

## Introduction

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### SITING PLATO

IN THIS BOOK I argue for a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between Plato's thought and the practice of democracy. I propose that the canonical view of Plato as a virulent antidemocrat is not sound.<sup>1</sup> Rather, in his work, a searching consideration of the possibilities raised by some democratic ideals and institutions coexists alongside severe criticisms of democratic life and politics. Plato finds the lived experience and ideology of Athenian democracy repulsive and fascinating, troubling and intriguing. He not only assails democratic practice but also weaves hesitations about the reach of that attack into the very presentation of his thought. A substantial measure of ambivalence, not unequivocal hostility, marks his attitude toward democracy as he knew it.

This dimension of Plato's thought has remained largely unexplored for some time. This is in part because Plato has for centuries been cast as a founding figure in what has been called the "antidemocratic tradition in Western thought."<sup>2</sup> But even when commentators have noted that state-

<sup>1</sup> This view is longstanding and widely held, and thus I call it canonical. Typical are passages such as the following: "Plato's antipathy to democracy as he knew it thus emerges clearly in this section [the simile of the ship at *Republic* 487b–497a]. No doubt his anti-democratic attitude is a product of various complex factors, but what should interest us here is the philosophical ground for his condemnation of democracy" (R. C. Cross and A. D. Woozley, *Plato's Republic: A Philosophical Commentary* [London: Macmillan, 1964], p. 198); "The very notion of democracy has always provided a field day for critics. Critics are roughly of three kinds: those fundamentally opposed to democracy because, like Plato, they believe that while it may be possible it is inherently undesirable . . ." (Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], p. 2); and, "Plato was anti-democratic in the highest degree" (G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* [London: Duckworth, 1981], p. 71). A notable exception is Ernest Barker, *Greek Political Theory: Plato and His Predecessors* (New York: Methuen, 1918). He writes that although Plato is a "bitter critic of Periclean democracy . . . he can also do justice to its better side even in the *Republic*" (p. 126, see also p. 299).

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Roberts finds that "the subtleties [of Plato's thought on democracy] have not been incorporated into the tradition on Plato, Socrates and Athenian democracy" (p. 75), noting that the "indictment of democracy that appears in Plato's dialogues . . . was to become an integral part of the antidemocratic tradition and was to be cited by later writers as evidence of the insufficiency both of Athenian government in particular and of democracy in general. In this tradition, Plato's forceful attacks on oligarchy were generally ignored" (p. 82). Nevertheless, and despite expressing these words of caution, Roberts herself goes on to speak of Plato's clear "opposition

ments sympathetic to democracy appear in the dialogues, they typically treat them as anomalous. The most well-known is the passage in the *Statesman* where Socrates is made to identify democracy as preferable to any other regime likely to exist (303a–c), a view Plato repeats in *Letter 7* (342d8–10).<sup>3</sup> But such passages are not momentary irregularities. They are part of a sustained pattern of interest in democracy that runs through the entire corpus. To see this, however, we need to read Plato in the context of contemporaneous understandings of democratic political ideals and practices.<sup>4</sup> We need, that is, to be alert to the way Plato mobilizes the language, imagery, and principles that the Athenians themselves used to fashion their orthodox civic self-understanding. Familiarity with the variety of images and topics that were culturally available to Plato as he crafted his written works is crucial to understanding his commentary on democracy. Once we gain such familiarity, we can more readily see that he does not mount an enemy attack on Athenian democracy, nor does he oppose it totally. Instead, we see that Plato's dialogues contain explicit, albeit qualified, expressions of acceptance of the wide dispersal of political power characteristic of democracy, enlist certain celebrated Athenian democratic principles in the design of his critique of democratic politics, and depict the practice of philosophy as indebted to Athenian democratic culture. Plato indicates that philosophy needs to appropriate some, though certainly not all, of democracy's values.

Situating Plato in the context of the Athenian civic self-image raises some theoretical and methodological issues. The literary record of classical Greece does not include a systematic discussion of the merits and nature of Athenian democracy composed by someone of democratic sympathies. Substantial narrative accounts of "what the democrats think" are embedded in the work of Plato and other critics (e.g., Aristotle, the "Old Oligarch"). We obviously cannot use Plato's account of democratic thought as evidence for a new context within which to situate a reading of his treatment of democracy. Nor can we rely on accounts present in the work of other critics without independent evidence from less problematic sources. In addition, though there are explicit, favorable reviews of demo-

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to democracy" (e.g., p. 84) and does not hesitate labeling him an "antidemocratic thinker" (p. 95).

<sup>3</sup> Commenting on *Statesman* 303a, for example, George Klosko writes, "This sort of reasoning is alien to Plato's earlier works." See *The Development of Plato's Political Thought* (New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 196.

