1 Why democracy was invented

> By using a mirror of brass, you may see to adjust your hat. By using antiquity as a mirror, you may learn to foresee the rise and fall of empires.
>
> - Chinese Emperor T'ai Tsung

Human egalitarianism

If we anchor our idea of democracy in empirically weak or romantic notions of human nature, we'll probably come unstuck. So it may be good to begin by looking at how human groups have actually behaved throughout most of the human timeline. That would give us some idea of the extent to which democracy is a 'fit' with our human make-up.

The earliest known remains for our species, *Homo sapiens*, are roughly 300,000 years old. These were discovered in Morocco in 1961, and were identified as human much later, by the paleoanthropologist Jean-Jacques Hublin, who published his findings in 2017.[1] Older remains than this may yet be found. But for the moment, it seems that *we* might have become *us* something like 300,000 years ago.

The other period of interest is the ten thousand years or so since agriculture and human settlement began. For simplicity, I've called the culture of this era—actually a series of thousands of cultures—the *Myriade*.[a] (Myriad meaning 'ten thousand' and *–ade* 'product of'.)

The 30 symbols below represent the *Homo sapiens* timeline in 10,000-year increments:

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++*

The first 29 of them make up our hunter-gatherer era. The asterisk at the end is the *Myriade*: the time since we began cropping systematically and settled down. It's obvious that nearly all of our genetic endowment pre-dates the era of fixed human settlement.

[a] No existing term quite works. 'Civilization' began well after agriculture; 'Holocene' is a geological term; and 'ten kiloyears', 'ten millennia', etc, characterize time but not the unprecedented 'settlement' culture of the *Myriade*, or its novel forms of governance and technology.

There's been a little frank evolution during the *Myriade*—blue eyes for some, dairy tolerance for others—but most of our human DNA was established in our time as nomadic hunter-gatherers living in bands.

These bands contained ever-fluctuating numbers—commonly 20 to 50—with a collection of bands, by the late Stone Age, frequently forming a larger 'ethnolinguistic group' or network of maybe 1,500 people.[2] The picture varied greatly from savannah to coast to forest to Arctic—and from ice age to warmer 'interglacial' times: but often a network would extend 200 to 400 kilometres from edge to edge. Its larger population and spread allowed information, resources and ideas to be shared widely. It also maximized co-operation in such things as food processing technology and hunting strategies.[3]

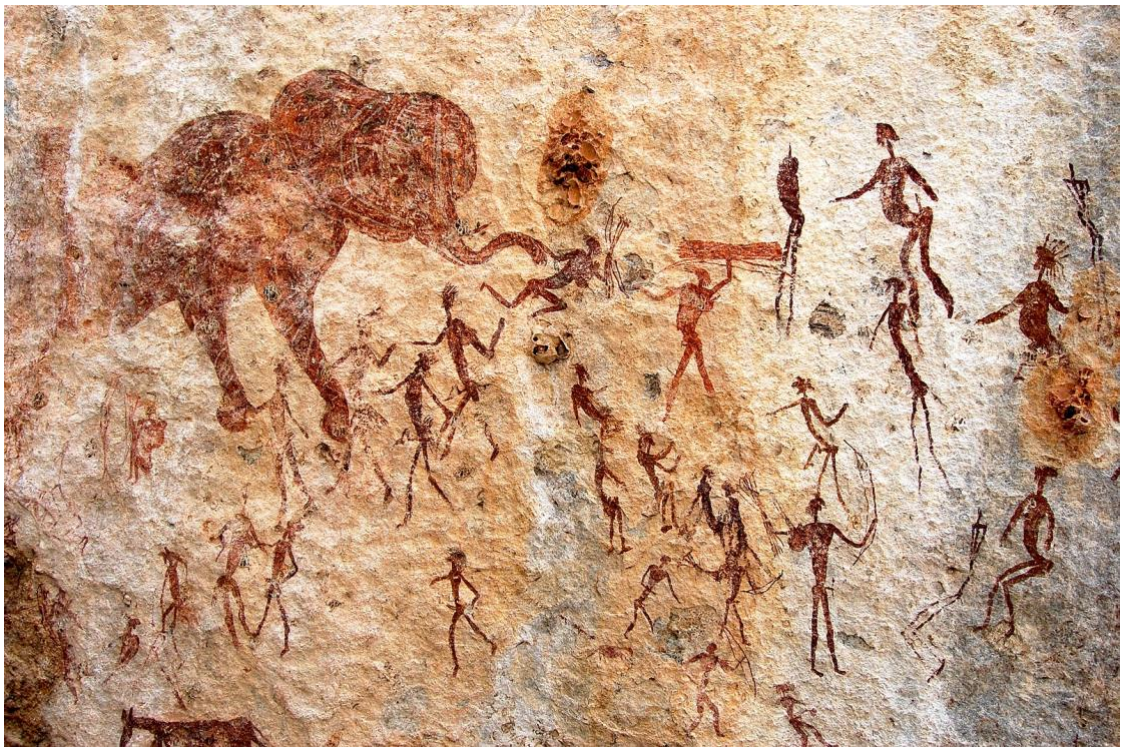


Fig. 1.1: *Stone Age rock art in Zimbabwe, showing a hunt scene*

The emerging 'network' model made the entire society more resilient.[4] From about 45,000 years ago, groups in the Mediterranean Basin, for example, had much increased their 'demographic robustness': they had higher populations, a wider geographical spread and much greater cultural diversity. Body ornaments, decorated tools and art joined the human repertoire.

High-status individuals in stratified, hierarchical societies tend to leave behind ‘prestige possessions’ and evidence of conspicuous consumption. They live in fancier abodes, and are buried with well-ornamented ‘grave goods’.[5] None of these things have been found in the campsites of small-scale, pre-agricultural societies. This meshes quite well with our knowledge of the ‘counter-dominant’ culture of hunter-gatherers of recent times.

This particular simian offshoot didn’t permit alpha males, and took down bigshots.[6] This was something quite new to the great ape family. In place of the hyper-competition of its ape cousins, *Homo sapiens* had learned co-operation.

Some of the foundational work in this field has been done by anthropologist Christopher Boehm, who cites the example of a South American Yanomamo chief observed by a colleague. Seeing the need to tidy up the centre of the village in advance of a visit by a neighboring village, the chief

> went out and began to rake it himself. Others saw him and began to follow his example, at which point he retired to let them finish the job. He was obliged to lead by example.[7]

Decision-making in many hunter-gatherer societies is more evenly shared between women and men than in traditional agricultural societies.[8]

Broadly, anthropology finds that whilst human individuals do have ‘hierarchical’ or ‘dominant’ tendencies, such traits tend to be overcome by a range of pressures from the group. As the economic anthropologist Harold Schneider put it:

> All men seek to rule, but if they cannot rule they prefer to be equal.[9]

Homo sapiens’ tendency to co-operate and share is encapsulated by Dr Michael Tomasello, of the Max Planck Institute:

> It is inconceivable that you would ever see two chimpanzees carrying a log together.[10]

Indeed, one survey of the hunter-gatherer literature concludes that humans, uniquely in the animal kingdom, are ‘ultrasocial’—possessing

> the ability to care about the welfare of others (other-regarding concerns), to ‘feel into’ others (empathy), and to understand, adhere to, and enforce social norms (normativity).[11]

Another worldwide survey found that 'relatively few hunter-gatherer societies have well-defined social strata or politico-religious offices' (though people with special skills are highly respected).[12] They tend to have low to modest wealth differences—and 'social insurance', where the less advantaged are taken care of by the group. Humans probably ended up this way, the survey concludes, because, over time 'strict hierarchical structures became maladaptive'.[13]

This idea is seconded by David Erdal and Andrew Whiten, of the University of St Andrews in Scotland:

> Counterdominance ('no one is going to get away with more than I') is an economically efficient predisposition: it ensures that sharing takes place, and, given the risk profile of hunting, sharing rather than attempted dominance is the efficient strategy.[14]

Intriguingly, in the midst of all this egalitarian co-operation, individualism somehow assumes a key role. Whilst equality was the highest value for the group, for the individual it was autonomy—or what modern Americans call 'freedom'. Humans did not evolve to live as a homogenous mass.

