Does ancient democracy have any lessons for the modern world?

(An essay in the form of a dialogue)

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**D** Greetings, Socrates!

Please help me with my essay by telling me, does Athenian democracy have any lessons for my world, 2,400 years in the future?

**S** You have come from the future?

I wish I had a future. I have to drink hemlock in the morning.

Why are you *here*?

**D** Not only was Athens the city where democracy was invented, it was the *only* place where democracy was the system of government. Rome may have claimed nominal equality for its citizens, but power was always in the hands of a small elite[[1]](#footnote-2): “ancient” democracy is synonymous with “Athenian” democracy.

**S** What do you mean by “essay”?

**D** Essaï: Montesquieu’s idea. A written monologue in which he tried (or ‘essayed’) to think through a subject.

**S** Dialogue is better: ask Plato, it is his rhetorical idea[[2]](#footnote-3). It works like this: I ask probing questions and you think through the answers. *Essayez!* It will give your essay the authentic Athenian style.

**D** Writing an essay as a dialogue? It should be fun; and there are other precedents: Xenophon[[3]](#footnote-4) and Cicero[[4]](#footnote-5), no less.

Here goes!

Lesson number one, I suppose, must be that democracy is best. As Herodotus put it:

“The rule (*kratia*) of the people (*demos*) has, in the first place, the fairest name of all – equality of rights (*isonomie*); in the second place, the people do none of the wicked things that monarchs do.” He goes on to explain how it works: “Officials hold office by lot, and their conduct is subject to examination, and all measures are referred to the popular assembly…” [[5]](#footnote-6)

Actually, our (modern) democracy does not work quite like that – we don’t allocate jobs by lottery, for example – but the underlying idea is not dissimilar.

I myself would define democracy like this: a political structure to live by, in which the majority will of the people is paramount, individuals enjoy equality before the law and freedom of speech, and there is universal suffrage. But like Herodotus said, it is the best of all possible worlds.

**S**  You are wrong, on nearly all counts! We democratic Athenians don’t allow women the vote, we keep slaves (even our civil servants are slaves![[6]](#footnote-7)), and as for ‘freedom of speech’, a pious chap like me can be sentenced to death for so-called ‘blasphemy’ and ‘leading our young men astray’ – which is a way of saying, I try to make them think for themselves.

 Our values are different, our scale is small, and our constitutional arrangements are peculiar to us. How can you look for lessons here, to apply in your, surely very different, world?

**D** I admit that we seldom decide anything directly the way you do.

I also know about your peculiar constitution: for example, Cleisthenes’ reforms creating ten demes, each straddling city, coast and hinterland[[7]](#footnote-8). But that is just “housekeeping”: the philosophy behind democracy is surely more important that those administrative details.

**S** We philosophers don’t like democracy. The craftsmen and shopkeepers attend the Assembly, and such people are generally a bad lot.

**D** Those sentiments were echoed when democracy was re-invented. I remember William Wordsworth writing from revolutionary Paris, “I am of that odious class of men called ‘democrats’”[[8]](#footnote-9) – not odious, you understand, but regarded by others as such.

Plato wrote a lot about what he thought was the ideal system: government on behalf of the people by an altruistic class of professionals. He thought that only those who had been highly educated should qualify as rulers, and he was far from keen on devolving power to the masses: “when the subject of discussion is the government of the city, it is a free-for-all [in the Assembly]: nobody worries what credentials the speaker may have to qualify them to give advice on that subject.”[[9]](#footnote-10)

That is a view that surfaced in our newspapers after the Brexit vote; and the highly educated politicians, bankers, journalists, and so on in the capital did seem to prefer to “remain” in the EU. It was a shock to them to find the “shoemakers and shopkeepers” disagreed and outvoted them.

Plato wasn’t the only one: the Athenian writer they call the “Old Oligarch” was of the same mind (hence his nick-name): “One might argue …it would be more sensible to leave government to the more intelligent and better brought-up….”[[10]](#footnote-11)

**S** Was it merely the idealistic but unrealistic philosophers who were sceptical about the common people’s ability to rule themselves?