<sup>4</sup> On the terminology of "practices" and practice theory, see Sherry B. Ortner, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). Also see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978 [1972]).

cratic ideas in drama, oratory, and historical writings, these amount only to occasional, brief arguments in support of particular institutions or practices, or the expression of certain generalizations and maxims about the benefits of democracy. Some scholars have made exceptional use of this evidence to add texture to our understanding of the functioning of particular Athenian political institutions, including the courts and Assembly.<sup>5</sup> Others have focused on examining such things as the emergence of the term *dēmokratia* and the peculiar meanings of Athenian ideas of freedom, equality, and law (*eleutheria*, *isonomia*, and *nomos*).<sup>6</sup> Others still have attempted to reconstruct a lost systematic democratic theory from this disparate evidence.<sup>7</sup> These scholars are motivated by an admirable concern to demonstrate that among the intellectual products of Greek antiquity was not only fierce criticism of democracy but a sound defense of its basic structure and principles. Unfortunately, these works are often marred by

<sup>5</sup> For example, Moses Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1973), *Politics in the Ancient World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Arlene Saxonhouse in *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), turns to the work of historical and philosophical writers of antiquity to improve our understanding of the institutions of Athenian democracy. On the structure and mechanics of Athenian institutions, see Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles and Ideology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), which also contains a useful bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> For a representative selection of recent work in this area, see the essays collected as Part One in “Liberty, Equality and Law,” in *Dēmokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), which also contains a useful bibliography. Also see L. Foxhall and A.D.E. Lewis, eds., *Greek Law in Its Political Setting: Justification Not Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); John A. Koumoulides, ed., *The Good Idea: Democracy and Ancient Greece* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1995); Martin Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law: Law, Society and Politics in Fifth-Century Athens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Martin Ostwald, *Nomos and the Beginnings of Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969); John Dunn, ed., *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey, 508 B.C. to A.D. 1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Orlando Patterson, *Freedom: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic, 1991); and David Stockton, *The Classical Athenian Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Lisa Kallet-Marx, “Institutions, Ideology, and Political Consciousness in Ancient Greece: Some Recent Books on Athenian Democracy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55 (1994): 309–35; V. Ehrenberg, “Origins of Democracy,” *Historia* 1 (1950): 515–48; M. H. Hansen, “The Origin of the Term *Dēmokratia*,” *Liverpool Classical Monthly* 11 (1986): 35–36; G. Vlastos, “*Isonomia*,” *American Journal of Philology* 74 (1954): 333–66, and “*Isonomia Politikē*,” in his *Platonic Studies*, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 164–203.

<sup>7</sup> A.H.M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957); Eric Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957); Cynthia Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

an overinterpretation of fragmentary and dubiously situated evidence that is finally unacceptable, regardless of how clever—even ingenious—these analyses may be at times.<sup>8</sup>

I turn to wider cultural resources for expressions of Athenian democratic thought. Specifically, I look to civic ritual performances, oral traditions, popular legends, and other Athenian cultural practices. It is wrong to assume that the absence of a systematic work of democratic theory in the extant literary record of ancient Athens is just our bad luck and to consider our project today to be the recovery of the tenets of such a lost treatise. Rather, it is important to recognize that it is quite possible that the Athenians did not write an elaborate statement of democratic theory but “enacted it.”<sup>9</sup> Our challenge is to identify the occasions on which the Athenians experientially engaged important aspects of their civic self-understanding and to develop methods of analysis capable of drawing accounts of that civic self-image out of our sources.

Investigating the Athenian civic self-image involves some reconceptualization of what we ordinarily mean by “Athenian democracy.” The Athenians did not consider “democracy” to be a matter of the polis having in place certain governing institutions (though of course it was certainly this in part). For the Athenians, democratic citizenship not only involved participating in some capacity in the work of the Assembly, courts, Council, and military, it was also a matter of the ritualized performance of a cluster of cultural practices that reach into both private and public life. It included the way in which the city ordered the tending of sacred matters, physical exercise, athletic competition, poetic production and experience, burial of the dead, possession and distribution of property, acquisition and maintenance of prestige, education of children, sexual behavior, military training and service, and deliberation on public affairs. Commentators routinely acknowledge this expanded understanding of Athenian democracy when they note how inadequately the Greek word *politeia* translates “constitution.” A city’s *politeia* encompasses not only its organization of legislative, judicial, and administrative authority but also the

<sup>8</sup> On the unreliability of these studies, see Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Power of the People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> W. Robert Connor, “Civil Society, Dionysiac Festival and the Athenian Democracy,” in Ober and Hedrick, eds., *Dēmokratia*, p. 224. On the conspicuous absence of any record of formal democratic theorizing in ancient Athens, also see Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 147–48. He stresses that “in Athens democratic ideology so dominated the political landscape that formal democratic theory was otiose” (p. 148). On democratic thought (in contrast to systematic theorizing) of the period, see Kurt A. Raaflaub, “Contemporary Perceptions of Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens,” *Classica et mediaevalia* 40 (1989): 33–70.

patterns of life and ideology that distinguish its civic culture.<sup>10</sup> This is abundantly clear in our sources. For instance, Pericles in his funeral oration attributes Athens' greatness to its democracy, which, he goes on to explain, refers not only to the city's form of government but also to its pervasive patterns of life.<sup>11</sup>

