

1

## Democracy's First Coming

OUT OF THE DARK and from very long ago has come a word. Like every word which carries authority for human beings, it began its life somewhere in particular. Today that word reaches out almost everywhere on earth where humans gather together in any numbers. Wherever it goes, it presses a claim for authority and a demand for respect. Everywhere, still, these claims remain sharply contested. In some settings they are brushed effortlessly aside, and all but cowed into silence. In others they are affirmed sonorously enough, but heard by most listeners with a hollow groan. Virtually nowhere any longer, even in the most brutal of autocracies, are they merely unintelligible as claims; and in remarkably few sites by now are they simply and permanently inaudible: excluded or erased from public speech by the sheer ferocity of repression. (Note, for example, what was first to respond even for Iraq in the summer of 2003 when the United Nations Security Council demanded its submission, before America launched its invasion. It was not the tyrant who had ruled the country with such murderous brutality and for so long, and whose image dominated every Iraqi public space, but what passed for a national representative assembly: a Parliament. It was they, not their real master, who showily declined to submit. Within the week, their real master, less showily, had decided quite differently. Or so, at least for a time, it seemed.)

As it travels through time and space, the word democracy never travels all on its own. Increasingly, as the last two centuries have gone by, it has travelled in fine company, alongside freedom, human rights, and perhaps now even, at least in pretension, material prosperity as well. But unlike these companions, democracy stakes a claim which is disconcerting from the outset: the claim to be obeyed. Every right constrains free action. Even freedom necessarily intrudes on the freedom of action of others. But democracy is itself a direct pressure on the will: a demand to accept, abide by, and in the end even submit to, the choices of most of your fellow citizens. There is nothing enticing about that demand, and no guarantee ever that accepting it will avoid fearsome consequences and may not involve hideous complicities. In many ways, and from many different points of view, the authority won by this far-flung word is strange indeed.

This is a story with a beginning. Democracy began in Athens. Not anything whatever which anyone today might reasonably choose to call democracy,<sup>1</sup> but something which someone first in fact, as far as we know, did. Today democracy has come to be used, with sufficient galle, to refer to almost any form of rule or decision making. But when it entered human speech, it did so as a description of an already existing and very specific state of affairs, somewhere in particular. That place was Athens.

What exactly did democracy describe when the Athenians first used the term as a description? What did they mean by describing it in this way? To see what was happening in that first act of naming (or labelling), it helps to begin by listening to the Athenians as they addressed one another about the experience which they hoped to capture. Consider two voices, one very much speaking on democracy's behalf, the other writing of it without enthusiasm and in a more confiding and enquiring fashion.

The first is famous and imposing, the voice of Pericles himself. The grandest celebration of ancient democracy comes not from a poet or philosopher (or even a professional orator),<sup>2</sup> but from the great political leader who led Athens into the war which all but

destroyed her. It evokes, and claims to report, a single momentous historical ceremony, held late in the year 430 BC. True, we do not know that Pericles himself ever spoke a single word of it. But Thucydides, the mesmerizing historian who certainly composed virtually all of it, assures his readers that it, like the many other speeches of his *History*, conveys not merely what Pericles should have said but also what he would have meant.<sup>3</sup> Thucydides, as he tells us himself with some pride, intended his story to last for ever;<sup>4</sup> and Pericles by that point had led his city state in war and peace for longer than Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill, and done so under conditions which often tested the skills of domestic political leadership as exactly as America's devastating Civil War or the grim struggle to withstand and overthrow the Third Reich. He also led it (and could only have led it), to a degree that has never been true in any modern Parliamentary or Presidential regime, by convincing, time after time, a majority of the citizens present on the occasion by the speeches which he made. He held power by oratory,<sup>5</sup> and did so steadily and tautly enough for Thucydides himself to describe Athens at the time as being ruled by a single person.<sup>6</sup> We need not be surprised at the lasting power or resonance of this remarkable witness.