Individualism, according to anthropologist Tim Ingold, is a 'fundamental value which ethnology [the comparative study of cultures] consistently attributes to hunters and gatherers'.[15]

Erdal and Whiten write that to recognize good performance, and defer to those who achieve it, is a 'cross-culturally stable tendency'—all cultures do it. Individualism, which they see as 'grounded in inherited tendencies', probably had an adaptive advantage by 'structuring groups around effective individuals'.[16]

In short—Christopher Boehm writes—humanity's '"democratic" origins…are not recent and historical, but evolutionary and ancient. They date from well back in the Paleolithic era, and were intimately involved with the development of human nature itself.'[17]

When hunter-gatherer groups *do* have 'leaders', they're much less powerful than those in modern political groups, and more easily removed. Of 48 such societies surveyed by Christopher Boehm, 38 had removed an unsatisfactory leader—11 of them by assassination.[18]

British anthropologist Susan Kent goes so far as to suggest that hunter-gatherer 'leaders' were only 'situational, temporary and nonbinding

“leaders” who are “leaders” only because ethnographers and others have labeled them as such’.[19]

When bossy people and power junkies cropped up—anthropologists call them ‘upstarts’—human groups worldwide developed a suite of actions to keep them in their place. These included:

Rebuffs
Rebukes
Criticism
Ridicule
Satire
‘Cutting down’
‘Shouting down’
Disobedience
Exile

Thus, if a chief of the Iban tribe in the Philippines gives a command, he’s likely to be ‘sharply rebuffed’. The Mbuti Pygmies ‘shout down’ a successful hunter who becomes over-assertive, as do the South American Shavante. If an individual among the Nuer (Nile Valley), Inuit (Arctic), Arapaho (North America), Bedouin (Arabia) and Chaco (South America) attempts to give orders, he is disobeyed or simply ignored.[20]

In most groups, would-be autocrats are routinely fired. Others are deserted: the band picks up its tools, food and children, and goes to live elsewhere, leaving the ‘leader’ to cope by himself. Homicide is not uncommon: several groups simply kill off men who try to dominate them.

From the Arctic to the tropics, behaviors that merit such forms of overthrow include:

Monopolizing resources
Lying
War-mongering
Meanness
Incest
Employing clan-members to work for oneself
Giving orders
Being over-assertive
Indecision
Greed
Partiality

Self-aggrandizement
Aggressive behavior
Dominating others
Making deals with outsiders
Not protecting the group from disaster
Boasting
Trying to over-rule the wishes of the group [21]

Though *Homo sapiens* emerged within the hierarchy-conscious great ape family, she turned the great ape social model on its head.

In *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*, the anthropologist Morton Sahlins argues that modern ideas in both economics and biology play into the mistaken idea of an incorrigibly selfish human nature:

> For the greater part of humanity, self interest as we know it is unnatural in the normative sense; it is considered madness, witchcraft or some such grounds for ostracism, execution or at least therapy… Such avarice is generally taken for a loss of humanity.[22]

Similar rank-and-file attitudes toward wealth and power exist today[23]—only today there's less scope for deploying them. We'll look at ourselves (literate moderns) in more detail in Part Seven.

Finally, if hunter-gatherers displayed political harmony within the band, what about relations *between* groups? What about our famous propensity for war?

Christopher Boehm believes that some larger recent-era groups engaged in feuds and 'strings of revenge killings', which added up to quite a lot of victims over time.[24] And it may be that large-scale warfare increased when late Stone Age tribes were expanded by trade—as when the South American sweet potato was introduced to Papua-New Guinea in the 17th Century: suddenly there was a food surplus to fight over.[25]

But whilst there was a certain amount of homicide in ancient populations,[26] a survey of the archeological evidence of prehistoric warfare, by the American anthropologist Brian Ferguson, found no proven large death tolls from 'intergroup violence'. Ferguson, whose expertise lies in the anthropology of war, finds no evidence that Stone Age humans were prone to war, or that making war is an evolved human tendency.[27]

In summary, the record of our time on Earth tells us that, under the right conditions, we're a co-operative, egalitarian and amiable-enough species.

We are highly social; we value individual autonomy; we don't have much time for leaders.

With that distinguished backstory, something like democracy might have been inevitable.

The long march

Because tools of mass control were discovered before tools of mass co-operation, the human itinerary since the Stone Age at first took us away from egalitarianism.

That is, social hierarchies as we now know them seem to have begun some time after the arrival of agriculture and settlement—and it was only later, as we developed the tools of philosophy and science, of civil rights and democracy, that we began, incrementally, our reversion to type.

Whilst agriculture is colloquially dated to the Neolithic Revolution in the Middle East around 10000 BC, in fact it had at least 11 independent centres of origin, including China, Turkey, Pakistan, the Andes, New Guinea, the Sahel in Africa, and Mesopotamia—the earliest being in the Levant about 11,500 years ago.

Still-emerging evidence on Australian Aboriginals may push it well beyond that.

But the conventional timeline—farming led to settlement; settlement led to civilization—now looks more messy. Britons, who'd begun cropping by the time of Stonehenge, later abandoned it.[28] And excavations at Gobekli Tepe in southern Turkey reveal that the late Stone Age people at this site erected twenty-ton megaliths, and gathered in large numbers, from around 9000 BC—long before they turned to agriculture.[29] Until recently, hunter-gatherers weren't supposed to do things like this.

Fig. 1.2: *Excavation at Gobekli Tepe, showing T-shaped monoliths arranged in circular patterns, each carved with animal figures & abstract symbols.*

Gobekli is thought to be the world's oldest ceremonial site. It's likely that the first wheat was domesticated, only 20 miles away, well after the complex began. This makes a case that humans first met in large numbers principally for ritual and social purposes, not economic ones.[30]

Egalitarianism seems to have survived into the Neolithic, a couple of millennia later—when hunting and gathering were giving way to farming. Another Turkish site, Catalhoyuk, dating from around 7000 BC, is a dense collection of mudbrick houses that contained 5,000 to 7,000 people. Catalhoyuk's ritual and social life was highly organized, and its community was mutually dependent and tightknit. Its excavator, British archeologist Ian Hodder, writes:

> You might have thought that all of this organization—this large number of people living together—necessitated some sort of central hierarchy. But that's not what we find at Catalhoyuk. We think Catalhoyuk is an aggressively egalitarian society, where showing difference was not really allowed… In fact we can find no chiefly house or chiefly centre—or high status house or high status centre. Everybody seems to be about

> the same. Everybody has the same amount of storage, the same amount of productive facility, and so on. This is a very egalitarian society.[31]

Gender equality too, Hodder says, survived at Catalhoyuk, where 'the same social stature was given to both men and women'.[32]

Human nature is often conceptualized via a 'split model'. Religion gives us 'lower nature' v. selflessness; anthropology has 'dominance' v. 'counter-dominance'; and psychology has 'anti-social' v. 'pro-social' traits. Since we emerged from the Stone Age, our religion, our philosophy and our science have repeatedly emphasized this choice between hierarchy and equality.

As we'll see in the chapters ahead, it's the social design that coaxes one or the other forward.

Humanity's hallmark egalitarianism arose from a suite of biological and cultural adaptations[33]—you might call them the 'democratic instinct'. So it's not surprising that the first kings and prelates had to work hard to keep this instinct in check. The written history of humankind is the history of opulent aristocracies, toiling masses, and regular rebellions.

Where and when the trek toward democracy began is much debated. The safe answers are 'Eurasia' and 'a long time ago'.

Limited kinds of assembly had existed in early Sumerian cities, millennia before the Greek Golden Age. There is no record of land ownership in Neolithic or Copper Age Europe up till about 1700 BC—all was communal—which hints that decision-making might also have been communal.[34]

Local assemblies that advised princes seem to have originated in Syria, Iraq and Iran, then spread west through Phoenician cities such as Sidon and Byblos,[35] and made their way to Greece.[36]

The main form of political organization in the ancient era was the city-state. Long before their democratic experiment, the Greeks enacted the first city-state constitution. The event was surrounded by notable symbolism. Firstly, in a male-dominated culture, this constitution was decreed by a woman. And secondly, it was delivered *underground*—to the ancients, the source of 'big dreams' that conferred an expanded view of life: the place of self-renewal.[37]

The receiver was Lycurgus, the leader of Sparta in around the 9th Century BC. The giver was the priestess at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi—the spiritual centre of the ancient European world.

According to the historian Plutarch, writing in the 1st Century AD, Lycurgus had realized that his fractious people and unstable state required a revolution:

> He was convinced that a partial change of the laws would be of no avail whatsoever, but that he must proceed as a physician would with a patient who was debilitated and full of all sorts of diseases; he must reduce and alter the existing temperament by means of drugs and purges, and introduce a new and different regimen.[38]

The Delphic priestess, channelling Apollo, god of order and harmony—the divine law-maker—instructed Lycurgus to establish a council of 28 nobles, which could propose and rescind laws. Significantly, the council's reach was to be tempered by assemblies of the people. The power of Sparta's two kings was no longer absolute.[39]

Plutarch tells us this 'gave steadiness and safety to the commonwealth', and 'always kept things in a just equilibrium; the twenty-eight always adhering to the kings so far as to resist democracy, and, on the other hand, supporting the people against the establishment of absolute monarchy'.[40] Indeed this watering down of kingly power ensured that Sparta's kings escaped the fates of neighboring ones, whose tight grip on power led to successful revolutions.

