
Before reading Cynthia Farrar's The Origins of Democratic Thinking, I tended to accept the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century view that modern democracy, though sharing the word 'democracy' with ancient Greece, shared little else. 'Democracy' for the moderns has meant representative democracy, and has usually been connected with theories of natural rights or with utilitarianism. Even where there is an emphasis on participation and the ancient polis may be invoked as a sort of model, the inegalitarian states of ancient Greece, always prone to civil strife, have proved to be imperfect models for the more universal and pacific aspirations of modern thought. Modern democrats might admire the civil virtue of republican Rome, but when it came to the Greek polis, they could line up with Plato and Aristotle who were, as we know, critics of ancient democracy. It was not until the work of George Grote in the nineteenth century and Karl Popper in the twentieth, two important figures missing from Farrar's bibliography, that both Athenian democracy and the thought of the sophists, like Protagoras, have been reassessed and shown to be relevant to modern democracy.

Cynthia Farrar wants to take this process even further than her predecessors. Yet her own study is somewhat problematic. Consider the full title of the book: The Origins of Democratic Thinking: The Invention of Politics in Classical Athens. It would appear that the 'invention' of politics should logically precede the origin of 'democratic thinking', in the sense that one needs to have a polis and politics in order to have a democratic politics. But Farrar's ordering of the title and subtitle is clearly intentional. She suggests that thinking about democracy is directly connected to the invention
of politics, and in making this suggestion, she presents the misleading impression that certain thinkers who thought about politics in a certain way were, in fact, thinking about democracy. What makes this problematic is the lack of clarity concerning what she means by 'democratic thinking' and the 'invention of politics'. She does not seem to mean what we might call a democratic ideology, that is to say, democratic thinking that is evinced by various writers who justify democracy as opposed, say, to oligarchy or monarchy. Nor does she want to confine her conception of 'thinking' to philosophy, for the enemies of 'democratic thinking' happen to be the philosophers - Plato and Aristotle. Farrar's use of the curious phrase, 'democratic thinking' has its origin in her attempt to dismiss Plato and Aristotle as 'those undemocratic and politically alienated thinkers' (p. 1). Plato and Aristotle have cast 'shadows' from behind which democratic thinking must be recovered. They cast shadows not only because they do not advance a democratic ideology but also because they defend the good polis and the good life over the democratic polis and the life of politics. For this reason, and in contrast to earlier writers like Grote and Popper, not even Socrates (when split off from Plato), ranks as a 'democratic' thinker, for Socrates puts reason and truth above democratic politics. But if we know what 'democratic thinking' is not, we are not presented with a very clear picture of what it is.

The core of the book is a study of the ideas of Protagoras, Democritus, and Thucydides, and what makes these thinkers 'democratic thinkers' is the way they attempt to reconcile freedom with order. This, in itself, would not make them compelling objects of study. And Farrar does not claim that they self-consciously developed together a democratic doctrine. But she does argue that their ideas not only reflect and are embodied in the concrete practices of ancient democracy but also and more importantly that they speak directly to the so-called failures of modern theories of liberal democracy. What are these failures? 'A political theory,' she writes, 'based on an abstract understanding of rationality and motivation, a negative conception of freedom,