We might think the democratic significance of these cultural activities lies in their capacity to equip citizens for the more straightforwardly political work they perform in such arenas as the Assembly, courts, and Council. For example, the production of tragedy on a grand civic festival occasion provided theater-going citizens with an opportunity to hone intellectual skills that would be valuable when conducting policy deliberations and making decisions in the Assembly, courts, and Council.<sup>12</sup> But while we observe this connection, we must also recognize that to the Athenians, such cultural practices were in themselves part of the conduct of democratic life and not strictly ways to prepare oneself for the (more) real work of governing. Traversing civic space, participating in particular ways in a procession or public sacrifice, attending the theater, heading a household, performing the dithyramb, acting in a chorus, as well as many other activities were all strands of a web of practices through which eligible individuals experienced their Athenian democratic citizenship.<sup>13</sup>

These practices as well as more traditionally political forms of participation in civic life involved citizens in enacting a sort of official public perception of Athenian democracy's character and excellence. This perception was certainly not neutral toward the various citizen and noncitizen populations of the Athenian polis. Rather, it presented the city as a unity, wishfully ignoring or fancifully resolving serious social tensions that plagued the polis. Alert to this dimension of the self-image the Athenian projected

<sup>10</sup> Josiah Ober argues that *politeia* must include ideology, offering a persuasive reading of passages from Aristotle in the process. See *The Athenian Revolution*, p. 173. On Aristotle and a broader, practice-based understanding of democracy, see Jill Frank, "Democracy and Distribution: Aristotle on Just Desert," *Political Theory* 26, no. 6 (1998): 784–802. For discussion of *politeia* and "forms of society," see Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 2–3.

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides 2.36.4–42.1. Thucydides develops a critique of this typically Athenian, expansive way of conceiving the scope of collective activities that can properly be considered "political." His account of the war employs a narrower conception of the boundaries of the political. Indeed, his text is one of the first to identify political activity exclusively with governing and military matters.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, J. Peter Euben, "Introduction," in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); and Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> See Pauline Schmitt-Pantel, "Collective Activities and the Political in the Greek City," in *The Greek City*, ed. Oswyn Murray and Simon Price (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), pp. 199–214.

in the context of performing these activities, I call attention to its partial and at times oppressive character. But my central concern is to interpret a set of practices through which the Athenian *dēmos*, itself an exclusive group, fashioned a public presentation of its own understanding of the “fragment of reality” in which its members lived.<sup>14</sup> I examine what the dominant elements in the democratic polis found politically useful to publicize about itself. The dominant elements were citizens—freeborn native males of mature age who could participate fully in political life. But the *demos* was not a homogenous group. It was beset by class, regional, age, and clan conflicts, and so sometimes dominant elements will be subsets of the citizen population.

We must, of course, recognize that the Athenian democratic order practiced—and celebrated—gender inequality, xenophobia, imperialism, and slavery. But doing so does not require us to deny that the idea and practice of democracy was an invention of the Greek polis. It was at this historical moment that there emerged both the idea that all citizens, regardless of differences of wealth, birth, talents, trade, or profession, should be political equals and a stable set of practices that effectively placed power in the hands of the common (nonelite) mass of citizens. Despite its many shortcomings, it is the case that, as Geoffrey de Ste. Croix stressed, democracy is “the brilliant achievement of the Greek polis: the Greek polis . . . had to build it up from the very bottom; . . . had both to devise the necessary institutions and to construct an appropriate ideology.”<sup>15</sup> My focus in the chapters on Athenian democratic thought is not the extent to which the Athenian democratic order materially depended upon the more disturbing features of Athenian life that accompanied it but how the dominant ele-

<sup>14</sup> I have borrowed this phrasing from Lydia Cochrane’s translation of Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient World*, p. 281. See also Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Pierre Lévêque, “On the Invention of Democracy,” in Lévêque and Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes the Athenian*, trans. David Ames Curtis (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996 [1964]), pp. 100–135; Ober and Hedrick, eds., *Dēmokratia*; Euben, Ober, and Wallach, eds., *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstitution of American Democracy*; Morris and Raflaub, eds., *Democracy 2500?*; Bernard Gofmann, Sheldon S. Wolin, J. Peter Euben, Josiah Ober, Arlene Saxonhouse, and Michael T. Clark, “The 2500th Anniversary of Democracy: Lessons of Athenian Democracy,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 26, no. 3 (Sept. 1993): 471–94. On the nature of democracy at Athens, see Ober, who argues that Athenians sustained rule by the people because “the ordinary citizen . . . was a participant in maintaining a political culture and a value system that constituted him the political equal of his elite neighbor” (*The Athenian Revolution*, p. 154). On the manner in which the ordinary citizen wielded power and the nature of the democratic hegemony at Athens, see Ober, *Mass and Elite*, and the useful summary in *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 31.

ments in the polis mobilized the available meanings associated with various groups and practices to craft a patriotic civic self-image, that is, to celebrate the achievement of democracy.<sup>16</sup>

This book has two parts. Part One examines aspects of Athenian democratic thought, focusing on the structure of the Athenian democratic imaginary (wishful self-image). Part Two turns to the interpretation of the dialogues of Plato. This strategy of presentation stresses that a new reading of Plato's treatment of democracy becomes possible only once features of the Athenian civic self-image are juxtaposed with Plato's account of philosophical practice.

