Larry Patriquin


Larry Patriquin’s new book argues for a close connection between the socio-economic structure of ancient Athens and its democracy. More broadly he wants to use the Athenian example to make the case for a fundamental link between economic fairness and democracy, suggesting that without the former we cannot have the latter. It is thus in many ways a timely call to make addressing economic inequality more central to democratic politics.

Given that Athens was among the first cities, if not the first, we know of to give the poor a leading share in governing, students of Athenian democracy have found it remarkable that the enfranchised poor did not take steps to address economic inequality. The Athenian demos could have tried to redistribute the land or to cancel all debts. Something like that supposedly did happen in Attica in the early 6th century under Solon.1 And debt cancelation and land redistribution were a recurring manifesto of ancient revolutionaries. They echo with remarkable frequency in the ancient record, from the archaic to the Roman period.2 Around 370 the city of Argos witnessed a particularly bloody episode where 1,200 members of the wealthier class were summarily slaughtered (Diodorus Siculus 15. 57-58). Isocrates’ contemporary reference to the event shows that it resonated with Athenian fears (To Philip, 5. 52). Perhaps that is why incoming archons and jurors took an oath to ensure that property remained in the hands of its owners (Ath. Pol. 56. 2; Dem. 24. 149). Clearly then, radical redistribution was seen as being within the realm of possibility in classical Athens. Why did the Athenian demos not use its power to force a fairer distribution of wealth?

The usual answer, implicitly or in part, is that Athenian citizens had different priorities than those of contemporary democracies’ citizens. Whereas contemporary citizens might be focused on ‘pocketbook’ issues that tend to align with their narrowly economic interests, Athenian citizens placed a higher premium on what Aristotle called a share in honour, their direct participation in government and administration. As long as they could attend the

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1 These reforms are much more obscure than historians’ accounts of them let on. Even ancient Athenians did not understand what they were really about. That is how the historian Androtion could argue that they were not a cancelation of debts at all, just an adjustment of the interest rate or devaluation of the currency (Plut. Sol. 15. 2).

Assembly and sit on jury panels they were content to let their elite enjoy a substantial degree of economic leeway in their private lives. This assumption (first echoed in Aristotle: Pol. 6. 4) is a common one in the scholarship, and constitutes a fundamental premise of Josh Ober’s now-classic *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, as well as in more recent work such as Peter Liddel’s *Civic Obligation and Individual Liberty in Ancient Athens*. Another part of the usual answer is that the democracy found ways of encouraging the wealthy to contribute to the common good, primarily by channeling their competitive urge to outdo one another in ostentatious expenditure for the good of the city. These expenditures took the form primarily of ‘liturgies’, the major ones being the funding of a warship for a year or of a chorus for one of the dramatic festivals. Interestingly, liturgies did not involve welfare-like expenditures. The rich did not support the poor, directly at least. The closest thing to welfare was the state payment for service in juries and assemblies, a small and unreliable source of income, and, despite Patriquin’s claims, certainly not paid for by heavy taxes on the rich. Payment hinged on attendance and even then there was no guarantee. More reliable was service in the fleet. That was indeed based on a tax on the rich, the trierarchy. But that was also seasonal and not limited to citizens.

Patriquin offers a different explanation for the demos’ indifference to issue of economic justice: the Assembly never tried to redistribute wealth because the distribution of wealth already

rested on a foundation of general economic equality between households. Indeed, how could it have been otherwise? The political powers held by the Athenians could only have been disseminated so broadly if those powers were grafted on to a social structure that had a relatively small gap between the rich and poor, where it would be an exaggeration to use the term ‘wealthy’ to describe almost all those near the peak of the structure. (p. 38)

‘How could it have been otherwise?’ That rhetorical question sums up Patriquin’s case. He assumes that Athenian wealth distribution ‘must have been more equal than any modern society’ (p. 41). Economic historians might like to see the data on Athenian taxes and income, but the evidence that we have is both anecdotal and suspiciously round. For instance, how seriously are we to take the information that precisely 1,200 citizens had enough wealth to be liable for the trierarchy (Dem. 14. 16), and that the total value of their land was 6,000 talents (19), especially when we are also told that many tried to avoid getting on that list (25)?