It was a speech for a proud sad occasion: a eulogy to the war dead of Athens in the opening year of the long drawn-out Peloponnesian War, delivered, as at every Athenian public funeral of its fallen (with the single exception of the victors of Marathon),<sup>7</sup> before their common grave beside the loveliest approach road to the city walls. In it, Pericles spoke not at all of the individual exploits or daring of his heroes,<sup>8</sup> though he left his hearers in little doubt that many had done finely. What he spoke of, incomparably, was Athens itself, the community for which each had made their final sacrifice. He spoke of its singular glories and its unique claim to such ultimate devotion. Thucydides was no sentimentalist, and no one since he wrote has judged the political conduct of the Athenians in those years more searchingly. What he makes Pericles say in praise of Athens at that point, in vindication of the

choices of those who went out to die on its behalf, begins from and centres on its political regime, and the political and spiritual lives which it freed and prompted the Athenians to live together:

We live under a form of government which does not emulate the institutions of our neighbours; on the contrary, we are ourselves a model (*paradeigma*, or paradigm) which some follow, rather than the imitators of other peoples.<sup>9</sup>

This regime, which is called democracy (*demokratia*), because it is administered with a view to the interest of the many, not of the few, has not merely made Athens great. It has also rendered its citizens equal before the law in their private disputes, and equally free to compete for public honours by personal merit and exertion, or to seek to lead the city, irrespective of their own wealth or social background.<sup>10</sup> Pericles praises it for the mutual politeness and lack of spite it fostered between those citizens, for the deep respect for law it inculcated, and for drawing to the city the fruits and products of the whole world. He praises it, too, for the military superiority it had mustered, for its determined openness in face of every other people, and the stalwart courage nurtured by its way of life. But he praises it, equally, for its taste and responsiveness to beauty, its sobriety of judgment and respect for wisdom, its pride in its own energy, discretion, and generosity. Athens, he boasted in summary, is an education for the whole of Greece.<sup>11</sup>

Democracy for the Athenians began (and even acquired its name) before the category itself carried or expressed any clear or special value. Yet within a few decades of picking up the name, it had come to mean for some not just a way of organizing power and political institutions, but a whole way of life and the inspiring qualities which somehow suffused it. At the core of that way of life lay a combination of personal commitment to a community of birth and residence, and a continuing practice of alert public judgment on which that community quite consciously depended for its own security:

For we alone regard the man who takes no part in public affairs, not as one who minds his own business, but as good for nothing; and we Athenians decide public questions for ourselves or at least endeavour to arrive at a sound understanding of them, in the belief that it is not debate which is a hindrance to action, but rather not to be instructed by debate before the time comes for action.<sup>12</sup>

There has never been a fuller or saner expression of the hope which lies at the very centre of democracy as a political ideal.

The speech which Thucydides gives us is a historian's presentation of a dutifully partisan and highly political performance. It is also an epitome of the ways in which the citizens of Athens had come to wish to conceive themselves as a community.<sup>13</sup> To other Athenians at the time, just as earlier and later, democracy naturally meant something very different, as it presumably did to many inhabitants of Attica—slaves, women, *metics*—who could never become full citizens.<sup>14</sup> With the critics of democracy there is a wider range of voices to listen to, not all of them cultured despisers like Plato.<sup>15</sup> Especially striking is the figure whom British classical scholars, for reasons now largely forgotten, have come to call the Old Oligarch, author of a terse study of *The Constitution of Athens*, long attributed to Xenophon.<sup>16</sup> For the Old Oligarch, writing in all probability before the Peloponnesian War even began, Athens's democracy was no occasion for applause;<sup>17</sup> but it certainly was a coherent political order, with many elements well calculated to sustain and strengthen it over time. It gave power to the poor, the unsavoury and the unabashedly popular,<sup>18</sup> and did so quite deliberately at the expense of those of wealth, nobility of birth, or social distinction.<sup>19</sup> This distribution of power<sup>20</sup> had entirely natural consequences,<sup>21</sup> benefiting the former mercilessly at the expense of the latter. What made the distribution viable was the main source of the city's military power, its citizen navy, drawn overwhelmingly from the poorer sections of Athens's population, unlike the heavily armed hoplites who dominated its land armies.<sup>22</sup>

In the eyes of the Old Oligarch, it was true in every country that those of greater distinction<sup>23</sup> oppose democracy, seeing themselves as repositories of decorum and respect for justice, and their social inferiors as ignorant, disorderly, and vicious.<sup>24</sup> In the face of these attitudes, the poorer majority of Athens's citizens are very well advised to insist on their opportunity to share the public offices of the city, and their right to address their fellow citizens at will,<sup>25</sup> and especially well advised to allocate those public offices on which the safety or danger of the people depended,<sup>26</sup> the roles of general or cavalry commander, not randomly across the citizen body but by popular election of those best equipped to hold them (inevitably, the wealthier and more powerful).

