

**REVIEW ARTICLE –  
PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY, AND DEMOCRACY**

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**John R. Wallach**, *The Platonic Political Art: A Study of Critical Reason and Democracy* (University Park Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), xi + 468 pp., \$65.00, ISBN 0 271 02075 X (cloth); \$25.00, ISBN 0 271 02076 8 (pbk.).

Plato was born into a new, exciting, and very confusing world. The polis of Athens, in the late sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries BC, was remarkable for accomplishment in many spheres of activity. From the perspective of traditional Greeks, the radically enhanced capacity of the Athenian people to get things done was awe-inspiring and frightening. Lacking any better explanation, Athens' rivals resorted to claims based on 'nature', explaining the restless drive to do and have more as an innate Athenian quality. Or so we are led to believe by the speech of the Corinthian ambassadors in the first book of Thucydides' history (1.70–71), who characterize Athens and its accomplishments for their Spartan allies. Thucydides' readers will learn, as they work through his complex account of the twenty-seven year war, that the Corinthians offered a fair description of Athenian activity but that 'innate nature' is a weak explanation for Athenian performance. Fifth-century writers, including Herodotus (*Histories* 5.78) and Pseudo-Xenophon ('The Old Oligarch', *Politeia of the Athenians* passim), had already pointed to the inadequacy of such facile explanations, by linking the Athenians' success directly to their political culture.

Democracy, inaugurated in the last decade of the sixth century and refined in the course of the next two centuries, was somehow related to the remarkable Athenian rise to cultural and military preeminence. But how, precisely? And was it a good thing? The first problem for ancient political theorists came in identifying the relationship between democracy and success: Why should the extension of political rights to ordinary men and their inclusion in decision-making and judicial processes have helped make Athens into a great and powerful state? The second problem was even more pressing: What were the implications of democratic success for ethics and morality? If democracy promoted greatness, why did it not promote a corresponding rise in goodness or true happiness?

For anyone coming of age in the mid- or late fifth-century BC (as did Socrates and Plato respectively), the contrast between democratic Athens and the more traditional poleis who were Athens' rivals was striking. The traditional polis was defined by the carefully delimited maximin calculations of a society balanced between aristocrats, focused on the glories of a long-ago heroic past,

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and agricultural smallholders (the so-called ‘hoplite class’), confronted by the exigencies of thin soil, uncertain rainfall, endemic inter-state warfare, and family demography.<sup>2</sup> In the traditional polis (Sparta provides the ideal type for Thucydides’ Corinthians), fundamental change of any sort meant degeneration: Hesiod’s description in the *Works and Days* of the ‘races of man’, represented as a sequence of metals (from the long-lost age of gold, through subsequent eras of silver and bronze, to the recent and pain-filled age of iron), exemplifies conservative traditional-polis ideology. The Athenians, by contrast, defined themselves by the political, social, and cultural changes they themselves had fostered. Tremendous advances were made in architecture, music, visual arts, military strategy, anthropology, rhetoric, drama, astronomy, mathematics, historiography, medicine, and so on. The net result, sometimes referred to as ‘the Greek Enlightenment’ or even ‘the Greek Miracle’, was to transform the experience of polis life and to challenge thinkers like Socrates and Plato to make sense of it all.

The connection between Athens’ success and democracy lay in processes of learning, in the communication of knowledge fostered by the open culture of the democratic polis. Each of the many individual advances that collectively constituted classical Athenian success came about because individual Athenians were capable of effectively learning from others. The process can be traced, for example, in the development of vase-painting: beginning in the mid-sixth century, and continuing through the fifth century, Athens dominated the Mediterranean market for artfully decorated ceramic vases (the Etruscans of central Italy were especially avid customers). The development of artistic technique, from the early and experimental black-figure style through mature red-figure points to steady and (in the aggregate) remarkable advances in representational art. Among the great accomplishments of twentieth-century classical scholarship was sorting out the ‘workshops’ in which Athenian black- and red-figured vases were produced by expert painters working closely with equally expert potters.<sup>3</sup> The upshot is that it is now possible for art historians to trace the development of the craft, decade by decade, from workshop to workshop, mapping over time the complex network of didactic relationships between individual potters and painters that resulted in the extraordinary efflorescence of one particular craft. In Plato’s *Apology* (22c–e), Socrates makes a point of asserting that Athenian craftsmen did indeed know ‘many and fine things’ — although they made the mistake (in Socrates’ view) of believing that their craft knowledge offered them more general insight into the ‘greatest matters’, i.e. politics, ethics, and morality. It seems reasonable to

<sup>2</sup> Aristocrats: L. Kurke, *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece* (Princeton, 1999). Smallholder demographics: T.W. Gallant, *Risk and Survival in Ancient Greece: Reconstructing the Rural Domestic Economy* (Stanford, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> The definitive work on the topic is J.D. Beazley, *Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters* (Oxford, 1956) and *Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1963).