In Part One, I employ an approach to Athenian democratic thought that builds on a growing literature in classics and political theory that considers Athenian political life fluidly to reach beyond the functioning of specific traditional political institutions. For example, I draw on the extensive work on such topics as the civic context of Athenian drama, the civic ideals that animate festival events and ritual practices unique to Athens (City Dionysia, funeral oration), the meanings of the myths that pervade Athenian political discourse, the character and reach of the power of the ordinary people in the Athenian polis, the gendered nature of Athenian political life, and the political dimension of Athenian erotic life. These chapters contribute to the literature on Athenian politics from the vantage point of political theory. That is, these chapters extend the findings of classicists in theoretical directions and, in doing so, raise the possibility that we can track Plato's interest in Athenian politics at the level of theory—the task to which I turn in Part Two.

The strategy of reading Plato I develop in Part Two builds upon five strands of recent Plato scholarship. First, work tracing the roots of the new genre of writing Plato develops, philosophic dialogue, in Athenian drama (specifically tragedy) supports my efforts to unsettle the common view that Plato's thought is at war with the Athenian democratic tradition. Such work shows, for example, that "Plato's debt to theater is not a debt to some arbitrary aesthetic invention but to the social institutions of his culture, which means that his attitude toward tragedy is a way of locating him in the intellectual traditions and political practices that defined Athenian democracy."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For discussion of various recent studies that aim to characterize Athenian democracy, see Lisa Kallet-Marx, "Institutions, Ideology and Political Consciousness." Also see Robert Browning, "How Democratic Was Ancient Athens?" in Koumoulides, ed., *The Good Idea*, pp. 57–70; and Robin Osborne, "Athenian Democracy: Something to Celebrate?" *Dialogos* 1 (1994): 48–58.

<sup>17</sup> J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 236. Also Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 122–35.

Second, the compelling body of literature on why Plato wrote dialogues also supports my view that defining aspects of Plato's thought have roots in Athenian democratic practices. This work demonstrates that the dialogic form has deep philosophic import. It is not simply a clever way to express a doctrine that could have been more easily stated in systematic exposition, but a mode of writing that allows Plato to craft for the reader the unusual experience of philosophic inquiry and dramatize both its departures from and attachments to Athenian traditions.<sup>18</sup>

Third, the few historical studies of Plato that exist have demonstrated that he was deeply engaged with the politics of his city. Glenn Morrow's historical interpretation of the *Laws* shows that Plato was fully conversant with the minutiae of Athenian politics and concerned not simply to denounce democracy but to explore the possibilities that inhere in some specifically democratic structures and practices.<sup>19</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet shows how imbedded in Plato's thought are structures of Athenian political discourse. His essays on the myths of Atlantis in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* and of a Golden Age in the *Statesman* detail how Plato's thought not only opposes certain practices of Athenian democracy but also simultaneously explores the possibilities that attend its political life.<sup>20</sup> Most recently, Josiah Ober has placed Plato's philosophical project in the context of Athenian elites' efforts to "reinvent political dissent" at Athens after practical attempts to bring about change failed miserably (i.e., generated the rule of the Thirty).<sup>21</sup> He proposes that a desire to find new grounds for

<sup>18</sup> Andrea Nightingale examines "Platonic intertextuality" in relation to Plato's efforts to define the boundaries of philosophy as a discursive and social practice in *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Also on the philosophical import of the dialogic form, see Charles Griswold, ed., *Platonic Writings/Platonic Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1988); J. C. Klagge and Nicholas D. Smith, eds., *Methods of Interpreting Plato: Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); Gerald A. Press, *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993); and Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Glenn Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City: An Historical Commentary on the Laws*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993 [1960]).

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Athens and Atlantis: Structure and Meaning of a Platonic Myth," and "Plato's Myth of the Statesman, the Ambiguities of the Golden Age and of History," in *The Black Hunter: Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World*, trans. Andrew Szegedy-Maszak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 263–301. Also see his "A Study of Ambiguity: Artisans in the Platonic City," in *The Black Hunter*, pp. 224–48.

<sup>21</sup> Ober, *Political Dissent*, p. 5. Other historical studies of Plato include Michael Morgan, *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); and Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). Morgan finds important continuities between the practices of the Athenian democratic polis and the structure of Plato's thought.

explaining what was wrong with rule of the people motivates Plato's work. In so doing, he offers an account of Plato's serious critique of democracy, but he also observes that Plato at times utilizes the language and imagery of Athenian democratic practices to articulate these views.<sup>22</sup>

The fourth strand of recent work with which this study stands in conversation are the several efforts to consider the complexities of the relationship between Socrates and Athenian democracy. This work includes assessments of the evidence for the attitudes of the historical Socrates as well as consideration of links between Plato's depiction of Socrates and democratic ideals and practices of his time.<sup>23</sup> In this book I focus squarely

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Yunis places Plato's critique of democracy in the context of contemporaneous writers' concerns with rhetoric and leadership.