For Pericles, as Thucydides makes him speak, the democracy of Athens was a way of living together in political freedom, which ennobled the characters and refined the sensibilities of an entire community. It opened up to them lives rich with interest and gratification, and protected them effectively in living out these lives with one another. It would be hard sanely to ask for more from any set of political institutions or practices. For the Old Oligarch, in stark contrast, the democracy of Athens was a robust but flagrantly unifying system of power, which subjected the nobler elements of its society to the meaner, transferred wealth purposefully from one to the other, and distributed the means of coercion clear-headedly and determinedly to cement this outcome and keep the nobler elements under control.

For the people do not want a good government under which they themselves are slaves; they want to be free and to rule.<sup>27</sup>

No one could miss the clash between these two views. What is harder to assess is how far they really conflict in judgment and not merely in taste, and, where they do conflict in judgment, which better conveys the way democratic Athens really was.

Anyone who tries to see that reality for themselves faces three very different obstacles. The first is intrinsic to assessing the politics of anywhere at any time. It comes from the ambiguities of

politics itself, above all the permanent tensions between its two principal components.<sup>28</sup> Every political community is an elusive and unstable blend of human purposes and the (principally unintended) consequences of human actions. Those purposes can be extremely narrow or very widely shared. They can flicker for a day or two, or congeal into well-defined institutions or rules of action, and carefully interpreted conceptions of why both institutions and rules are or are not appropriate. Any picture of politics which focuses principally on institutions, practices, and values starts off from the official face of a political community, and registers its aspirations and pretensions. A picture which attempts instead to pin down what actually happens as a result of how particular men and women choose to behave is all but certain to present that community in a less sanguine or generous light. It is likely to conclude that the aspirations enunciated on its official occasions are often bogus, its institutions grossly at odds with their official justifications, and the values invoked within it to sanction one line of political conduct against another little more than tools of deception.<sup>29</sup> What must be true, however, is that neither picture can ever be adequate on its own and neither, therefore, ever wholly beside the point.<sup>30</sup> With Athens, more clearly perhaps than with General Mobutu's Zaire or the Wahabite Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the need for each is very clear.

The other two impediments to seeing Athenian democracy the way it really was are less intimidating but every bit as inconvenient. The first is the sporadic and often capricious character of the evidence which is still available to us. Much of this does not consist of elaborate descriptive texts.<sup>31</sup> But all of it is still very much in the shadow of a relatively small number of extremely striking texts, above all works of history, philosophy, drama, or oratory. All of these, in one way or another, press upon us their own picture of that very distant reality, and do so for purposes of their own, many hard, or even impossible, now to identify. We have works of painstaking institutional description, like Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*, comedies and tragedies from Aeschylus to Aristophanes,

probing histories from Herodotus and Thucydides, passionately engaged speeches by prominent political advocates like Demosthenes or Isocrates, unexcelled enquiries into the meaning of human life and the place of politics within it from Plato and Aristotle. Between them these disparate texts make some things arrestingly clear; but they also leave a great deal which is now wholly out of view. These large gaps in our knowledge do nothing to blur the realities of the distant past,<sup>32</sup> or weaken our reasons for straining to grasp them as best we can. But they offer a salutary warning of how easy it will always remain to deceive ourselves about the sources of our own views of those realities: why we see them, and feel about them, the way we do.

