually elected generals. The work of establishing the naval colony was chiefly to be done, in other words, by average citizens, although the need for skill and experience in military affairs was emphasised on the ships. Athenian politics was a complex and effective system designed to identify (to articulate, aggregate and organise) relevant knowledge in the hands of thousands of citizens.<sup>46</sup>

Other examples of wise and effective decision making in the Assembly included of course the building of the new navy. The silver strike of 483/2 would have been enough for a universal distribution among the citizenry of a sum worth around two weeks' wages for a skilled artisan. But Themistocles argued successfully for a formidable trireme fleet, and the deferred but ultimately substantial gratification which developed naval power would bring.<sup>47</sup>

Another was the decision in 480-479 BCE to meet the invading Persian army 'with all their people and their entire navy', to evacuate Athens and abandon the homes of tens of thousands of citizens, implementing a scorched earth policy, in order to preserve their freedom at all costs. Everyone shared in the labour and costs of the evacuation, and 'the

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<sup>46</sup> *Democracy and Knowledge* (124-33).

<sup>47</sup> Cartledge (2006) 98.

aristocracy acquiesce[d] in the destruction of its estates.’ A related decision specified the complex demographic and logistical provisions of the evacuation. It was ‘one of the most significant decisions that the Athenians ever took’, and it set the city firmly ‘on the path to radical participatory democracy’, Garland recognises.<sup>48</sup>

### *Controlling Elites*

This was a continuing problem, which was substantially addressed through the empowerment of the poor majority and in the construction of an institutional array of interlocking agencies and institutions expressing the power of the demos—excluding or limiting elite penetration—bolstered overall by a dominant ideology of political equality. Elites of wealth, status and education actively existed, and the democracy sought to utilise their skills and experience in specific areas, while controlling their powers and restricting their oligarchical tendencies. Over long and highly turbulent times, there were only two brief interruptions, in 411 and 404-03 BCE, to the democratic dominance of the common man.<sup>49</sup>

The threat of ostracism was one of the most visible of such control devices. Introduced by Cleisthenes around 507 BCE, it was often used by the Assembly between 487 and 416, but never in the 4<sup>th</sup> century; on Thorley’s estimate, only about a dozen ostracisms occurred in total.<sup>50</sup> It gave the citizens the annual opportunity to exile a prominent person for a maximum of ten years—without loss of property or honours—because he was believed to be a threat to stable democracy.

The principles and practice of universal fitness for office, for rotational, short-term appointments, and the almost complete reliance on random, lotteried selection, all in close working association, helped check elite power. Athens recognised that election conferred potential prestige, and sharply restricted its use. Only ten generals, each over thirty years, held annual, renewable elected office, along with key naval architects, some treasurers and the superintendents of the water supply.<sup>51</sup> The powers possessed by the generals were high, but the controls exerted over them by

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Garland, *Athens Burning* (2017) 11 and 142.

<sup>49</sup> Waterfield (2010) 24.

<sup>50</sup> John Thorley, *Athenian Democracy* (2004) 43.

<sup>51</sup> Kagan (2009) 110.

the Assembly, Council of 500 and the Courts system were as great and implicitly greater.

The position of general was a strategic office,<sup>52</sup> representing military and societal prestige, and the lion's share of war booty, but it remained open to recall and public trial, and around 430 Athenian politics were highly volatile. Pericles in that year was deposed as general by vote in the Assembly. He was charged with embezzlement of public funds, tried before a large jury, convicted, and fined, says Kagan, an 'extraordinarily large amount;' perhaps between 15 and 50 talents. He was re-elected general the following year but died of the plague in 429.<sup>53</sup>

Alcibiades (c. 453-404) personified most of the values and pretenses that the demos most disliked in their aristocratic elites. At age 20 he was already, on Waterfield's description, the darling of Athenian high society, the leader of the fashionable young bloods, and notorious for his arrogant, flamboyantly anti-social behaviour. He was born into two of the greatest Athenian families, and was very rich. He had the best of teachers, and was prominent in the company of Socrates.

In 415 Alcibiades persuaded the Assembly to attack Sicily, and to name him as one of three generals in command. The rash move necessarily confronted Syracuse, a prosperous Greek city and ally of Sparta.<sup>54</sup> The expedition represented 'an enormous financial outlay,'<sup>55</sup> and it ended in disaster, and the exhaustion of Athens' capital reserves. Alcibiades then defected to advise the Spartans on how best to attack Athens, and defected again to Persia. In 411 he conspired with a group of aristocrats to overthrow the democracy, promising Persian support. He was tried *in absentia*, condemned to death and his property sold. Though subsequently pardoned, he remained on the margins of Athenian life and, after further manoeuvrings with Persia, was assassinated in Phrygia in 404.<sup>56</sup> His career paralleled and contributed

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<sup>52</sup> The Assembly retained control over the size, composition and use of naval and land forces.