Such parries against oligarchy arose in several Greek cities thereafter. One scholar has counted 18 cities that employed semi-popular or quasi-democratic government before 480 BC. Democracy, you could say, was born into a receptive family of city-states.

Sometimes this expansion of freedom stalled or went into reverse, and sometimes it remained stable for years. On one occasion it projected an entire society into the future overnight, in a dramatic paradigm shift.

Athens

> I would take the Tube, by myself, at the age of about 13, and visit the British Museum. I would walk through the cat-headed Egyptians, and the cloven-hoofed Babylonians, and the typewriter-bearded Assyrians—and all the other savage and ludicrous near-Eastern divinities—until I penetrated the sanctum sanctorum—the innermost and holiest shrine of London's greatest cultural temple, the Duveen Galleries…
>
> You go into that room and you feel that you are in a new and better world. You've left behind the totalitarian tyrannies, with their rigid and

> robotic processions of prisoners, their undifferentiated armies, their scenes of humiliation and massacre… You notice a change in mood. It's not just the quality of the sculpture, though that's taken a hyper-leap forward, with a new accuracy and fluency in the modelling: it's in the attitude towards the subject. You look at the riders of the Panathenaic Frieze…and you realise that the sculptors were trying to say something new.
>
> These people were idealised certainly—but they were meant to be the real people of Athens, the ordinary people. And in their scale and in the attention to detail, they were just as important as anyone else on that frieze. No smaller—just as big and just as carefully rendered—as the Olympian gods themselves. And so after thousands of years of civilisation, and after centuries of abject quivering before fish gods and cow gods and sky gods, you are seeing the arrival of the individual: centre-stage at last in the story of humanity.[41]
>
> - Boris Johnson (classical scholar and former British prime minister)

In ancient Greece, an important task of the oracle was to represent the community's future thoughts to it. She—a temple priestess channelling a goddess or god—suggested new technology, new forms of government, new moral outlooks: better ways of being human.

The priestess took the role of the 'unacknowledged legislator' that Percy Shelley later claimed for the poet: a mirror of 'the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present'.[42]

An oracular priestess generally dealt with a procession of supplicants—kings, merchants, philosophers, paupers—which gave her unique insight into her era's social currents. Able to sense what lay in the psychic shadows, and draw it into the daylight, she nudged civilization forward.

The most influential of these priestesses was at Delphi. The classicist FWH Myers writes:

> It is from Delphi that reverence for oaths, respect for the life of slaves, of women, derive in great measure their sanction and strength.[43]

In her *adyton*, or underground chamber, the Delphic priestess sat in a kind of bronze cauldron. This was held aloft on a tripod—which symbolized the collective strength of the community.[44] As Greece's Classical Era drew nearer, the rights of ordinary people were more often cited, and the priestess increasingly marshalled her society-shaping grandiloquence against tyranny.

She famously told one rich visitor that his costly offering was not worth the cake offered by a poor man. Several tyrants were given the brush-off.[45]

Fig. 1.3: *Design on 5th Century BC bowl. The Delphi priestess sits atop a tripod structure. Her supplicant is a visiting king.*

In the early 6th Century BC, Athens was in uproar. Common people increasingly refused to accept the steep inequality in their *polis,* or city-state. Athens, Plutarch tells us, 'was on the verge of revolution, because of the excessive poverty of some citizens, and the enormous wealth of others'.[46] As Aristotle described it:

> [T]here was contention for a long time between the upper classes and the populace. Not only was the constitution at this time oligarchical in every respect, but the poorer classes, men, women, and children, were the serfs of the rich… The whole country was in the hands of a few persons, and if the tenants failed to pay their rent they were liable to be hauled into slavery, and their children with them. All loans secured upon the debtor's person, a custom which prevailed until the time of Solon, who was the first to appear as the champion of the people.[47]

Solon was a poet and merchant—a noble, though not a wealthy one—who was trusted by all sides for his sagacity. He was chosen by the majority of citizens in this modestly successful city-state to devise a constitution that would end the ructions that threatened social implosion.

Solon did what people tended to do when faced with an impossible problem: he went to Delphi. There, the priestess—a peasant girl in a land ruled by aristocratic men, sitting underground beside a large, smooth stone representing the navel of the Earth—instructed him not to flinch from establishing the first proto-democracy:

> Seat yourself now amidships
> For you are the pilot of Athens.
> Grasp the helm fast in your hands:
> You have many allies in your city.[48]

If this event occurred as recorded, it's a moment as remarkable as Prometheus stealing fire from the gods to kindle civilization. Our debt to this unnamed girl has never been acknowledged.

Returning to Athens, Solon cancelled all debts, and outlawed debt servitude. He released debtors from slavery, and from prison, and brought them back from exile.[49] Plutocracy was terminated at a stroke. The poor and the middle classes once again had a future they could contemplate without dread.

In one of his poems, Solon wrote:

> I stood with a mighty shield in front of both
> classes,
> And suffered neither of them to prevail unjustly.[50]

According to Athenians writing in later centuries, Solon established the jury system (still in use around the world today) and allowed any citizen to prosecute a crime.[51] He also decreed that certain public office-holders be chosen by lot—the 'sortition' system now being revived in some 21st Century democracies.[52] (Part Five.)

Solon's motto was: 'Equality prevents war'.

The Solonic reforms were revolutionary for the time—though this was not yet democracy. Some retrograde laws were kept on, and the aristocratic Areopagus council remained the guardian of the constitution.

Soon after, the populace, happy with their lot, ‘went back to farming’—metaphorically, the mistake populaces have been making ever since—and left politics to city-based experts. As a result of this neglect, after three decades Solon’s constitution was overtaken by a *tyranny*: government by a single ruler, or *tyrannos*.

But because the atmosphere of Athens had changed, even the ‘tyrant’, whose name was Peisistratos, invoked egalitarian ideas, and was neither violent nor overly greedy. He subjected himself to the law like any citizen.

There was a half-century interregnum in which Peisistratos ruled, and then his sons. The latter were less competent than their father, and crueller. One was assassinated; the other was eventually forced to abdicate.

We’re now at 508 BC, nearly nine decades after Solon’s revolution. That year saw the rise of Cleisthenes, Athens’ second lawgiver. A leading citizen—chosen, like Solon, for his judgement and lack of self-interest—Cleisthenes was given the authority to broker a deal to end the chaos accompanying the end of the tyranny.

Aristotle tells us that ‘the populace flocked together’ to support him.[53]

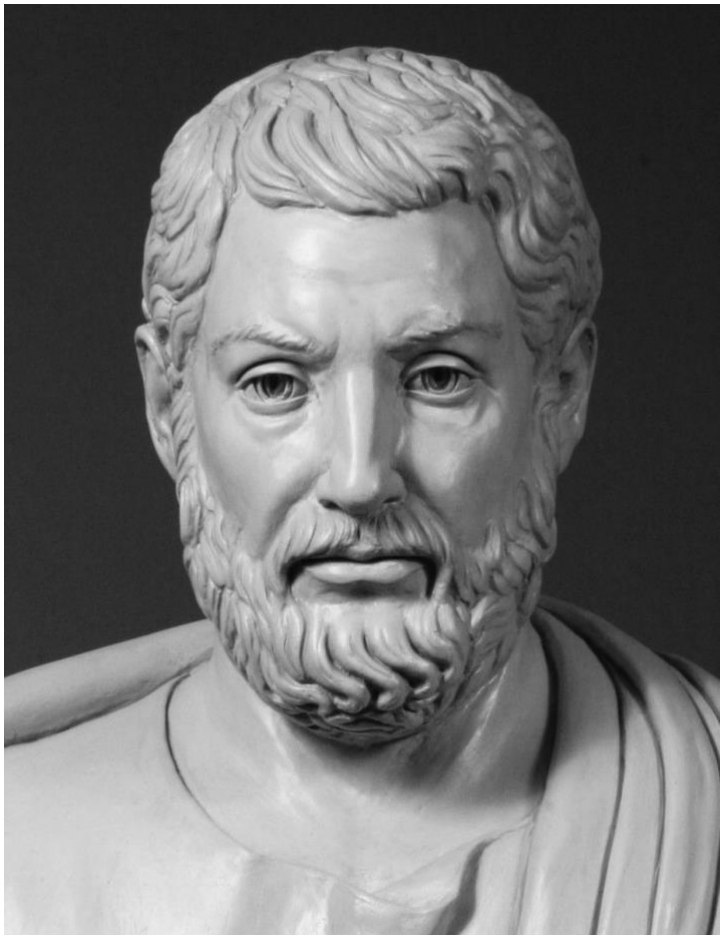


Fig. 1.4: *Bust of Cleisthenes in the Ohio state Capitol building*

Cleisthenes created ten new clans, both to replace the fractious old clans and to expand the franchise. He sent (or went) to Delphi for advice on their names. The priestess obliged, naming the clans after ten national heroes—in so doing, giving her blessing to the most radical social experiment of the ancient world.