<sup>22</sup> Ober occasionally acknowledges the constructive impact of Athenian political culture on Plato's thought (*Political Dissent*, pp. 49, 158, 247, 281, 370–72), despite characterizing Plato as engaging in an “epic rejection of Athenian political culture” and, he implies, as betraying Socrates, who he takes to have been an “immanent social critic” (p. 213). For example, Ober details how Plato's “imaginative attempt to solve his ‘Socrates and Athens’ problem . . . [makes use of] exactly the performative, speech-act method characteristic of the democracy: vigorous, open debate conducted according to accepted protocols among persons who regarded one another as equals; followed by a resolution for action by the assembled company” (p. 247). But he seems content for such observations to suggest little more than Plato's recognition of the fact that “to inhabit the public domain of the democratic polis is to be affected by and borrow from the language, procedures, and assumptions of the demos” (p. 214). I find these aspects of Plato's work far more significant. They are part of what I argue is a pattern of interest in the possibilities raised by democratic hegemony and the development of certain practices in democratic Athens. The relation of my project to Ober's assessment of Plato in *Political Dissent* may be clarified further. He refers to his work as an effort to track how theorists, including Plato, describe “alternative visions of consensual and noncoercive—yet nondemocratic—political societies” (p. 5). I focus on the continuity between democratic innovations at Athens and the “consensual and noncoercive” features of the tradition Ober sees Plato embracing. I plot the lingering presence of Athenian democratic traditions in Plato's “alternative vision.” I fully agree with Ober that Plato should not be described as a democrat but rather as a dissident voice in democratic Athens chiefly because he so thoroughly rejects “rule of the people” as the Athenians themselves understood that ideal. But Ober's account of the dynamics of Plato's critical attachment to Athens is incomplete. The features of Athenian democratic practice that haunt Plato's imagination are also part of the story of the birth of a tradition of intellectual dissent in Greek antiquity.

<sup>23</sup> J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory, and Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Richard Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Gerald Mara, *Socrates' Discursive Democracy* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1997); Gregory Vlastos, “The Historical Socrates and Athenian Democracy,” *Political Theory* 11, no. 4 (1983): 495–516; Ellen M. Wood and Neal Wood, “Socrates and Democracy: A Reply to Gregory Vlastos,” *Political Theory* vol. 14, no. 1 (1986): 55–82; W. R. Connor, “The Other 399: Religion and the Trial of Socrates,” *Georgica: Greek Studies in Honor of George Cawkwell, Bulletin, Institute for Classical Studies* (London), suppl. 58 (1991): 49–56; T. H. Irwin, “Socrates and Athenian Democracy,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18, no. 2 (1989): 184–205; I. F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988); G. Vlastos, “Why Was

on Plato. I consider what we know of Plato's behavior and personal attitudes, and I examine how the understanding of philosophic labor developed in the dialogues is indebted to Athenian democratic traditions.

The fifth and final strand of recent scholarship on Plato I engage is the work by Arlene Saxonhouse and J. Peter Euben reassessing Plato's treatment of democracy. They attend, as I do, to Plato's interest in the culture of democracy. Saxonhouse explores Plato's interest in the gentleness and variety of democracy, stressing their importance to philosophical investigation. Euben's two books map the affinities between Athenian practices of self-scrutiny (chiefly tragic theater and the pervasive mechanisms of accountability) and key aspects of Plato's portrayal of Socratic philosophy (chiefly rigorous questioning and the explicit demand for an account of one's moral choices and conduct of life).<sup>24</sup> Like these studies, this book explores how far Plato's elaborations of the practice of philosophy not only challenge but also "extend" Athenian democratic traditions.<sup>25</sup> I advance this project by tracking Plato's efforts to combine the practice of philosophy with the "normative imagery" of Athenian democracy.<sup>26</sup>

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Socrates Condemned?" in *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 293–97; and Charles Taylor, "Philosophical Gadfly," *Times Literary Supplement* (June 7, 1991); Alexander Nehamas, "Voices of Silence: On Gregory Vlastos' Socrates," in Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 83–107; Roberts, *Athens on Trial*, pp. 71–76; Wallach, "Plato's Socratic Problem, and Ours," *History of Political Thought* 18, no. 3 (1997): 377–98; Ober, *Political Dissent*, pp. 156–213; M. H. Hansen, "The Trial of Socrates from the Athenian Point of View," in *Démocratie et Culture*, ed. M. Sakellariou (Athens: Academy of Athens, 1996), pp. 137–70. George Kateb, "Socratic Integrity," in *NOMOS XL: Integrity and Conscience*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Robert Adams (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 77–112.

