Democracy *à l'ancienne*

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Abstract

Democracy often appears as the ideal regime, alluding to an ancient Athenian governance model. Since successive and/ or distant reproductions risk being chimeric rather than harmonious, re-visiting the origins helps to identify and clarify key concepts and their importance.

1   Introduction

To *govern*[1] an organisation such as a city, state, or enterprise means to conduct or administer[2] its affairs with competence and authority (Perdicoúlis, 2014d). Since the original context of the city-state in the Hellenic space, the activities associated with governance are known as *politics*[3] and require competences such as *statesmanship* for 'home' affairs and *diplomacy*[4] for 'external' affairs, complemented by skills for 'practical' or managerial[5] tasks relating to operations or finances[6].

Contrary to competence, authority has an intriguing profile with interpretations as diverse as *designation of duty* and *licence for domination*, which either restrict or highlight people's legendary desire for 'power'[7] in ways documented as early as in the works of Thucydides (ca. 431 BC), Plato (ca. 360 BC), and Aristotle (ca. 330 BC). Authority entails relations among people, and this creates sensitivity, *inter alia*, about fairness, interests, communication, and representativeness.

While modern-day 'democracy' is debated in many cultural contexts at the international setting, some of its practices come in remarkable contrast with the original classic variants — often the Athenian city-state of the 5th C. BC. Three selected instances are presented in the following sections, regarding duty *vs.* privilege (§ 2.1), facts *vs.* function (§ 2.2), and unity *vs.* fragmentation (§ 2.3).

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[1]From κυβερνείν [Gk], to steer (Perdicoúlis, 2014d).

[2]From *ad-* [L], to + *ministrare* [L], to wait upon — *cf.* minister (*minister* [L], servant; from *minus* [L], less): a person acting under the authority of another (*cf.* υπάλληλος [Gk], servant).

[3]From πολίτης [Gk], citizen; from πόλις [Gk], city or city-state, often considered in its ideal form for philosophical purposes (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010).

[4]From δίπλωμα [Gk], folded paper, in the sense of state (or official) paper (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010).

[5]From *maneggiare* [It], based on *manus* [L], hand — related to *manège* [F], an enclosed area in which horses and riders are trained (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010).

[6]One's monetary resources and affairs; from *finer* [F], to make an end, to settle a debt, from *fin* [F], end; original sense: payment of a debt, compensation, or ransom; later taxation, revenue (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010).

[7]Capacity to subdue, control, or influence others for one's own satisfaction or profit — *cf.* ισχύς [Gk].

2 Antitheses

2.1 Duty *vs.* privilege

As documented by Thucydides (ca. 431 BC, VI — Funeral Oration of Pericles), Plato (ca. 360 BC), and Aristotle (ca. 330 BC), citizens in the classic Athenian democracy had a duty to *serve*[8] their city-state. The attribution of civil service was conducted by public vote[9]. After an assay of their suitability[10], the selected citizens could not refuse to serve and, in addition, they were accountable for their conduct[11] — Figure 1. The idea of *service* in the public function[12] has survived over the centuries, embedded in subsequently coined terms such as the Latin-based *minister*[13] and *ambassador*[14].

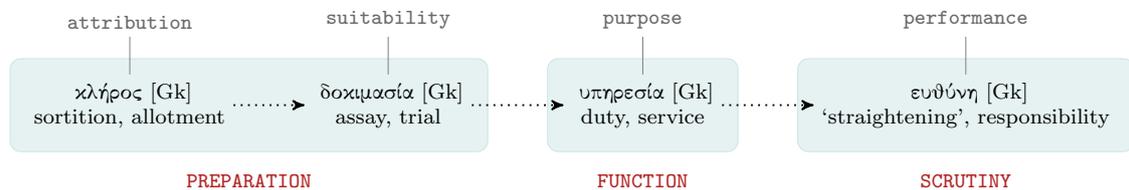| attribution	suitability	purpose	performance
χλήρος [Gk] sortition, allotment	δοκιμασία [Gk] assay, trial	υπηρεσία [Gk] duty, service	ευθύνη [Gk] 'straightening', responsibility
PREPARATION		FUNCTION	SCRUTINY

FIGURE 1   Public function entails careful preparation and scrutiny (Aristotle, ca. 330 BC, Part 4)

It could be argued that since — or *if* — governance functions are to stand out in the community, they may justify some special handling or 'privilege'[15]. In support of this argument, special rights and advantages (e.g. malpractice immunity) turn the public function much more appealing than their counterpart of accountable duty of the classic Athenian city-state. But even then, a hint of a privilege could be detected in the honorarium[16] attributed to the participating Athenians for their public service, which was intended to release their time so that they could perform their civic duties — interestingly enough, with an association to 'political advantage', as its institution was allegedly used by Pericles as a bid for popular favour (Aristotle, ca. 330 BC, Part 27).