**D** No, the historian, Thucydides, reported on the Assembly’s debate when it decided to invade Sicily: those voting were “for the most part ignorant”, not knowing even how big Sicily is[[11]](#footnote-12).

**S** Did our writers find the *demos* to be merely ignorant?

**D** Susceptible to flattery, too, certainly: “..when the ambassadors from the allied cities were trying to deceive you, they began by calling you “violet crowned”, and at once you sat on the tips of your tiny buttocks. And if someone called Athens “gleaming”, he got all he wanted, by fastening on you an honour fit for sardines.”[[12]](#footnote-13)

**S** Would you say, ‘easily deceived’, too?

**D** That was exactly how Cleon described the Assembly to itself: “You are easily deceived by any new argument and unwilling to comply with a proven one, slaves of every topical paradox, despisers of tradition, … eager to anticipate what is said but slow to foresee its consequences; … more like the audience of a sophist than the government of a city.”[[13]](#footnote-14)

**S** And did we find our political masters to be ‘spineless’ too?

**D** Your probing makes me uncomfortable, but I admit that too: “Because of the fervent enthusiasm of the majority, anyone who did not care for the proposal was afraid that if he raised his hand in opposition, he would be judged unpatriotic, and so he kept quiet.”[[14]](#footnote-15)

**S** Have you yet abandoned your initial enthusiasm for Athenian democracy? Do you now believe that when the people gathered on Pnyx hill for the Assembly they were ignorant, susceptible to “crowd psychology”, and easily swayed by flattery? And is your first lesson for “modern times” now quite different, that democracy is an unwise experiment?

**D** Perhaps the best than can be said, with my advantage of hindsight, is this: “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried.”[[15]](#footnote-16)

But in your own day, democracy had its supporters, and it did prove durable. Athenagoras put it this way: “though the rich are best at looking after money, and the intelligent are the best at deliberation, it is the many who are best at listening and deciding.”[[16]](#footnote-17)

“It seems to me they (the common people) are preserving the democracy well” was the verdict expressed in what we call Pseudo-Xenophon’s “Constitution of Athens.”[[17]](#footnote-18)

**S** Do you see a paradox there? Our people have little education, yet they have proved able to sustain a democracy.

**D** Protagoras and other ‘sophists’ claimed that all men, regardless of their education, possess the art of political judgement. They called it ‘*politike techne*’[[18]](#footnote-19).

Professor Finley did not ‘buy’ that idea. He considered that active involvement in politics throughout the Athenians’ youth was what guaranteed the success of your democracy. You had a word for that concept: ‘*paideia*’: learning civic responsibility through participation[[19]](#footnote-20).

Allocation of public offices by lot might not be tenable in my complicated modern world, but in ancient Athens it did mean that every citizen could expect to be involved. So did mass participation in the “*dikasteria*” or “people’s juries”[[20]](#footnote-21). Finley was worried by the political apathy – and frank ignorance - of our modern electorates. One lesson he would draw from ancient democracy is this: people should be brought up to be involved. He quotes this from Pericles’ funeral oration for the glorious dead of the Peloponnesian War: “We consider anyone who does not share in the life of a citizen not as minding his own business, but as useless”[[21]](#footnote-22).

Finley admired John Stuart Mill’s concept of political apprenticeship in Athens: “the Athenian citizen is called upon to weigh interests not his own, … to apply principles and maxims … for … the common good”. In this politicised environment “he usually finds … minds more familiarized than his own with these ideas … and [finds] stimulation of his feelings for the general interest.”[[22]](#footnote-23)

**S** That is your first lesson ‘for modern times’, is it? You think we ‘ancient democrats’ were better at bringing up our youth to be involved in politics than you are?

 You are clearly very committed to the idea of government of the people, by the people, for the people. Very altruistic. ‘*Real Politik*’ is not like that, though, is it? Let me ask you this: who pays for Athenian democracy?