<sup>24</sup> J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, and *Corrupting Youth*; Arlene Saxonhouse, "Plato and the Problematical Gentleness of Democracy," in her *Athenian Democracy and "Democracy, Equality, and Eide": A Radical View from Book 8 of Plato's Republic*, *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 2 (June 1998): 273–84. Other recent efforts to reconsider Plato's treatment of democracy are David Cohen, "Law, Autonomy and Political Community in Plato's *Laws*," *Classical Philology* 88, no. 4 (1993): 301–17; and Christopher Rowe, "Democracy and Socratic-Platonic Philosophy," in *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens*, ed. Deborah Boedeker and Kurt A. Raflaub (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 241–53. See also the exchange between Arlene Saxonhouse and Jennifer Roberts on the question of Plato's hostility toward democracy: Arlene Saxonhouse, "Athenian Democracy and Modern Mythmakers: A Lesson from Plato about Democracy, Equality and Gender," *Thamyris* (Amsterdam: Najade) 1, no. 2 (1994): 105–22; Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, "Myths of Democracy and Gender in Plato's *Republic*: A Reply to Arlene Saxonhouse," *Thamyris* 2, no. 2. (1995): 259–72; Arlene Saxonhouse, "Response to Jennifer Tolbert Roberts," *Thamyris* 2, no. 2 (1995): 273–76.

<sup>25</sup> Euben, *Corrupting Youth*, p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Goldhill, "The Seductions of the Gaze: Socrates and His Girlfriends," in *Kosmos: Essays in Order, Conflict, and Community in Classical Athens*, ed. Paul Cartledge, Paul Mil-

In my view, Plato decidedly does not assume the posture of an enemy of democratic Athens and does not sustain a thoroughgoing betrayal of the Socratic ideal of committed criticism.<sup>27</sup> An enemy is presumed to have ill will toward his opponent, to be motivated by hatred, to desire vanquishing his foe, and to be enraged by the behavior of his target. The critique of democracy in Plato's dialogues is, of course, radical. But his works deliver just that, a critique. He denounces majority rule, Assembly debate, equality, and the celebration of "living as you like," for example, as disturbing, deeply flawed practices that systematically misdirect citizens to make error upon error regarding what they should consider admirable as well as how they can lead a good life. He indeed resists what Josiah Ober has termed the "democratic hegemony" of his time by bringing into question "the basic assumptions on which democratic knowledge rested; he questioned the validity of mass wisdom as a basis for judgment, the efficacy of public rhetoric as a prelude to decision making."<sup>28</sup> But, I wish to stress, he remains always an Athenian, concerned to identify and publicize what in the local democratic tradition might hold some promise. Plato does not present philosophic practice as a purely other-worldly activity or as a retreat from and opposition to the political world but as a brave and daring effort to call one's community to its own best possible self without romanticizing what a rigorous pursuit of that best self would entail.

Before turning to the analysis of sources in the individual chapters, I must note with dismay the stubborn endurance of the view of Plato as a proto-totalitarian thinker.<sup>29</sup> Readings that link Plato to a totalitarian political agenda not only betray the historical insensitivity of the commentator but also entirely misrepresent the spirit of Plato's works. They also erect impediments to the serious investigation of his assessment of the moral significance of democratic forms of power. Surely we need not adopt such imprecise and highly charged language as well as such anachronistic categories of analysis to give full due to the considerable nondemocratic elements of Plato's thought. Since others have, to my mind, thoroughly dis-

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lett, and Sitta von Reden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 108. On Athenian normative imagery, also see Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> On the language of "immanent" and "connected" social criticism, see Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), and *The Company of Critics* (New York: Basic, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> Ober, *The Athenian Revolution*, p. 156.

<sup>29</sup> I am referring of course to a view put forward most forcefully by Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1, *The Spell of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971 [1945]). For evidence of its endurance, see C.C.W. Taylor, "Plato's Totalitarianism," in *Plato's Republic: Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Kraut (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 1997), pp. 31–48; and D. Dombrowski, "Plato's Noble Lie," *History of Political Thought* 18, no. 4 (1997): 565–78.

credited this approach, I do not take it on explicitly in these pages.<sup>30</sup> Here I wish only to call attention to Quentin Skinner's observation that this reading of Plato provides a fine example of a very serious methodological error he terms "the mythology of prolepsis." He writes: "One such prolepsis which has constantly been exposed, and yet has constantly recurred, has been the attempt to consider Plato's political views in the *Republic* as those of a 'totalitarian party politician.'" <sup>31</sup> My argument in this book applies not merely to the loose way in which such terminology is thrown around. I seek to render problematic the standard view that Plato's texts are unequivocally hostile to democracy. That assumption implicitly informs most work on Plato's political thought and makes such unthinking use of inappropriate terminology possible.