The transition of the perception of public service from duty to privilege inspires a parallel with the argument of Socrates about the (hypothetical) evolution of the state (Plato, ca. 360 BC, Book II). Governance as a *duty* fits well in the 'core' state, which is restricted to the most basic of necessities. On the contrary, governance as a *privilege* fits well in the evolved or 'luxurious' state that is characterised initially by some 'ordinary conveniences', and eventually by excess and its consequences (Perdicoúlis, 2015).

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[8]Ὑπηρετώ [Gk], to serve; υπηρεσία [Gk], service; υπηρέτης [Gk], servant.
[9]Some votes were used for *inclusion* (e.g. by draw or lottery for a public service), and others for *exclusion* (e.g. to outcast or ostracise unpopular citizens — from όστρακον [Gk], shell or potsherd).
[10]Qualifications for public office were typically based on birth (e.g. citizenship) and wealth; a suitability assay (δοκιμασία) could be applied after the sortition or allotment (Aristotle, ca. 330 BC, Part 4).
[11]Fines were a common punishment — e.g. for missing a meeting of the Assembly (Aristotle, ca. 330 BC, Part 4).
[12]Activity assigned to someone — from *fungi* [L], to perform.
[13]*Minister* [L], servant; from *minus* [L], less.
[14]Based on *ambactus* [L], servant.
[15]*Privilegium* [L], a law in favour of (or against) a specific individual; claim of special right (Aversa and Whitaker, 2008) — from *privus* [L], private + *lex* [L], law.
[16]Pay for service, or μισθός [Gk], salary.

2.2   Facts *vs.* function

Stories about *people* are interesting and easy to relate to, so they are embraced even by celebrated philosophers such as Plato (ca. 360 BC) and historians such as Plutarch (ca. 100 AD). However, such stories are not intended to stop at the 'juicy bits' of private lives, but to illustrate *situations* and, even more abstractly, *ideas*. Situations are objects of direct interest to governance and often express issues of function, such as the problems[17] to be solved — e.g. a persistent economic decline, social turmoil, or fine-tuning the public health system. Ideas are sometimes difficult to grasp or relate to as they stand one abstraction level above people's physical lives — e.g. justice, efficiency, happiness — and so they may become somewhat remote from the public interest.

Indeed, the preference and interest for the 'tangible' fact-based reality extends beyond the personal level and well into the public affairs. In a 'scientific' way, situations are described in detail with a profusion of data, supported by the argument that 'to know something is to measure it' (Perdicoúlis, 2012, 2013). Quite expectedly, the concerns and methodology of recent mainstream governance are shaped by the economic[18] paradigms (Smith, 1776; Mill, 1885; Taylor, 1911) characterised by indicator sets, input–output processes, computational indices (e.g. performance), and pattern analyses of large data sets such as data mining (Perdicoúlis and Glasson, 2011).

Nonetheless, the underlying challenge for governance is *understanding* (Perdicoúlis, 2012) — for instance, to a level that would explore the causal mechanisms (*how?*) and explain the reasons (*why?*) that produce the observed data. This is typically beyond the scope of the 'data doctrine', which rarely ventures past data-rich descriptions of situations. But while economist models with *static* computational relationships and 'tangibles' may be satisfied with data, indicators, and indices, it is the *dynamics*[19] that make up the essence of reality, or 'how things work'. Recognised as early as Heraclitus (Harris, 2003) and Aristotle (ca. 360 BC)[20], thinking of systems resorts to structure and function through explicit and shared knowledge and assumptions to build the necessary understanding (Perdicoúlis, 2016) — Figure 2. Then, seeking solutions (e.g. a trade agreement or military strategy) relates to the system (e.g. city-state and its context) rather than its parts (e.g. lobby interests or unrelated indicators).
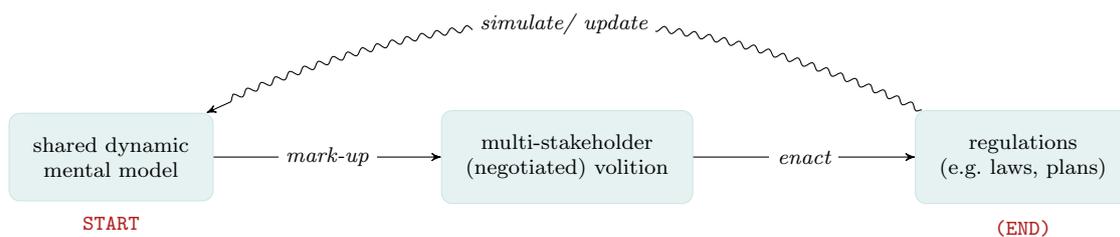

FIGURE 2   Generic arrangement for the use of mental models as collective references

Both data and understanding on public affairs (i.e. facts and function) are expected to constitute *common references* such as data sets and mental models (e.g. arguments), with due transparency about how they are created, where they are kept, and how they are being used — Figure 2.

