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Book Reviews



Jeff Miller, *Democracy in Crisis: Lessons from Ancient Athens*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2022. ISBN 9781788360630 (hbk). 227 pp. £25.00.

Today, the liberal democracies of the world are facing formidable challenges. Besides the global dangers of climate change, loss of biodiversity, and increasing violent conflicts affecting all types of states, liberal democracy as a political system also faces an internal crisis. It is a crisis of trust of citizens in their governments, not just in the ability of the government to deal with the problems at hand, but a lack of trust in the validity, legitimacy, and efficacy of liberal democracy itself. In his eloquent and thought-provoking book, Jeff Miller argues that liberal democracy – understood as a political system with a representative government based on elections, pluralism of political parties and state institutions, and civil liberties and rights – ‘needs some rethinking, expansion, and retooling’ (p. 12) to survive, and to do so in a better shape. Only when regaining the faith and support of the citizens will liberal democracies be able to cope effectively and democratically with the huge difficulties the world encounters.

For this rethinking, expansion, and retooling, Miller turns to the democracy of Classical Athens for inspiration. In this turn, Miller is far from alone. The widespread use of drawing lots for political office and for other aspects of governance in Athens enjoys a growing interest among political scientists and democratic activists, who see in sortition the potential to create a stronger basis for democracy than representative systems alone provide, while avoiding the pitfalls of populist slogans or referenda. Miller, who teaches political theory at SUNY New Paltz, takes this debate a step further: for him, Athens provides not just the democratic ‘tool’ of sortition but, more importantly, a conception of citizenship that may help to reboot the present-day ideas about and practices of citizenship in liberal democracies. Pointing out the vast differences between the society of Athens and that of present-day Western states, notably the too-exclusive basis of the Athenian democracy in free, male citizens, he

wisely rules out the idea that we could adopt Athenian practices straightaway. Rather, he approaches Athens as a treasure trove of ideas and practices, indeed of lessons to be learned with which to enrich, deepen, and reinvigorate our liberal democracies.

The argument of the book is developed in five chapters, with an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter begins with a topical case, a recent event in the United States that Miller dissects for its underlying political principles to be critically explored and compared with the Athenian counterpart.

Chapter One, 'Theoretical Foundations', takes the resistance against wearing masks or getting vaccinated during the COVID pandemic on the grounds of 'freedom' to address the liberal conception of the self. More specifically, Miller critically discusses the liberal conception of the self as *prior* to the state and society, as well as the liberal principle that the state should not set any norms about how people live their lives. He contrasts this modern viewpoint with that in Athens, where the polis expected the citizens to be active members of the community; the 'good life' meant developing one's individual capacities in exchange with others in a political context. Carefully balancing the strengths and weaknesses of the liberal values of liberty and individualism against commitments to more communitarian positions, Miller observes that by prioritizing individual choice over other values, liberalism in effect also imposes a certain type of society: 'while most liberals would acknowledge that we rank freedoms in terms of their importance, their commitment to neutrality on the question of the good life restricts the legal or social operationalization of those evaluations' (p. 47). This chapter lays the foundation for the other four, in which Miller explores political institutions and the social texture of Classical Athens for their potential to help rethinking, expansion, and retooling of liberal democracy.

Chapter Two picks up Twitter's ban of Donald Trump's account to explore the institution of ostracism, the decision of the Athenian citizens to ban a wealthy, influential leader from the city for ten years. After setting out the main features of the system, Miller further examines the meaning of ostracism as a political instrument. On the one hand, ostracism can be (and was by its Greek critics) regarded as an act of social revenge by the mass of citizens on those more talented and successful than themselves. Ostracism, in this view, is a tool of democracy for levelling down all excellence to the (less than) mediocre. On the other hand, Miller points out that not only do 'other forms of legal enforcement tend to affect members of the lower classes disproportionately' (p. 70), but the wealthy exert a disproportionate influence in society and politics, in Athens and certainly today. This is most blatantly the case in the United States, where the tax system hardly touches the enormous fortunes of the wealthy,

whose stranglehold over the elections and lobbying prevents any change. Athens shows it may be worth considering institutional instruments to check the extreme effects of the power of wealth.

Although the connection to the previous topic is not explicitly made, Chapter Three fittingly is devoted to sortition and its greater capacity, compared with elections, for realizing equality and the inclusion of all citizens. After looking briefly at the (mythological) origins of and some theoretical comments on sortition in Greece, Miller describes the main features of the system in Athens, the selection by lot of members of the council, the jury courts, and the majority of executive offices. The lesson to be drawn from Athens here is first of all taking the equality of all citizens in terms of political entitlement seriously, and making sure that all citizens effectuate this entitlement, as an obligation both to their own worth and to society. A sophisticated system of drawing lots and setting up all political bodies in sizeable boards, gathering the more and the less able citizens to work together, provide the best chances for satisfactory and inclusive governance. In the Athenian system, where all male citizens would hold office at least once in their life, citizens held 'an engaged stance relative to the public sphere' (p. 113). Drawing on Josiah Ober's *Democracy and Knowledge*, Miller argues that citizens' abilities grew in the process as these governmental bodies stimulated the spread of knowledge.¹ By contrast, in liberal democracy, '[w]e have a mismatch between the theoretical promise of equal access to office and the ability to deliver it' (p. 112).