The Oracle functioned for at least 1,200 years—a long succession of priestesses conveying the evolving thoughts of Apollo, protector of music and poetry, provider of roads and homes. It was she who inspired the three most important constitutions of the Greek world—Sparta's, then the Athenian constitutions of Solon and Cleisthenes. In such ways, in the heart of a patriarchal age, did a humble village girl prod the Greek era toward democracy.

Cleisthenes restored Solon's reforms, and extended them. He institutionalized and broadened sortition for the awarding of government posts. And he introduced ostracism—ten years of exile—to get budding tyrants and coup-plotters out of the way. Cleisthenes further broke up old

power bases by enrolling foreigners and even slaves as citizens.[54] Hereditary privilege, the blight of the age, was pulled out by its roots.

The people's Assembly now became the prime law-making body. It met on a hill named the *Pnyx*. Typically, six thousand citizens met there about 40 days per year. The new regime even allowed Athenians to elect their own generals. What we now call 'direct democracy' had arrived in Athens.

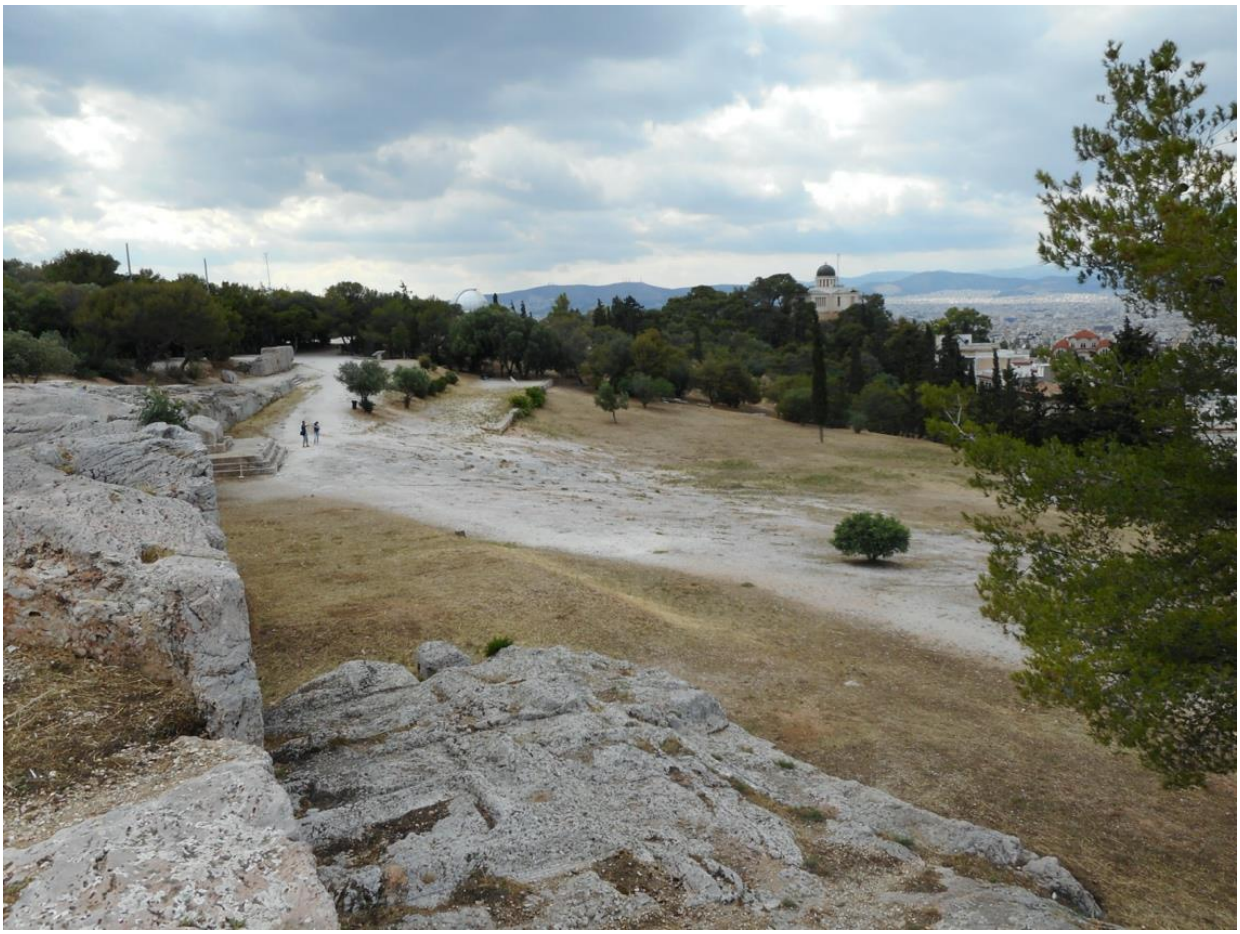


Fig. 1.5: *The world's first democratic space. The* Pnyx *in Athens today, with the* bema *or speaker's platform to the left.*

Eighteen years after Cleisthenes' reforms, Athens won the Battle of Marathon against Persia, the regional superpower. Thereafter, confidence in democracy grew—and the Athenian *demos*, or citizen body, began selecting its nine *archons* (chief administrators) for the first time. Archonships had traditionally been reserved for aristocrats. Now, five hundred candidates were elected by popular vote, and from these the nine were chosen by lot.

From this point on, the ownership of property had diminishing import for political power.[55] Increasingly, it was the citizenry that drove change, decided policy and shaped the *polis*.

What resulted was not mob rule, chaos, or the reign of the lowest common denominator. Nor did the citizens bankrupt the *polis* by awarding themselves perks and benefits. Instead, the years that followed Cleisthenes' reforms produced many of the elements of what we now think of as civilization. This Greek Classical era, centred on Athens, saw the invention or reinvention of philosophy, logic, rhetoric, poetry, aesthetics, education, historiography, social security, constitutional law, politics, sculpture, pottery, drama, viticulture, fitness training, archeology, architecture, physics, optics, harmonics, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, medicine, pharmacology, biology, botany and zoology.

The Athenian experiment gave us Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Themistocles, Xenophon, Thucydides, Herodotus, Diogenes, Demosthenes, Epicurus, Hippocrates, Pericles, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. How many of our names will be lower-case adjectives 2,500 years from now?

The era furnished us with further adjectives via its philosophical schools—not only the Platonists and Epicureans, but the Sophists, Skeptics, Peripatetics, Cynics and Stoics.

In the decades that followed Cleisthenes' democratic reforms, the Parthenon was built, Plato speculated that the Earth was round, and tiny Greece expelled the Persian superpower from the region. The existence of gods was questioned, and Plato suggested that women could become philosophers and heads of government[56]—ideas that reached their flowering only in our own era.

Through the 5th and 4th centuries BC, the experiment spread through much of Greece. Trade, philosophy, science and the arts blossomed, and a middle class was able to flourish. Classicist Josiah Ober writes that, because of its 'distinct approach to politics'—a level playing field, and rules the people made themselves—Greece experienced 'an historically unusual period of sustained economic growth'.[57]

When silver was discovered in Attica, the region surrounding Athens, the proceeds were deemed to be community money, and were used to build one hundred *trireme* warships. The trireme got its first test at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC, which the Greeks fought against the invading Persians. It

was a massacre. The democracy had thrown up a master strategist, Themistocles, who boxed the Persians up in narrow straits, where their vastly superior numbers were neutralized.

As Professor Paul Cartledge puts it: 'If there wasn't a notion of the power of the people—as against dictatorship and tyranny—before the Persian invasion, there was after.'[58] The Athenians soon began characterizing their invention with the feminine nouns *isegoria* (equality of speech) or *demokratia* (*demos* = people*; kratos* = power).[59]

As the democracy proved itself, it became more democratic. In 462, at the instigation of the leading citizen Ephialtes, the aristocratic Areopagus council—which had till then had oversight of laws and magistrates—had its powers reduced to the trial of homicides.

Ephialtes' protégé, Pericles, became the foremost political leader in the years 461 to 429, instigating many expansions of the democracy—such as pay for jury service, and a reduced property qualification for archonship.[60] Pericles was the great orator of the era: probably trained in the art by his remarkable lover, Aspasia. (Aspasia also trained the young Socrates in rhetoric. In our age, she would probably be at the top of at least one profession, if not a national leader.)