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[17]In the mathematical use of 'problem' (Perdicoúlis, 2010, pp.58–66), 'concerns' (Y) are states of special interest.
[18]Branch of knowledge concerned with human activities such as the production, consumption, accumulation, and transfer of 'wealth' — e.g. resources or fabricated goods.
[19]Relationships between entities, in a way that one 'forces' the other to behave in a certain way — from δύναμις [Gk], force (Perdicoúlis, 2014d).
[20]Αιτία [Gr], cause, motive, reason (for things to happen) is crucial for causal thinking.

2.3   Unity *vs.* fragmentation

In a regime referred to as 'direct democracy'[21], Athens of the classic period featured a governance configuration[22] of a 500-strong Council (βουλή) and a more populous Assembly (εχχλησία) of citizens[23]. Political issues were discussed and tentatively resolved in the Council, and the solutions were proposed for voting at the Assembly. Opinions were often divided, and people with experience (and interests) would lead the public (δήμος) towards one solution or another[24], but both 'chambers' were officially non-partisan.

The Athenian model of (direct) democracy had no permanent political parties like those found in modern-day (representative) democracies (Hansen, 2014). In contrast to the Athenians, the Roman society had a clear and official division into *patricians*[25] and *plebeians*[26] (Greenidge, 1901), which perhaps makes first case of permanent political divisions catering to specific interests — which later became known as political parties.

Political parties as collective stakeholders defending their social and economic core values and — naturally — interests are more organised and permanent versions of the occasional associations that occurred in Athenian politics, identified by the name of their impromptu leaders. This level of maturity brings sharper and more elaborate political arguments, but their permanence fragments the society, with interest shifting from the community to the fractions — Figure 3.
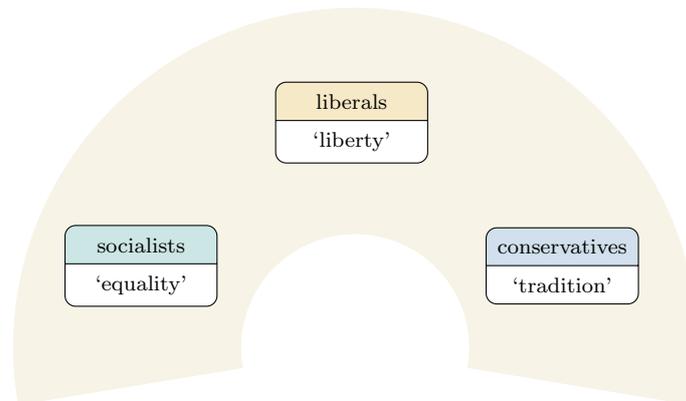

FIGURE 3   Overlay of the fragmented modern arrangement on top of the unified classic model

The Assembly of Athenian citizens was hosted in the amphitheatre of Dionysus, below the Acropolis. It is interesting that the general pattern of modern-day 'parliamentary' seatings maintains an amphitheatrical configuration[27], although divided in sectors to host special-interest groups ('parties') that stand for their respective core values — Figure 3.

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[21] A more accurate designation would be 'sampled democracy'.

[22] Resembling a modern 'two-chamber' governance system.

[23] i.e. adult males, sons of Athenian citizens, excluding women, children, and slaves; this social discrimination would be scandalous if judged against more recent norms, but it was common for city-states of the time, place, and culture.

[24] Whether intentionally or not, the Athenian public was largely shaping its political culture (παιδεία) and critical spirit through theatre, and comedy in particular (Heath, 1987).

[25] *Patricius* [L], from *pater* [L], father — indicating noble birth.

[26] *Plebeius* [L], from *plebs* [L], the common people, or mob/ mass — *cf.* πλήθος [Gk], crowd.

[27] Perhaps dictated by space restrictions, and/ or in honour of the classics.

3   Discussion

The three selected antitheses (§ 2) have been shaped by the workings of century-old historical forces. Current situations are difficult to invert, revise, or even critique because they represent ancestral choices, and/ or because they are daunting tasks. The relatively short-lived classic Athenian city-state of the 5th C. BC stands as a perennial *ideal* model, perhaps somewhat more credible than the subsequent and imaginary[28] *Utopia* (More, 1516). Notwithstanding the complexity beneath the establishment of current trends, the selected antitheses reveal resilient human tendencies such as human weaknesses — either in the way of frailty or fondness, or even both.