 Not sure? I’ll tell you the answer, with a quote from “The Constitution of Athens”:

 “More than twenty thousand men were supported from the tribute [levied on Athens’ empire], the taxes and the allies. There were 6,000 jurors, 1,600 archers, 1,200 cavalry, the Council of 500, 500 guards of the dockyards, and 50 guards on the Acropolis, and about 70 internal officials…”[[23]](#footnote-24). Even the Parthenon was built with tribute money[[24]](#footnote-25).

**D** I see a hint of a parallel with the wealth of empire that underwrote Britain’s slow evolution of democracy. But a successful state would be expensive to run, whatever the type of government; and democracy does not need to be parasitic upon other, subjugated communities. What is the lesson, exactly, that the financing of ancient democracy has to teach?

**S** Work it out: I will start you off with this little historical insight. Athens won the empire through naval superiority.

**D** I remember: Herodotus told me. “The Athenians had a large sum of money in their treasury, the yield of the [silver] mines at Laureion. They were about to share it out among the citizens at a rate of ten *drachmai* a man, when Themistocles persuaded them to drop the distribution and use the money to build 200 ships to help in the war with Aegina. The outbreak of this war at that time saved Greece by forcing Athens to become a naval power.”[[25]](#footnote-26) That sounds like a good democratic decision!

**S** But then who had the power?

**D** I think I understand you. “It is right that in Athens the poor and the common people have the advantage over the well-born and the rich, because it is the common people who row the warships and give the city its power; and also the helmsmen, the boatswains, the pursers, the look-out men and the shipwrights – they are the ones who give the city its power, much more than the heavy infantry, the well-born and the good. Accordingly it seems right that everyone should share in the public offices, both those filled by lot and those filled by election, and that every citizen should be free to speak out if he wants to.”[[26]](#footnote-27)

**S** Exactly so! The lesson is that democracy is at heart a deal, a balance of power, and all that talk of Athens as a ‘koinonia’, a cohesive, united community[[27]](#footnote-28), conceals the very real internal divisions between factions – most obviously between rich and poor.

**D** I think you are right; and Finley stresses the importance of controlling factions (‘stasis’ was your Athenian word): “Faction is the greatest evil and the most present danger”[[28]](#footnote-29). “In the great final scene of Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, the chorus expresses the doctrine explicitly: the welfare of the state can rest only on harmony and freedom from faction.”[[29]](#footnote-30)

But the balancing act is not specific to democracy: the Roman historian, Polybius, found a degree of balance in the governance of the Roman Republic; and he credited Lycurgus of Sparta with achieving the same, “each power being counterbalanced by the others... Being equally balanced and equilibrated according to the principle of opposition, the governing body will continue in permanence for ever”.[[30]](#footnote-31)

 Stability through balance of power may therefore be a general rule, not a lesson from Athens. But perhaps Athens did it best. “The remarkable thing about Athens is how near she came from being free from *stasis*. Armed terror was used on only two occasions, in 411 and 404, both times by oligarchic factions which seized control of the state for brief periods”[[31]](#footnote-32); and after the second, as Lord Acton put it, “the hostile parties were reconciled and proclaimed an amnesty, the first in history”.[[32]](#footnote-33)

 I don’t suppose there was a direct link between that original amnesty and more recent ones, some of which even aspire to ‘truth and reconciliation’. But you know, Socrates, to broker that amnesty must have taken quite some leadership. Where did Athenians find their leadership, amid the churning of annual turnover of their official posts, with appointment (to some) by lottery? Surely it is true that “the formulation of long-term policies was not well catered for” by the Athenian constitution.[[33]](#footnote-34)

**S** We had leaders long before the amnesty of 404, of course: “Ephialtes, son of Sophonides, became the champion of the people. He appeared to be both uncorrupt and loyal to the constitution…”[[34]](#footnote-35); and “because of his prestige, intelligence and known incorruptibility with respect to money, Pericles was able to lead the people as a free man should… He did not have to humour them in the pursuit of power; on the contrary, his repute was such that he could contradict them and even provoke their anger.”[[35]](#footnote-36). I expect you thought that probity came with your religious leaders.