Perhaps paradoxically, I both agree and disagree with the tradition of reading Plato as an antipolitical thinker.<sup>32</sup> I agree that the vision of justice in the *Republic* can be fairly described as one in which a legitimate power "still[s] the unruly conflicts and contests of democratic politics."<sup>33</sup> It is a place of fantastic unity. But I observe that this aspect of Plato's vision actually engages local, democratic structures of political discourse at the

<sup>30</sup> Ronald B. Levinson compellingly argued in his *In Defense of Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953) that it is simply not accurate to say that the proposals developed in the *Republic* resemble the institutional structure of modern totalitarianism and that it is simply wrong to suggest that Plato would have approved of fascism. Leo Strauss also cautioned that "Plato, or at any rate Socrates, was not a liberal democrat, or a communist in the sense of Marx or a Fascist" ("Plato," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 3d ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], p. 35). For useful accounts of the controversy that Popper's work sparked, see Renford Bambrough, ed., *Plato, Popper and Politics: Some Contributions to a Modern Controversy* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967); and Thomas Thorson, ed., *Plato: Totalitarian or Democrat?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963). For discussion of the enduring import of these views, see Wallach, "Plato's Socratic Problem." Note that Popper's argument pivots on a reading of Plato's epistemology and its political import. For a valuable recent study of Plato's epistemological critique of democracy that comes to very different conclusions, see Arlene Saxonhouse, "Democracy, Equality and *Eidē*."

<sup>31</sup> Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. J. Tully (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 29–67, at p. 44. A recent example of such an error appears in an otherwise excellent—and indeed, otherwise historically sensitive—essay by M. F. Burnyeat. He writes: "Plato was no democrat, and had no qualms about proposing Soviet-style control from above, by those who know best" ("Art and Mimesis in Plato's *Republic*," *London Review of Books*, 21 May 1998, p. 3). For another account of the pull of this "radically mistaken" interpretation of the *Republic*, see Lefort, *Democracy*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Change in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).

<sup>33</sup> I borrow this phrasing from Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 14.

level of the imaginary. Embracing the idea of the unified whole as well as some other ideals tracked in the chapters to follow, Plato's vision has some kinship with the city's own patriotic self-image. For example, while clearly taking pleasure in the rough-and-tumble of politics in their material lives, the Athenians did not embrace the messiness of democratic politics in their civic self-image. At the level of the imaginary, they spurned discord and ambition, and embraced instead harmony, responsibility, reciprocity, and respect for "good" arguments. At the level of the imaginary, for instance, the democracy perpetrated the fiction that the view of a majority (even of only one) constitutes the considered view of the whole. This is what the formulaic expression of Assembly decisions suggests ("It seems best to the demos that . . .").<sup>34</sup> To offer another example, when Athens and Athenians appear in tragedy, they are depicted as thoroughly unified.<sup>35</sup> The portrayals of the instability, noise, moral dilemmas, personal conflicts, and costs of politics these texts offer are projected onto other *poleis* and the behavior of members other cities—most strikingly Thebes and Thebans.<sup>36</sup> The Athens of tragedy and the ideal city in the *Republic* appear in this way similar.

I do not doubt that Plato's dialogues make extensive, even systematic, use of the imagery and terminology of elite Athenian discourse. That is, it is indeed likely that Plato also draws upon elements of local aristocratic discourse, a discourse hostile to democracy in the specific sense of being the language of unreconciled foes eager for specific constitutional changes. For example, the language of metals Plato uses to articulate appropriate hierarchies or divisions in the *Republic* is not dreamt up but has a long history in elite discourse.<sup>37</sup> It is also likely that the language of *patrios politeia* to which Plato sometimes alludes was a staple of elite political argument, as was the vocabulary of "better" and "worse" sorts of men. In my view, possible affinities between Plato's thought and the counterhe-

<sup>34</sup> Ober terms this element of Athenian civic ideology "the myth of Demos" (*Political Dissent*, pp. 39–40, 69). He notes that some writers at times treat the state as a single organism with one mind (*mia gnōmē*; *Mass and Elite*, p. 297). For discussion of the relationship between the inscribed record of Assembly decisions and the arguments and activities of the Assembly, see Robin Osborne, "Inscribing Performance," in *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*, ed. Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 341–58.

<sup>35</sup> For example, the portrait of the chorus and relationship between Athenian individuals and Theseus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. The exception is the conflict settled by the intervention of Athena in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, a play about reconciliation and unity.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Froma Zeitlin, "Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*, ed. John J. Winkler and Froma Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 130–67.

<sup>37</sup> Leslie Kurke, "Herodotus and the Language of Metals," *Helios* 22, no. 1 (1995): 35–64.

gemonic discourse of Athenian elites do not provide evidence of Plato's unmitigated contempt for democracy, his aristocratic bias, his position as a thoroughly conservative foe of Athenian democracy, or, worse, his stance as a partisan of oligarchy any more than his subtle use of the language and imagery of elements of democratic ideology suggests he was a secret partisan of democracy.<sup>38</sup> If Plato works with the imagery and language of both partisans of democracy and elite opponents of democracy, and no doubt he does, interpreters should inquire as to the range of substantive meanings and implications set in motion by such tactics and not assume he is betraying a political bias.