Chapter Four, a discussion of how to effectuate a fairer distribution of the costs of government, elaborates on the problem of the disproportionately low taxation of the very wealthy compared to the average household in the United States. In Athens, the liturgies imposed by law and by social pressure on the wealthy, ranging from equipping a ship for the navy to financing a chorus for the Dionysia festival, provided a substantial part of the costs of the state. For the wealthy, the recompense lay in the public honor received for their contribution, a system similar to that in the United States where the wealthy donate public goods with their name attached. The difference, however, lies in the fully voluntary choice of the American wealthy to do so and on what to spend (some of) their fortune, whereas in Athens the polis assigned the liturgies required for the public good. Again, liberal democracy can require citizens to pay taxes *as citizens*, but on liberal principles private property is a core right of the individual, preceding any obligation towards the state, a viewpoint that makes taxes appear as an infringement on individual liberty. The latter position

¹ Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

is far stronger in the United States (and I think in the United Kingdom) than in states like my own, where social-democratic values about progressive taxation and the awareness that all citizens benefit from the public goods that taxes support are still common, despite several decades of neoliberal government.

In Chapter Five, Miller addresses the social coherence necessary for citizens' wellbeing and especially for the engagement with public life that a democracy such as the Athenian requires. Here, Robert Putnam's studies of the gradual dissolution of face-to-face interaction in American life are the point of departure, highlighting the increasing isolation of individual citizens caused by many factors but above all by the internet and kindred media. For Miller, the solitary life behind the screen ties in all too well with the liberal conception of the pre-social individual as the core figure of society. In Athens, by contrast, citizens participated in a range of political and religious bodies and other associations, centering around a clear geographic location, providing a sense of common identity, a durable sense of community, and a basis for shared action (p. 146). After some discussion of the *boulê* as a social hub, the main part of the chapter is devoted to the Dionysia, where, in addition to the male citizens, female citizens, foreigners, and even slaves were welcome to watch the plays. Miller pays careful attention to the Athenian theater as a place not just of shared emotions but also, again, of shared knowledge, while he deftly engages with the diverging scholarly opinions on the democratic nature of the Dionysia.

In the conclusion, Miller emphasizes that liberal rights are a great good but that they can be divisive and disruptive when taken to the extreme. Great individual wealth should face progressive taxation for the common good, and unlimited freedom of speech may need a safety valve like ostracism, which represented both a real check on elites but also a means of reconciliation. Democracy can be reinvigorated if governments dare to entrust certain elements of policy-making to allotted boards of citizens. Trust in the fairness of equality and in the abilities of the citizens, and the idea that privilege entails obligations towards the community, are also defended by philosophers such as John Rawls. Overall, it is not any of the elements of Athenian governance on its own but the understanding of the citizenship tying them together that should help to reboot the liberal democracies of today.

Democracy in Crisis is a rich, subtly argued book, so criticism may seem ungrateful, but it cannot be entirely avoided. First, although Miller is quite well versed in matters Athenian, the book contains several historical errors. For instance, the 'Constitution of Draco' in the *Athênaiion Politeia* does not hold historical evidence about the seventh century, in this case about allotment for the *boulê*, as Miller seems to think (p. 91), but is, on present consensus, a late

fourth-century construction projected onto early Athenian history. The *tamiai* were not randomly drawn by lot irrespective of location or property class (p. 106) but only from the highest property class. These mistakes arguably do not affect the overall argument. A bit more worrying is that Miller, who teaches ancient Greek political theory, thinks that Lysias was an Athenian citizen pleading for himself (pp. 128–29) instead of a metic logographer, in this case (oration 21) composing a defense for an unknown citizen against a charge of bribery. Even more worrying are several misunderstandings of Cleisthenes' system. The four Ionian tribes did not 'dominate political activity' (p. 147); even if they were the units from which, since the time of Solon, the archons were elected, politics pre-Cleisthenes had primarily a regional, elite-dominated power base, and when Cleisthenes created the ten new tribes the four Ionian tribes were not eliminated but relegated to religious and judicial roles only. Furthermore, Miller states that due to Cleisthenes the residents of Attica 'began to identify themselves by their demonymic [*sic* – a neologism for demotic?], thus aligning themselves with the new political structure instead of identifying by their patronymic, which associated them with their family and the older tribal system' (p. 147). Miller's view is wide of the mark here. Not only did demotics become common only in the last decades of the fifth century (prior to this only on ostraca) and regular in the fourth century, they never replaced patronymics but were added to them. Citizen status, and with it citizenship more broadly, became more tied to descent and family lines, not less. The image Miller creates here of Athenian citizenship as disconnected from descent and kinship would be inconceivable for a Classical Athenian. Miller might be forgiven for errors in an intricate field perhaps not entirely his own, but proofreading of the book by an ancient historian would have removed these mistakes prior to publication.

Yet, these quibbles do little to detract from the value of the book, and one could argue that Miller's perspective on Athens from a modern, political-scientific viewpoint allows him to find lessons in the Classical democracy for present-day application in a way that few ancient historians could. Obviously, Miller cannot solve all the problems his argument raises. For instance, the coherent society of Athens that Miller envisions also entailed deep distrust paired with tight social control; would citizens of present-day democracies find such pressure acceptable? Sortition for office became normative in Athens in a society where drawing lots for all kinds of other purposes had been ingrained for centuries, and the system was nonetheless never totally accepted by all. Today, meritocratic values are paramount for assigning privileges, including holding political office; we have a long way to go from a few successful instances of allotted bodies to a regular institution for setting political

agendas. But for those (like myself) who believe that trying to get there and create a better form of democratic citizenship is important, Miller's account of 'lessons from ancient Athens' is both persuasive and inspiring.

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