<sup>53</sup> Waterfield (2010) 53 and 100; Kagan (2009) 83, 106 and 113, and Hanson (2007) 47 and 321.

<sup>54</sup> Alcibiades' command position probably derived more from his Olympic achievements and over-payment of liturgies than his military capacities. Simon Hornblower, 'Creation and Development of Democratic Institutions in Ancient Greece', chapter in John Dunn, *Democracy The Unfinished Journey* (1992) 11.

<sup>55</sup> Debra Hamel, *The Mutilation of the Herms* (March 2012) 11.

<sup>56</sup> Waterfield (2010) cs. 4-7.



to the decline in Athenian power, facilitated by democratic over-tolerance towards an intemperate and treacherous upper class individual.

Aristocrats all over the Greek world were, in fact, ‘prepared to betray their city into the hands of a foreign occupying power, if that was the price of their holding political power.’ The common man, on the other hand, tended to be steadfast in his commitment to democracy. Piraeus, the home of the navy and its sailors, was ‘the heartland of the opposition to the oligarchs’ in the early 400s BCE.<sup>57</sup>

Heavy taxation, swingeing fines in the courts, and liturgies represented important financial controls on the rich, and helped to underwrite a redistribution of income in favour of the poor majority. Liturgy obligations like those a trierarch faced—some 4,000 drachma a year—harnessed the competitive drives of elites to outdo their rivals and win goodwill from the people. The trial of Socrates was related to the defeat at Syracuse and how it came about. Stone believes that Athens had been extraordinarily tolerant of dissident opinion, but what happened towards the end of the philosopher’s years altered this. What converted prejudice into prosecution was, he says, the move by disaffected upper-class elements in connivance with the Spartan enemy to overthrow democracy, set up dictatorships, and a reign of terror in 411 and 404, just a few years before Socrates’ trial and execution in 399 BCE. The first dictatorship, that of the Four Hundred, lasted only four months, and the second, of the Thirty, eight months, but each was accompanied by many horrors. The type of rich young aristocrats prominent in Socrates’ entourage, typified by Alcibiades, played a leading role in both.

Socrates was suspect by association with the plotters, his sympathies—shared with Plato—for Sparta, and his unhidden distaste for democracy. Charged with corruption of the youth and impiety, Socrates never addressed the charges before the jury but attempted a dialectical exchange with his accusers, insulting them further. Nonetheless, the verdict was close. Xenophon reportedly believed that Socrates wanted to die in order to expose the wilfulness of democracy. When a friend offered him an escape plan, he chose to stay in Athens and drink the hemlock. Socrates possibly succeeded in part: his trial was an over-reaction, a betrayal of Athenian values, not least their proclaimed tolerance for ‘the company of our critics.’ But democratic ideology demanded that all citizens ‘conform to a stern ethical code of behaviour predicated on duty to self and community.’ It enforced a

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<sup>57</sup> Waterfield (2010) 101 and 130.

permanent, intensely personal accountability, built on ‘fierce directness.’<sup>58</sup> The code constituted the framework of the community and indicated the expected role of the citizen therein; the constraint of the elite was the bolster of the common man.

Nonetheless, the long term post-coup situation in Athens was one favouring the reconciliation of the contending classes. For Stone, this was based on a sweeping and admirable amnesty, while for Arblaster more realistically, the restored democracy treated the Thirty Tyrants with ‘excessive leniency.’<sup>59</sup>

Realism won out. For some decades elites like Plato and Socrates had insisted that democracy was unnatural in promoting equality. But, says Waterfield, ‘the debate was won by the democrats...because their opponents had the worst track record’—Alcibiades’ arrogance and disloyalty, the brutality of the Tyrants—‘were plain facts.’ The oligarchs never recovered moral stature, and ‘active dissent fizzled out in the fourth century.’ Ste Croix adds that it was ‘taken for granted by virtually all citizens’ that there was no practical alternative to democracy for Athens; for two generations, the upper classes abandoned hopes for constitutional changes and devoted themselves to immediate pursuits.<sup>60</sup>

### *The Excision of the Common Man from Democracy*

The critical role of the demos in Athenian democratisation after 508 BCE ‘simply disappears in some respectable scholarly accounts,’ Ober notes.<sup>61</sup> The worker-citizen, however, is the focus of Wood’s attention, in arguing that ‘the free labourer, enjoying the status of citizenship’, the peasant-citizen, with juridical and political freedoms was, in fact, the most distinguishing feature of Athenian democracy. Citizenship was defined to include people who laboured for their livelihood. The need to work for a living, and the lack of property, were not grounds for exclusion from full political rights. Totally unlike modern liberal freedoms, Athens upheld the freedom of the demos from masters; not the oligarchs right to speak (*eleutheria*), but the *eleutheria* of the labouring man.