I begin with an examination of aspects of the Athenian civic self-image. My purpose is not to offer a full description of Athenian democratic ideology and practice, but rather to probe those features of that ideology that figure importantly in Plato's thinking in ways that are unexpected and have not been explored extensively in the existing literature. Accordingly, the concepts of freedom and equality do not organize my account, though they are central to the Athenian democratic imaginary and Plato has much to say about them. Much good work already exists on these features of Athenian thought. The structure of this book as a whole highlights that the Athenians also crafted and venerated other, less familiar ideals that Plato's thought engages in highly significant ways.

Taken together, the chapters in Part One show that orthodox Athenian democratic thought strongly identified the achievement of democracy with the accomplishment of social unity, an intellectually capable citizenry, the responsible exercise of power, relations of reciprocity among citizens and between city and individual,<sup>39</sup> and the defeat of tyranny. Chapters One through Four explore various accounts of how these ideals were enacted or represented. Chapter One examines the patriotic story of the historical founding of Athenian democracy that the Athenians told and retold on numerous occasions for generations, that is, the tale of Harmodius and Aristogeiton. Chapter Two examines the Athenian celebration of frank

<sup>38</sup> On the possible affinities between Plato's thought and the counterhegemonic discourse of Athenian elites, especially intellectuals, see Ober, *Political Dissent*.

<sup>39</sup> The centrality of the idea of reciprocity in the Greek moral and political outlook has recently received important attention. See, for example, Paul Millett, *Lending and Borrowing in Ancient Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. pp. 24–52, 109–26, and 148–59; Richard Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City State* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Danielle Allen, *The World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Malcolm Schofield, "Political Friendship and the Ideology of Reciprocity," in Cartledge et al., eds., *Kosmos*, pp. 37–51; Goldhill, "Seductions of the Gaze," pp. 115–24; Paul Millett, "Encounters in the Agora," in Cartledge et al., eds., *Kosmos*, pp. 203–28; and C. Gill, N. Postlethwaite, and R. Seaford, eds., *Reciprocity in Ancient Greece* (Oxford, forthcoming).

speaking (*parrhēsia*) as a specifically democratic ideal as well as a practice of Assembly debate. Chapter Three probes the implications of Pericles' deployment of an erotic metaphor to articulate the demands of democratic citizenship in his funeral oration as presented in Thucydides' *History*. Chapter Four examines the Athenian practice of theater-going as a stage for the performance of democratic citizenship.

Part Two demonstrates that reading Plato in this context raises new questions about the relationship of his thought to the practice of democracy at Athens. In particular, Chapter Five observes a parallel between the imagined excellence of Harmodius and Aristogeiton and Plato's view of the philosopher. The bulk of the chapter questions the canonical view of Plato as a wholesale antidemocrat by showing that each of six factors usually thought to indicate that Plato's dialogues sustain an unrelenting attack on democracy actually are wrong as characterizations of his thought in the first place, or indicate no such thing, or are far less univocal in meaning than is appreciated. The factors I review include Plato's elite personal background, his dismay over the fate of Socrates, his disdain for the common man and consequent opposition to majority rule, his recommendation in the *Republic* of a positive political doctrine marked by autocratic institutions, his actual founding of an elite institution at Athens (the Academy), and the tenor of his personal involvement in Syracusan politics. In Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, I further show that Plato's understanding of the performance of philosophy draws on aspects of the Athenian civic self-image explored in Part One. These three chapters combine to demonstrate that Plato's depiction of philosophic activity is deeply indebted to three practices of civic discourse developed by the Athenian democratic polis: the pervasive ethic of frank speaking (*parrhēsia*), the performance of the public funeral oration (*epitaphios logos*), and the conduct of theorizing (being an active audience member on the occasion of the dramatic competitions). In Chapter Six I show that Plato represents philosophic activity as a form of frank speaking in the *Laches*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Laws*. In Chapter Seven I demonstrate that in the *Menexenus*, Plato takes on the Athenian tendency to venerate the memory of Pericles, and in so doing explores the links between philosophic practice and a uniquely Athenian democratic form of civic speech at which Pericles is reputed to have excelled—public funeral oratory. In Chapter Eight I show that in both the *Republic* and the *Laws*, Plato models his depiction of philosophic practice on the experience of the intellectual labors of the ordinary theater-going public on the occasion of the City Dionysia, a grand civic festival occasion.

At the most general level, this book is about the relationship between thought and social reality, in particular, between Plato's highly abstract thought and some of the democratic practices of his time. As Vidal-Naquet

has stressed, “Even when the disjunction between the textual and the social is at its greatest, as for instance between the philosophical text produced by Plato and what Nicole Loraux calls ‘the Athenian history of Athens,’ the relation still exists.”<sup>40</sup> This book explores some of the complexities of that relation. It is an essay on the presence of specifically Athenian democratic cultural traditions in the structure of Plato’s thought. It is an exploration of how intimately connected are two things usually viewed as thoroughly opposed—Plato’s thought and Athenian democratic ideals and practices.

<sup>40</sup> *The Black Hunter*, p. xviii.