In his famed 'Funeral Oration', Pericles explained what made Athens tick:

> Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighbouring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators. It is called a democracy, because not the few but the many govern. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way…[61]

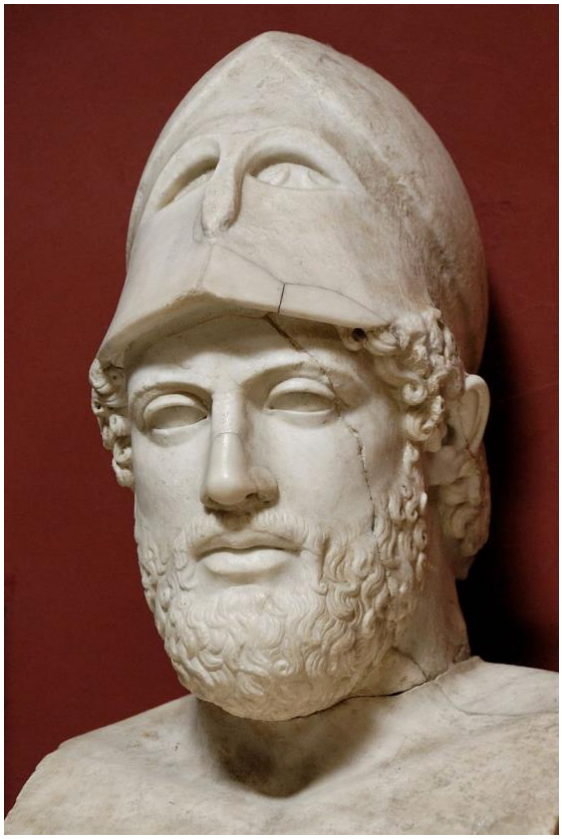


Fig. 1.6: *Bust of Pericles, with the inscription 'Pericles, son of Xanthippus, Athenian'.*

In the same speech (which Plato believed was written by Aspasia), Pericles articulated the Athenian attitude to personal liberty:

> Freedom is a feature of our daily life; and as for suspicion of one another in our daily private pursuits, we do not frown on our neighbor if he behaves to please himself…[62]

The Athenians fell woefully short on what we now call human rights and gender equality—to say nothing of international law. They kept women out of civic life; they owned slaves; they invaded other city-states, or coerced them into what amounted to an Athenian empire. In the ancient world, where honor and survival tended to trump empathy, such attitudes were part of the psychological furniture. Human society was not to make serious progress on these fronts for another 2,000 years.

But when we compare Athens to the other societies of its era—rather than to developed, liberal societies in the modern world—it is in a class of one.

The Athenians were the first to employ democracy systematically: to apply it to the management of a state. They codified it through ceaseless law-making, and participated in it *en masse*. They fought and died for it in battle, taught it to their children, developed a body of philosophy around it, and proactively exported it to other lands. They even deified it: in time, *Demokratia* became a goddess.

For all their flaws, the Athenians resolved the dilemma that has thwarted nearly every society since: they reconciled the classes.

Even the wealthy grew happier. Before his reforms, Solon observed that 'riches too great are poured upon men of unbalanced soul'.[63] After two centuries of democratic expansion, Pericles was able to say that 'wealth, to us, is not mere material for vainglory'. The rich had grasped the advantages of working with other citizens in a body, rather than lording it over them. The scholar LaRue Van Hook noted of the Periclean era:

> In the city, the house of the rich man and that of the poor man differed little in appearance.[64]

Constitutional change, it seems, was moulding character.

As the democracy matured, over its two centuries, citizens gained the right to sue the state, and sometimes did so successfully. Social mobility was uncommon, but at least possible. At the beginning of the 4th Century, the richest man in Athens was Pasion the banker—originally a slave, then a *metic* (resident foreigner), and finally a citizen.[65]

The notions of equality and liberty were distinguished from each other, but in rhetoric and conversation they were often twinned. As the doyen of today's Greek scholars, Mogens Herman Hansen, writes:

> The constant interplay of the two concepts is characteristic of Athenian democratic ideology and shows…the close affinity between modern democracy and Athenian demokratia…

The Assembly, Plato writes, was comprised of 'blacksmiths, shoemakers, merchants, shippers, rich, poor, the grand, and the humble'; or, according to Xenophon, 'fullers, shoemakers, carpenters, smiths, countrymen, merchants and market traders'.

When a decree was made, it began, *Edoxe toi demo*—'This was decided by the people'.

Pericles, a staunch democrat from an aristocratic family, dominated the Assembly for most of his adult life: Thucydides wrote that Athens was 'in name a democracy, but in fact under the rule of the first man'.[66]

That was true in the sense that the Athenians greatly esteemed *arete*—excellence—and Pericles rose to prominence due to his brilliance, first as a military strategist, then as a statesman. But he could not rule by edict. He had no troops at his private command, and could not make decisions of state off his own bat.

According to one description, the high-prestige individual in hunter-gatherer societies is

> listened to, [and] their opinions are heavily weighed (not obeyed) because the person enjoys credit, estimation or standing in general opinion.[67]

That was Pericles. There was no parallel between his position and that of King Xerxes across the water in Persia. As with Britain in 1940, the democracy had produced a kind of genius, but the genius remained beholden to the democracy.

When the self-regard of any Athenian leader grew too great, he was put in his place with tactics such as disobedience and satire. In 490 BC, after Athens won the Battle of Marathon, Miltiades, the victorious general, asked the Assembly for a crown of olives. A cranky citizen stood up and said, 'Let Miltiades ask for such an honor for himself when he has conquered the barbarian single-handed'.[68] The Assembly agreed.

Pericles himself was mercilessly satirized in the public drama. Throughout the democracy, what Boris Johnson calls 'Athens' archaic spirit of insubordination' eclipsed the halo of rank.[69]

As the democratic decades ticked by, citizens became more civically literate.[70] 'Policy' had a mosaic quality: it was a quilt of what we'd now call conservative and progressive influences.

Once Pericles died in 429, leaders in the democracy's remaining century were more often lower-born small businessmen—most notably the tanner Kleon, the lamp-maker Hyperbolos and the lyre-maker Kleophon. According to the Classical scholars Raaflaub, Ober and Wallace:

> In the end the demos was able to pick its leaders from among its own ranks; from being followers of the powerful, the common people evolved into a community of the powerful.[71]

Throughout Greece, the democratic idea caught on by 'organic conquest': dozens of city-states imitated the model.[b] In Athens, the locals came to believe that Solon had discovered democracy, rather than invented it—as if, all along, it had lain just beyond the cusp of human awareness.[72]

As occurred later with Rome, Britain and the United States, empire and war eventually loomed large in the undoing of Athens. As a cultural and economic florescence arrived on the coat-tails of democracy, Athens developed the habits of imposing ruinous trade treaties on smaller rivals, of turning allies into vassals, and of exacting cruel reprisals when those vassals rebelled. This made Athens' rival, Sparta, nervous enough to want to challenge her power. The two city-states formally went to war in 431 BC.

When this Peloponnesian War was over, 27 years later, Athens had lost her fleet, her walls, a third of her population, her civic cohesion, her prosperity and her power.[73] The state that had defeated the Persian empire became, briefly, a Spartan vassal whose citizens were lashed in the streets by 'whip squads' for any disrespect to the new overlords.

As a regional force, Athens never recovered. But even as geopolitical power drained away, the Athenians increased their efforts to develop their constitution. (This was never a single document—but rather the ever-evolving 'rules defining the powers of the organs of state'.[74]) To guard against populism, the Assembly was weakened. Laws were now made by 'boards' selected by sortition. The system was rational and efficient: there was, for example, little conflict between laws as they multiplied.[75] Through the 4th Century, on the back of this smooth civic machinery, arrived much of the science, philosophy, literature and drama we now associate with Classical Greece.

Remarkably for such a philosophical race, the Greeks were not yet cured of war—which continued between the city-states for much of the century. This finally brought on a collective exhaustion that opened the door to Alexander the Great, to the north in Macedon, who conquered all of Greece near the end of the 4th Century, and much else besides.

In 322 BC, the Macedonians dissolved Athens' democratic institutions, setting it down the road to centuries as a Roman, Byzantine, Latin,

[b] New terms are defined in the glossary at the end of the book.

Aragonese, Florentine and Ottoman colony. Democracy survived in bits of Greece into the 'Hellenistic' era that came between Alexander and Rome. Thereafter, the country did not know democracy again till the 20th Century. According to classicist and political scientist Josiah Ober, it took 2,300 years for Greece to return to the level of material wellbeing that had accompanied the democracy.[76]

The temple at Delphi went on into the Christian era, with reduced influence, until it was shut down by a Roman emperor in the 4th Century AD. It was subsequently buried by earthquakes and landslides. When the 17th Century French traveller Jacob Spon rediscovered the site, he was startled to find that a miserable village named Castri now sat over it:

> What I found stranger still was that the most famous place in the world had suffered such a reversal of fortune that we were obliged to look for Delphi in Delphi itself, and enquire after the whereabouts of Apollo's Temple even as we stood on its foundations.[77]

Fig. 1.7: *The Apollo temple at Delphi today*

Today, Delphi is a tourist town, struggling, even before the pandemic, with Greece's second Great Depression in 100 years. At its beautiful central café,

situated between its two main streets under a giant plane tree, a waiter named Yannis will tell you that in Greece, since the austerity imposed by the European Union in 2015, ‘There is no democracy. Democracy is dead.’