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<sup>58</sup> Ober, *The Athenian Revolution*, pp. 11-12, and John Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (2006) 37.

<sup>59</sup> I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (1988) ch.11 and Anthony Arblaster, *Democracy* (1994) 17.

<sup>60</sup> Waterfield (2010) 154, and Ste Croix (1981) 291-2.

<sup>61</sup> *The Athenian Revolution*, 43.

As well as being a geographical unity, the polis was a socio-political unity, ‘the union of labour and citizenship’, Wood says. The Athenian civic community constituted a ‘direct relationship between landlords and peasants as individuals and as classes’—fraught, challenged, disrupted, re-negotiated and re-made. The Athenian citizenry were increasingly democratic after 508 BCE, and elite interests were unable to oppose them effectively in establishing political institutions and in the allocation of resources like silver, and the utilisation of slaves was determined by the daily economic needs of worker-citizens. Slavery was crucial in the mines, and farm slaves were important on large estates, but their usage was restricted elsewhere.<sup>62</sup>

But the role of Athenian free labour was suppressed in early modern British and United States’ historiography, with the aim of warning readers against democracy, in the proto-revolutionary late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: lampooned as ‘the turbulent mob’/ ‘the swinish multitude’/ ‘men with no interests other than in breathing’ / ‘incipient anarchists’.<sup>63</sup> The hard-working Athenian jurors and Councillors, the thousands of soldiers who served actively until age 60 and the sailors on the triremes, were ignored. The rewriting of history ‘forged a new pedigree for the concept of democracy’ traceable from Magna Carta, through the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and the Founding Fathers of the slave-based American constitution—all largely aristocratic or elitist events with an absent or passive people--taking firm precedence over Athens. In this long heritage, political rights in modern capitalist society, no longer had the meaning and potency of citizenship in Athens, where there was no clear division between state and civil society, no autonomous economy. With an especial contribution from American experience, modern capitalist democracy would be confined to a formally separate sphere while the market economy followed rules of its own, and socio-economic inequalities would coexist with civic freedom and formal political equality.

The events of and soon after 508/7 BCE constituted ‘a genuine rupture’ in Athens’ political history because they marked the moment when ‘the demos stepped on to the historical stage as a collective agent’. The energy released by the revolution was ‘a key factor in Athens subsequent political evolution’:

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<sup>62</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism* (1995) 181-86 and 236).

<sup>63</sup> Wood sees the 1640s to 1670s in Britain as representing the first clash between democracy and the elitist interpretation of constitutionalism. After 1688 it was clear that the reality of constitutional monarchy—rule by the king in parliament—represented oligarchy.

through the the panoply of democratic institutions, and democratic electoral practise within them, developing over the fifth and fourth centuries. Revolutionary action against Spartan occupation facilitated democratisation 'by enlarging the bounds of the thinkable, and by altering the way citizens treated one another.' Leaderless revolts, he recognises, are extremely rare in human history, and 'the appearance of democracy is *also* a historical rarity' (Ober's emphasis). Democracy became both a possibility and a reality in Athens when the demos became a self-conscious and a determining actor in its own right.<sup>64</sup> A revolutionary participatory democratisation was fuelled by the capacities of the common man over almost two centuries.

### *Out of Africa*

What follows are three examples of struggle against authoritarianism in former British settler colonies: Kenya where a poor peasantry fought for Land and Freedom against British imperial power, where Loyalist elites around Jomo Kenyatta, were ensured power, and the poor marginalised; Rhodesia-Zimbabwe, where Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF acquired state power, and 37 years of exceptional, relentless brutality followed, and the people, nevertheless, asserted their democratic aspirations when they could, most notably in the founding of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999, based on strong trade union and civil society support. And South Africa where, in an urban industrialising economy, democratisation was most advanced in the 1980s, in the United Democratic Front (UDF), founded on wide ranging community support. The Front put forward important principles for combatting elitism in democratic organisations, before being crushed in 1991, by an intolerant ANC on the eve of acquiring state power: the proclaimed legitimacy of the ANC was based chiefly on a mythologised external armed struggle: hegemony was its byword, and elitist wealth-acquisition its main aim.

Tunisia is a near total contrast: a steadily advancing democratisation, based on a strong and organised civil society, a democratic Islamist party, a wide disposition to compromise, and constitutionalism based on participation. But corruption and regional disparities run deep, addressed in part recently through the creation of an innovative Truth and Dignity Commission. Combatting corruption is an anti-elitist and a popular democratic cause in

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<sup>64</sup> Ober, 'Democracy's Revolutionary Start' (2007) 86-101.

Tunisia. 'Work and Dignity' were the declared aims of the uprising in 2010-2011, and their achievement is an on-going task.