PUT SELF-BENEFIT OVER THE COMMON GOOD (§ 2.1) Simply put: faced with the dilemma to serve the state for privilege or duty, who would not seize the opportunity to opt for privilege? And who would let go of the privilege if they already had it?

WORK WITH THE EASY FACTS INSTEAD OF THE 'COMPLICATED' HOLON (§ 2.2) People are used to seeing trees instead of a forest — the former have economic interest (e.g. timber) while the latter is just a 'boring' and difficult-to-understand ecosystem. The qualitative nature of holistic thinking is not strong enough to attract 'headline attention', but it has the capacity of becoming so once a numerical interface is introduced, as evidenced with System Dynamics (SDS, website).

LET INTEREST-GROUPS TAKE OVER GOVERNANCE (§ 2.3) The appearance of stakeholders is natural, but governing is meant to be un-biased. Political parties, which openly stand for specific principles and ends, see governance as a vehicle to implement their interests. The official ruling of a party comes at the expense of the excluded parties (i.e.-stakeholders) and, most importantly, the community.

The capacity and/ or actual conduct of the governors on the one hand, and the public satisfaction on the other, are products of the culture of each society, representing shared knowledge and experience. Hence, a 'perfect match' or a 'disaster' reflect merely internal assessments (Perdicoúlis, 2014c). In such conditions, haphazard situations may be assessed as 'normal' and thus accepted, and intelligent arrangements may be dismissed as 'inappropriate'. Despite this, after centuries of scholarly study and years of collective experience with governance[29], there are numerous ways to prepare for governance of high standards (Table 1) and little excuse to miss the opportunity.

LEARNING BY...	DESCRIPTION/ EXAMPLE
Society at large	life-long learning or experience; includes the classic Athenian model
Special-interest group	typically the mainstream 'party' culture
Family heritage	typically encountered in hereditary governments (e.g. tribes, monarchy)
Formal schooling	at an elementary or higher institution (e.g. political science or law degree)
Corporate culture	applying private-business culture to public office

TABLE 1   Different — and perhaps complementary — ways to prepare for governance

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[28] *Utopia* has gained fame for being the term of choice to designate a 'perfect but unachievable state', whereas the classic Athenian state at best serves as an ideal example.

[29] Aristotle (ca. 350a BC, Book X, § IX) insists that experience is indeed necessary to practice, or even to understand politics (Peters, 1906, p.352).

4 Challenges

Is a 'democracy *à l'ancienne*', with the selected antitheses (§ 2) set to their original values, still relevant nowadays as much as it appears to be esteemed? Would all modern-day stakeholders respect[30] this kind of regime today, with duty over privilege, function over facts, and unity over fragmentation?

Going backwards is the opposite of progress, so regressing to an ancient and short-lived regime may not be the ideal objective. Furthermore, vague calls for 'democracy' are misleading or disorienting. Rather, abstracting one level higher, the relevant questions are about the choices in the antitheses, interpreted in the current circumstances of place and culture — and for this matter, a global backdrop is much more challenging than that of a single, small, and ancient city-state.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

A search for century-old bibliographic sources expects to meet high uncertainty, including authorship and dates. Original records were handwritten on perishable material[a] or engraved in more durable but still degradable medium[b], and successive copies and translations are responsible for alterations due to interpretation and/ or errors.

On the classic Athenian model of governance, documentation was sought in the works of Plato (ca. 360 BC) and Aristotle (ca. 330 BC), as well as in the comments of their translators. Other ancient models of governance from the Hellenic space are mentioned directly or indirectly (Thucydides, ca. 431 BC; Plato, ca. 360 BC), with Sparta being of particular importance due to its involvement in a long conflict with Athens[c].

On more abstract subjects, reference for politics was sought in Aristotle's homonymous work (Aristotle, ca. 350b BC)[d] and its preceding volume on ethics (Aristotle, ca. 350a BC).

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[a]e.g. parchment, papyrus, or wax plates.
[b]e.g. marble or ceramic, subject to fractures or erosion, or even theft by (or for) 'collectors'.
[c]The Peloponesian war was perhaps the most visible facet of the clash of two civilisations, defending different ways of life in social and economic aspects (Lee, 1974).
[d]Technically, a *scroll* in its original format, since 'books' or *codices* (singular *codex*) are much later inventions.

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[30]i.e. if not admire, then at least recognise and accept someone or something 'as is'.

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