In Athens, a couple of hours east by road, the Pnyx—the world’s first democratic space—is used mostly by dog-walkers. The site of Plato’s Academy is bestrewn with the bedding of the homeless.

Athenian democracy is not forgotten. In Washington, the buildings of the Capitol, Supreme Court and Library of Congress display Greek columns in its honor, as do public buildings in most Western cities.

It was in between its two historical phases—the Greek and the modern—that democracy endured its long sleep.

The long sleep

For 1,500 years, democracy existed for the most part only on paper. To the new, monotheistic world, it was a Greek archaism less interesting than the squabbles amongst the gods on Mount Olympus, which at least provided good children’s stories. Works documenting the discarded idea lay in libraries such as those of Alexandria, Antioch, Pergamon and Ephesus, mostly unread, alongside the more popular Greek manuscripts on science, medicine and warfare.

Bits of democracy popped up from time to time. Influenced by the Greek example, early Christian churches of the gnostic kind selected their clergy by drawing lots.[78] This resulted in less emphasis on hierarchy and more on the inner life—and in women deacons, priests and bishops. But these groups were annihilated once the pagan emperor Constantine gained control of the Church in 325 AD.

From the 5th Century, the Byzantine Empire kept alive Greek mathematics, medicine, science and philosophy, and built on them substantially. The other great culture-preserver was the Islamic Golden Age, centred in Baghdad, which lasted from the 8th to the 13th centuries. A succession of caliphs, and the scholars they retained in such institutions as the House of Wisdom, translated and preserved the surviving Greek works. This at least ensured that a record of the Greek democratic period remained in existence.

Islam in this era placed strong emphasis on equality. Councils checked the power of rulers; monopolies were outlawed; land was given to the landless;

and endowments were made to the poor by the wealthy.[79] But institutional democracy wasn't practised anywhere. Only the idea survived—via a fragile continuity. Amid the comings and goings of the Macedonian, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic empires, there was never a time when barbarism ruled everywhere. As one high culture collapsed, scholars would flee to another, their manuscripts hidden away in bags and donkey carts.

Scattered reappearance of democratic practices

When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?

- Radical priest John Ball, emphasizing the natural equality of all people to a crowd during the Peasants' Revolt (1381). The saying spread through Britain and Europe in the medieval period.[80]

Roughly a millennium and a half after the eclipse of democratic Athens, in one part of Europe and another there were occasional signs that the democratic instinct was stirring.

The incrementalism of these changes makes it impossible to say when the new, parliamentary form of democracy 'began': that would depend on how both 'parliament' and 'democracy' are defined.

The Icelandic Althing, for example—a gathering mostly of district chieftains—met annually to make laws from 930 AD. From the 13th Century, numerous Swiss city-states used a popular assembly—the *Landsgemeinde*—to pass and amend laws.[81]

In 1188, Prince Alfonso IX of Leon in the Iberian Peninsula put together a *Curia Regis*—an advisory council of nobles, bishops and the urban middle class. Its bourgeois members were 'elected', though we're not sure by whom. Nonetheless, UNESCO believes this was the first time something resembling a parliament came into being. Alfonso's reform was derisory by today's standards. Democracy's second incarnation, unlike its first, began with fairy steps.

A generation after the *Curia*, England was home to another questionable starting point. Magna Carta, in 1215, granted a set of rights to nobles and free males: introducing *habeas corpus*, limiting King John's taxing powers, and for the first time putting the monarch within the law. Like every evolution toward democracy till the 20th Century, its rights went to a minority—but it

did serve as the thin end of the wedge. The Charter bolstered the power of wealthy males: which, paradoxically, opened the door to reducing that power over time.

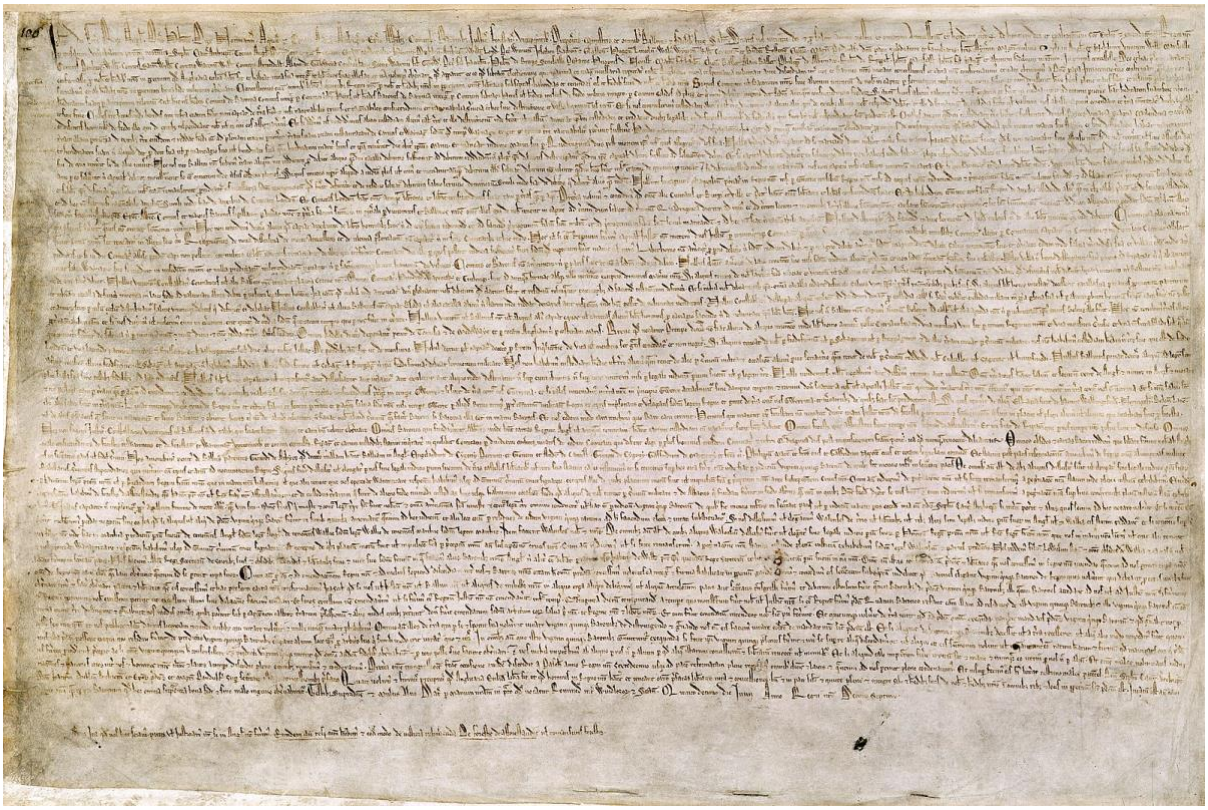


Fig. 1.8: Magna Carta Libertatum *or the Great Charter of Liberties, 1215—written on parchment with iron gall ink, in medieval Latin*.

Kings, the quintessential plutocrats, do not give up their prerogatives gracefully. Forced to sign the Charter, John, much vexed, threw himself to the ground…

> …gnashed his teeth, rolled his eyes, grabbed sticks and straws and gnawed them like a madman.[82]

Over the ensuing centuries, elements of Magna Carta were repealed, reinstated, replaced, improved on… The Charter was less a sea change than a vague but unmistakable warning to monarchs: an intimation of their disposability.

Two years after Magna Carta, in 1217, the Charter of the Forest—less famous but possibly more consequential—re-established the rights of ordinary people to land that had been ‘enclosed’ for the king’s use.

Near the end of the next century, in 1381, England's Peasants' Revolt protested foreign war and draconian labor laws: demanding self-regulating local communities, and an end to serfdom. Armies of peasants and artisans marched through the kingdom opening up gaols, and beheading unpopular officials—including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord High Treasurer and the Chief Justice. It was a near-run thing. But the rebels were, in time, either defeated in battle or mollified by a raft of concessions from the king.

Fig. 1.9: *Adam delving & Eve spinning, 1888, by Edward Burne-Jones. The illustration harks back to the Peasants' Revolt. It was used by the English socialist William Morris in his novel,* A Dream of John Ball, *about the centuries-old struggle for equality.*

Most of the concessions were revoked the moment the peasants stood down and 'went back to farming'. But, like many failed rebellions, the Peasants' Revolt had lasting effects. The king wound back the war in France, and a poll tax raised to finance it was scrapped. For the next century, peasants pointedly reminded tax collectors of the revolt. No monarch dared again to raise taxes too high.[83]

When an elite uses its control of politics to shift wealth upwards—as it generally does—you'd expect that common people would fight back: and that world history, therefore, would be a history of peasants' revolts.