The third obstacle is the lengthy and surprisingly continuous history which has led us to see them this way, a history largely carried by the historical transmission of exactly the same texts. There is, as we shall see, little direct relation between the political institutions and practices of ancient Athens and those of any human community today. But there is unmistakably at least one connecting strand, which runs without interruption from the texts of Aeschylus to the present day. What is transmitted along this strand is seldom, if ever, firm structures of power or definite institutional practices. What travels along it, often with great vitality, is conceptions of what to value and aim for, and why and how to act on the basis of those conceptions. Conceptions of this kind (values, ideals, visions of life) never determine the outcome of the politics of any community, and change constantly as they shape and reshape purposes along the way. But no community can exist even fugitively, let alone persist and extend across long spans of time, except by courtesy of just such conceptions, and the complicated tissue of institutions and practices which they inform and sustain. (The law of any society is an ideal setting in which to see the weight of this simple consideration: an endless battleground of contending force, but also and just as necessarily a seamless canvas for enquiry and interpretation, the play of intelligence and even the impact of scruple.<sup>33</sup>) As we peer back towards the democracy of Athens,

through the murk of history, and quarrel endlessly about what was ever really there, we largely recapitulate Greek arguments. We do so partly because of an obvious continuity in subject matter: because the reality we are trying to grasp was to such a large degree what those arguments were about; and partly too because recapitulating Greek arguments was what for almost two thousand years Europeans, and later North Americans, were tirelessly trained to do. But we also do so because of the enduring power of some of those arguments, itself a testimony to the power of the way of life from which they first came.<sup>34</sup>

What then was Athenian democracy? Of some things we can be quite certain. For the Athenians themselves what it was remained fiercely contentious from its beginning to its end. It could scarcely have been less like the anodyne political recipe which democracy readily seems today, an almost wholly unreflective formula for how things ought to be politically almost everywhere and almost always (anywhere and any time, at least, at which it does not very urgently matter).<sup>35</sup> What the Athenians disagreed about, of course, was what happened in and through and because of their democracy, and what their regime therefore meant. They had far less doubt about what its principal institutions were, or when it had come into existence, or when, eventually, it had come to an end. What divided them, as it divides every human community, was how they saw one another's political actions, and the purposes which lay behind these, and the forces and interests (conscious or otherwise) which in turn lay behind those purposes.

Throughout its history, the democracy of Athens had bitter enemies as well as committed partisans, both at home and abroad. It may have come to be, as Pericles boasted, a proudly shared way of life in a conspicuously splendid setting; but that way of life itself attracted hatred and scorn as well as love and admiration; and the hatred and the love flowed out over and enveloped the institutions and practices of the democracy itself, and the balance of competing groups, social interests, and political energies which it reflected and secured.

Democracy in Athens arose out of struggles between wealthier landowners and poorer families who had lost, or were in danger of losing, their land, and who therefore risked being forced into unfree labour by their accumulated debts.<sup>36</sup> It did not arise, directly and self-consciously, through that struggle itself, by unmistakable victory of the poor over the rich, but through a sequence of political initiatives which reshaped the social geography and institutions of Athens, and endowed it with a political identity, and a system of self-rule which equipped it to express and defend that identity. The most important of these initiatives, the reforms of Solon, were put in place before Athens had in any sense become a democracy.

Solon was an Athenian nobleman (*Eupatrid*), chosen magistrate (*Archon*) for the year 594 BC, and given full power to reorganize the basis of land ownership, credit, and personal status amongst the Athenians, and give it lasting legal form. He codified the laws, revised the levels of property on the basis of which wealthier Athenians were eligible to hold public office,<sup>37</sup> modified the structure of law courts, greatly improving access for the poor, freed those already enslaved for debt, and abolished debt bondage for the future. He firmly refused to redistribute the land.<sup>38</sup>

By these means Solon tamed the brutal dynamics of appropriation, land hunger, debt, and potential enslavement amongst the Athenians themselves, and showed them how Athens could hope to conceive itself, and keep itself together as a community, while the world changed round it. What he failed to do was to establish a political mechanism through which the Athenians could act together to realize that hope. His reforms were a remedy for a dire trouble between the Athenians themselves. It was yet to become a remedy in their own hands.

The next key initiative, the conventional date for democracy's inauguration, came almost a century later and after much intervening political turmoil. Solon was a real historical person; but he was also a figure of legend, one of the two great Lawgivers (Legislators) who haunted the political imagination of Greek communi-

(CONTINUED...)