Of course, you won’t let me get away with claiming that Athens always gave a lesson in honest leadership, nor that politics was invariably conducted in a proper and respectable manner. Here is Aristophanes’ characteristically vivid image of a politician: “Like flames in a ring around Cleon licked the heads of a hundred damned flatterers.”[[36]](#footnote-37)

Our word ‘demagogue’ ought to mean simply ‘leader of the demos’; but you will only ever hear ironic use, denoting ‘mis-leader’: “the demagogue is driven by self-interest, by the desire to advance himself in power, and through power, in wealth. To achieve this he surrenders all principles, all genuine leadership, and he panders to the people in every way” [[37]](#footnote-38), “even” – in Thucydides’ words - “offering the conduct of affairs to the whims of the people”[[38]](#footnote-39). There were many demagogues!

**D** Demagogues, alternative facts, and a post-truth society: where have I heard those words recently?

 “Thucydides tells us the people were given misinformation by a delegation from the Sicilian city of Segesta and by their own envoys just returned from Sicily”, [[39]](#footnote-40) and he wrote that the orators promoted the expedition for the wrong reasons (in the case of Alcibiades, for personal ambition and to thwart Nicias, a rival General), and gained the day by playing on the ignorance and emotions of the Assembly. [[40]](#footnote-41)

 Perhaps “the dossier was sexed up”, in modern parlance.

Such tactics quickly bring a “leader” into disrepute.

**S** Do you know how we Athenians dealt with bad leaders? We either laughed at them, or we kicked them out of town!

**D** Laughing at our leaders is a “lesson” we have well and truly learnt in modern times.

You had great annual festivals of drama with comic competitions, Lenaia and the City Dionysia, and made celebrities of the winners. “Comedy’s ridicule and abuse of political leaders was, amongst other things, an assertion of the sovereignty of the people”[[41]](#footnote-42).

**S** I think people need to feel they have some power over their leaders: power to laugh at them, and to put pressure on them.

**D** A good example shows Aristophanes attacking Cleon in his play “Knights”. Cleon had the demos in his sway, and Demosthenes, his opponent, is seeking to topple him with a new populist leader. I’ll quote a bit, if I may.

“DEMOSTHENES. As this oracle says, you are to become a very great man.

SAUSAGE SELLER. Tell me how I, a mere sausage seller, am to become a real man.

DEMOSTHENES. Look, it is for precisely that reason you are to become great – because you are base and brash and a product of the Agora.

SAUSAGE SELLER. I can’t think I am worthy to exercise such power.

DEMOSTHENES. Great Scot! Why on earth do you think you are unworthy? There must be something *good* on your conscience. You aren’t one of the ‘fine and upstanding’, I hope?

SAUSAGE SELLER. Good heavens, no. I’m base-born alright.

DEMOSTHENES. I congratulate you on your good fortune! What an asset for you in public life!

SAUSAGE SELLER. But, my good man, I’ve had no education, except for reading and writing, and I’m really bad at them.

DEMOSTHENES. That’s your one handicap – knowing them even really badly. Leading the party no longer calls for a man of education or good character. It’s a job for a disgusting ignoramus.

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SAUSAGE SELLER. I can’t imagine how I’m to manage the people.

DEMOSTHENES. Child’s play. Do what you always do. Stir up all their affairs together and make mincemeat of them - and always try to win the people over by sweetening them with a ‘chutney’ of artfully-prepared phrases. The other leadership qualities you have already: a hideous voice, low birth and market origins. You have everything you need for public life.”[[42]](#footnote-43)

**S** Yes, even though Aristophanes mocked me too, I have to admit that comedy has an important place in politics. Satire and ridicule are potent in a democracy just as in oligarchies. Durable, too, it seems.

But of course, we also had political ways to control our would-be leaders – and in fact all our public officers - too. That might be relevant to your ‘essay’ too, unless human nature has changed for the better in the future, has it?