Indeed it is. From the 3rd millennium BC to the 21st Century, they occurred in China, Egypt, France, Denmark, Lithuania, Hungary, Japan, Catalonia, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy, the Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and Dutch empires, Vietnam, Germany, Sweden, Russia, Taiwan, Switzerland, Austria, Korea, Brazil, Romania, Albania, India, El Salvador, Yugoslavia, Kenya, Cuba, Nigeria, Thailand, Ethiopia and Mexico.[84]

In 1647—brandishing pamphlets on the Peasants' Revolt of three centuries earlier—the English 'Levellers' helped to convene what looks remarkably like a constitutional convention.[85] Over two weeks, during these 'Putney Debates', the Levellers pushed for manhood suffrage, jury trials and a new constitution for England—with power vested in the House of Commons. This was all written into an 'Agreement of the People'.

The Levellers were crushed. But again, it was a near-run thing—and again there were long-term effects. English Leveller Richard Rumbold voiced the view that God had not

> made the greater part of mankind with saddles on their backs and bridles in their mouths, and some few booted and spurred to ride the rest.[86]

One hundred and forty years later, Thomas Jefferson wrote that

> the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favoured few booted and spurred, ready to ride them…[87]

Just as the Peasants' Revolt had influenced the Levellers, so did the Levellers influence the design of the United States Constitution.

Set-ups like the Peasants' Revolt and the Levellers might be thought of as

tableaus: public consciousness changes first; concrete reform comes much later. (In solitaire, a *tableau* is an opening pile from which better combinations are later made.)

Recurring century after century, *tableaus* remind us of the deep drive to equality inherent in human groups—but also of how hard it has been, since the Paleolithic, to enact that equality in one lifetime.

The main design obstacles, perhaps, have been our large numbers and our geographical dispersion. It's hard for millions of disparate people to reach agreement, especially as special interests—few in numbers, better resourced, with a built-in consensus—will usually be first to the drawing board.

But as we'll see in the chapters ahead, the democratic tools now exist to reverse this disadvantage. Self-governance is possible at scale.

Why democracy was reinvented (the second draft)

It was in the 18th Century that democracy began to wake from its twenty centuries of stony sleep.

As the Enlightenment took root, thinkers met in coffee houses, salons and debating clubs, formed their own societies, and communicated through their own journals and books—the 'Republic of Letters'. For the first time in centuries, the ideas that guided society were no longer the monopoly of rulers and religious authorities.

With the advent of long-distance sea travel, there was a two-way traffic in ideas between Old World and New. Benjamin Franklin took American scientific and political ideas to Europe—suggesting paper money to the British and religious tolerance to the French. The Declaration of Independence, penned mostly by Thomas Jefferson, was replete with the ideas of the European Enlightenment—such as the equality of man and John Locke's 'consent of the governed'.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the Enlightenment also addressed the problem of business monopoly—where one player eliminates the others from an economic sphere, in order to set its terms and prices. This kind of general market control was seen to be as dangerous to liberty as total government control. Indeed, monopoly enterprises were often compared to monarchs.

(Adam Smith more tactfully described them as ‘a great enemy to good management’.[88])

Thus Samuel Adams not only set up the ‘Committees of Correspondence’—a strategic matrix that linked thousands of Patriots in the 13 American colonies—but in December 1773 he called a mass meeting in Boston to protest the Tea Act, passed to protect the world’s largest business monopoly, the East India Company.

Some of that meeting’s attendees boarded a Company ship, and dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor. And here followed another oft-seen pattern in reform campaigns: an extreme government response catalyzing resistance, and turning the middle ground in favor of change. The British responded to the Boston Tea Party with a heavy-handedness that blew up in their faces. Within months of their closing the port of Boston and limiting public assembly, the ‘alternative government’ of Massachusetts was training a militia outside Boston. In September 1774, the first Continental Congress met.

Two generations after the American Revolution, when Britain’s ‘Chartists’ appeared, the British authorities fell into the same trap on home turf.

The Chartists were a working men’s movement—with thousands of women working in the background—and were so-named because in 1838, in the spirit of the Levellers, they convened to draw up a ‘People’s Charter’.

The Chartists were no mere ‘protest movement’. Like the Americans, they itemized their demands for constitutional change, and presented them for enactment. Like thoughtful reformers throughout history, they focused on parliamentary and electoral reform: reasoning that a legislative bounty would flow from that.

The Chartists also grasped that a successful reform movement needed a broad base. So rather than insisting on ideological purity, they drew disparate groups from up and down the country into a great coalition. A chronicler in one of these groups wrote:

> There were [radical] associations all over the county, but there was a great lack of cohesion. One wanted the ballot, another manhood suffrage and so on… The radicals were without unity of aim and method, and there was but little hope of accomplishing anything. When, however, the People's Charter was drawn up…clearly defining the urgent demands of the working class, we felt we had a real bond of

> union; and so transformed our Radical Association into local Chartist centres…[89]

The Chartists were Britain's most strategically savvy reform movement till the Suffragettes burst on the scene 65 years later. They had six demands—a vote for every man, a secret ballot, an end to the parliamentary property qualification, payment of MPs (allowing working men to serve), equal constituencies, and annual elections.

Most Chartists *did* want more: for example, an end to slavery, child labor and workhouses—to say nothing of better wages. But by confining the Charter to political rights, they drew in millions. In a 'quickening' era not unlike our own, people understood that electoral reform was the pathway to much more.

The Chartists also grasped the historical continuity of constitutional reform movements. They had the face of Wat Tyler, leader of the Peasants' Revolt 450 years earlier, painted on their banners.

Chartism's national convention in 1839 saw itself as an alternative parliament. The House of Commons voted not to receive the reform petition that came out of it, which had been signed by 1.3 million people. A second petition in 1842, with over three million signatures, met the same fate.

Anger boiled over, and there was a series of armed risings. Hundreds of Chartists were jailed. In 1842, 58 men—nearly the whole Chartist national executive—were prosecuted, with the Attorney General himself conducting the case. (It failed.) When the Chartists established a land company, and bought land to allot to members, the government shut it down. The newspapers crusaded relentlessly against the movement.

Fig. 1.10: *Chartist meeting in London, 1848*

When the Chartist movement expired in the 1850s, it had not achieved one of its goals.

But Chartism, too, was a *tableau*. The injustices it had established in the public mind set change quietly in motion. In 1867, urban working men got the vote. In 1872, the secret ballot arrived. In 1911, the payment of MPs was introduced. Full manhood suffrage was enacted in 1918, and the property qualification abolished. By that year, the only Chartist demand that had not been met was annual elections (which may not have been much of an idea anyway).

The effects of the movement did not end in England. Many Chartists were jailed and transported to Australia—about as close to a definition of 'failure' as you could find in the mid-19th Century.

But, once there, they helped to foment the rebellions against the extortionate 'miner's right'—a levy on digging for gold—on the Victorian goldfields. The Ballarat Reform League, for example (which advocated a representative political system) was led by Welsh Chartist John Humffray.[90]

Once again, many of these risings were put down violently. The most famous was at the Eureka Stockade in Ballarat, which was stormed by British forces, who killed perhaps 60 ‘diggers’.

Again, a highly publicized ‘failure’ had the effect of radically changing public opinion. The phoenix of change soon rose from the ashes of Eureka. Within two years of the rebellion, the Victorian government replaced the ‘miner’s right’, and introduced the secret ballot and near-universal male suffrage.

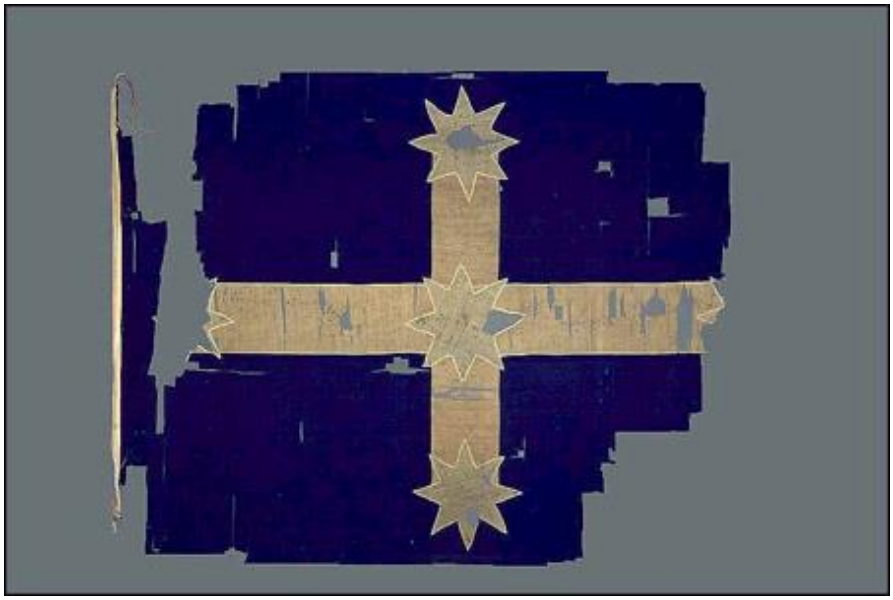


Fig. 1.11: *Remnant of the original five-starred Eureka flag, now in the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. Today the design is often proposed as the flag of an Australian republic.*

Mark Twain called Eureka ‘a victory won by a lost battle’ (as good a definition of a *tableau* as any).[91] As a result of the rebellion, in 1920, decades after the guns had fallen silent, my grandmother was able to purchase her miner’s right on the Victorian goldfields for the very reasonable sum of one shilling and threepence.

These factors—organic conquest, a tight focus on constitutional change, and victory forming in the smoke of a lost battle—were again on display when the British Suffragettes materialized at the turn of the 20th Century.

One more feature that recurred with the Suffragettes was their perception of historical continuity with other movements. The Suffragettes’ founder, Emmeline Pankhurst, wrote in her autobiography:

> One of my earliest recollections is of a great bazaar which was held in my native city of Manchester, the object of the bazaar being to raise money to relieve the poverty of the newly emancipated negro slaves in the United States. My mother took an active part in this effort, and I, as a small child, was entrusted with a lucky bag by means of which I helped to collect money.
>
> Young as I was—I could not have been more than five years—I knew perfectly well the meanings of the words slavery and emancipation.[92]

Emmeline read the *Odyssey* at nine, and was an ardent suffragist by 14. When she was sent to school in Paris (her daughter Sylvia wrote), she made a French playmate and

> was delighted to discover that she had been born on the anniversary of the destruction of the Bastille, and was proud to tell her friend that her own grandmother had been an earnest politician, and one of the earliest members of the Anti-Corn Law League, and that her grandfather had narrowly escaped death on the field of Peterloo.[93]

Emmeline's lawyer husband, Richard (a staunch supporter of women's suffrage) had been a Chartist in his youth. He was an advocate of public sanitation (one of the great political struggles of the 19th Century), freedom of speech and public education. Ahead of his time, he was active in promoting arbitration to replace war as the means for settling international disputes.

In her history of the Suffragettes, Sylvia Pankhurst introduces each activist, as she enters the story, with a character sketch. Like many of their American counterparts, these women had all been active in campaigns for the poor, for factory workers, for temperance, for education, for prison reform… Like most successful movements, suffragism did not see itself in narrow terms. The Suffragettes were very focused on the constitutional goal—votes for all women, which they achieved in 1928—but they also grasped that they were part of a broader movement for humankind. (And, thanks to them, the writing was on the wall for 'mankind'.)

Fig. 1.12: *Emmeline Pankhurst under arrest (again)—outside Buckingham Palace, 1914.*

As with many reform movements, the 'radical' ideal for which the Suffragettes shed so much blood, sweat and tears was in time assimilated into popular thinking. This might be illustrated by one obscure event:

After Cambodia came out of its Khmer Rouge dark age, at the first national elections in 1993, there was no debate on whether women should be given the franchise. Even in a patriarchal society which had never before had a free election, no man stood on a rostrum to denounce the idea, and no newspaper editorial predicted the end of civilization (or even Cambodian culture) if women were given the vote. A right for which women had for years been imprisoned, tortured and pilloried by the press was accorded without a second thought.

Democracy was reinvented for the same reason it was originally devised: to separate power from wealth.

The struggles that brought about its reinvention had many things in common:

- They drew inspiration, and copied tactics, from predecessor movements.

- They drew in diverse groups by limiting demands to high-yield issues.

- They grasped that monopoly was a block to liberty.

- They provoked establishment over-reaction, which helped to win over the middle.

- Their victories often arrived indirectly, via *tableaus*.

- Their ideas caught on from one jurisdiction to the next via 'organic conquest'.

- They focused on reforming the machinery of law-making: prioritizing constitutional law over ordinary law.

In this context, a striking feature of modern protest is its atomization—a thousand reform movements attacking a thousand separate ills. The atomization is 'vertical' as well as 'horizontal': unlike the Levellers, the Chartists and the Suffragettes, today's causes rarely grasp that they are in a centuries-old lineage.

Few modern movements are linked to their siblings, and few to their ancestors.

The two thousand-year counter-revolution

In ancient Jewish tradition there's a place named *Otzar* (the 'treasury of souls') where the unborn await their time on Earth.[94]

Metaphorically, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the beasts that ravage today's democracies still slept in *Otzar*. For instance, the purchase of legislation, the cornering of information by the wealthy, wars driven by corporations, and the surveillance state, were not on the mental map of early constitution-writers.

As a result, the second democratic model—the Euro-American—reached its zenith in the mid-20th Century, then was slowly overpowered by lines of

attack its designers could not have foreseen. Twenty-five centuries after the Greeks formulated it, democracy—the ideal that people should govern themselves—still evoked the most ingenious establishment resistance.

It's not clear why plutocrats prefer unlimited accumulation of wealth and power over living in a more engaged and happy society. Possibly, evolution placed no upper limit on the power urge because none was needed: any Stone Age assertions of power were swiftly curbed by peers. In the Stone Age, moreover, opportunities for power, like those for carbohydrates, were more limited.

With agriculture came big populations, currency, writing and (you could say) the invention of secrecy. For the first time, a skilled player could pile up all the tokens in his corner: he didn't have to be good at anything else. Our successful hunter, now an ambitious miller, could accumulate produce.

Thus did the machinery of civilization permit co-operation and equality to be nudged aside by competition and hierarchy. Those who gained control over grain wasted no time in donning the soldier's helmet, the king's crown and the bishop's mitre, to gain control over people.

The post-Stone Age *deconstraint* of the power impulse has never sat well with a species grounded in equality. It's probably why the history of human settlement is the history of protest, rebellion and revolution.

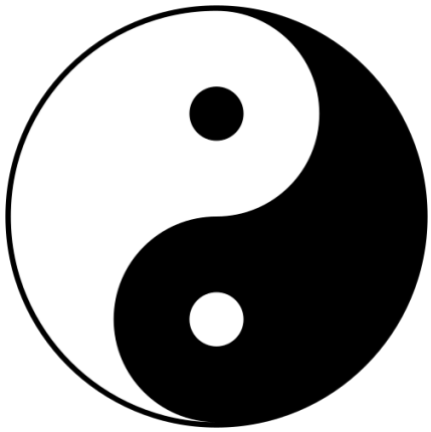
So, how to put the power urge back in its box?

In the West, Cleisthenes was the first to intuit that the shape of the system counted for more than laws and policies. He understood that until rule by the wealthy is replaced by a rational mechanics of government, just about any leader—benevolent or cruel, well-intended or selfish—will be moulded by that system.

Thus third draft democracy has no 'policies' beyond the shape of the system. It doesn't compete with the political ideologies—not with socialism, nor capitalism, nor today's 'free market' dogma. It will undoubtedly allow elements of several ideologies into governance, from one jurisdiction to the next. But it isn't comparable to any of them, as it's not, finally, a set of decisions, but a system of decision-making.

No *ism* has the versatility to combat the risks of our era. As we'll see in Part Seven, humans are not ideological creatures anyway. Like sleep and

waking—male and female—our ‘conservatism’ and ‘progressivism’ are not warring tendencies: they exist to co-exist.



The universality of this pattern is nicely captured by the Taoist *taijitu* (yin-yang) symbol—which was also, by other names, on the shields of the Western Roman infantry,[95] and indeed goes back to Neolithic Europe. In the *taijitu,* the white and black zones curve into each other, as if they’re trying to merge. Light and darkness stake a claim in the middle of each other’s territory—with a white dot in the black zone, and a black dot in the white. The *taijitu* suggests that what appears to be ‘opposite’ might actually be ‘complementary’.

Democracy is so lethal to special interests that it has been subject to a kind of permanent counter-revolution. That millennia-long crusade suggests that it remains the most radical idea in society.

But a vehicle built in the 18th Century, however elegant, cannot bear the heavy freight of the modern age. Constitutional redesign is more pressing than reforming banks, halting wars or reducing ocean pollution, as ignoring it ensures that victories on these fronts will continue to be hard-won, costly and occasional.

[1] Jean-Jacques Hublin et al., "New Fossils from Jebel Irhoud, Morocco and the Pan-African Origin of Homo Sapiens," *Nature* 546, no. 7657 (June 7, 2017): 289–92.
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