**D** Ha, ha!

I see I was quite wrong to call your constitutional arrangements mere “housekeeping”. The devices you Athenians used to restrain your officers were these, I believe.

First, “*euthynia*”, by which I mean that office holders had to give a public account of their work at the end of their year in post, so if they had not maintained proper probity, they would be found out. That was an early reform, made by Solon.[[43]](#footnote-44)

Second, even senior officials could be recalled – as Alcibiades was, for example.[[44]](#footnote-45)

Third, citizens could be “ostracised” by a public vote that banished them (as you put it, you “kicked them out of town”) from Athens for a full decade.[[45]](#footnote-46)

And fourth, you had a mechanism called “*graphe paranomôn*”, which meant that if the popular Assembly on Pnyx hill changed its mind, it could blame and punish the people whose advice had led it astray.[[46]](#footnote-47)

In short, you had institutional protection “against excessive individual political tyranny, against corruption and malfaisance, and against unthinking haste and passion in the Assembly”[[47]](#footnote-48).

**S** You seem to be coming round to my way of thinking: if a state can’t be run by dispassionate professionals (which is what my friend Plato would like for his imaginary, idealised and beautiful city “Kallipolis”)[[48]](#footnote-49), at least let it have a constitution structured by pragmatists who know how to offset human greed and folly. Is there a lesson for you?

**D** We ‘moderns’ have other “utopias” to look back on, besides his.

But if we stick to the real world, justice is what people seem to care about most; and “without doubt, the greatest benefit which the ordinary Athenian derived from the democracy was that it secured for him the most effective protection before and under the law”[[49]](#footnote-50). “The powerless and the rich enjoy *equal justice*, and when the powerless are ill spoken-of, they can reply to the prosperous in the same terms. The weaker one defeats the great man if he has justice on his side.” [[50]](#footnote-51)

In a democracy – no, in any society - “what matters above all is that the rule of law should be sovereign, and that the laws themselves should be good; the only true safeguard against arbitrary government and the abuse of power is that individuals should be able to make decisions only in particular matters which cannot be covered by the general rules of law.” [[51]](#footnote-52)

What is more, and also important, is that justice could be seen to be done because, as Aristotle put it when enumerating the key features of any democracy, “All the most important judicial decisions, including the review of the conduct in office of the officers of state, should be taken by courts which are drawn from, and representative of, the people.” [[52]](#footnote-53)

You Athenians managed this by having a pool of 6000 volunteer “jurors” each year, from whom large number were allocated to each case. Cumbersome, perhaps; but some such mechanism for sustaining public confidence in the law is certainly necessary for the long-term sustenance of democracy.

**S** You are describing for me a tripod for the support of society: first you said ‘balance of power’, which helps to control factionalism; then ‘justice’, both being done and being seen to be done. What is the third leg?

**D** Inclusiveness, I suppose. “Exclusion of any substantial element of a population from participation in government involves the danger of making it actively hostile to the government, with all that that entails.” [[53]](#footnote-54)

**S** And is there a lesson for the ‘modern world’ there?

**D** I was about to say that this is a far greater issue for us than it was for you Athenians – it does not seem to be discussed by any other of your political writers, though I understand you have a word, *paideia,* for ‘mature identification with the community, its traditions and its values.’ Modern people consider this notion when they consider the integration of large numbers of immigrants and refugees from other religions and cultures; but we really need it for our natives, too. I assumed you had no concept of the integration of ‘ethnic minorities’; but then I thought, what about your ‘metics’, the resident non-citizens? What about your slaves? What about your women? Are these not all ‘substantial elements of the population excluded from participation in government?’

**S** Why do you think these excluded Athenians did not become hostile to the government, and even attempt to revolt?

**D** Maybe economic stability helped to pacify those un-represented groups in the early years, when you had a stable supply of grain imported from your empire (grain and comedies, instead of ‘bread and circuses’); and maybe the long Peloponnesian war helped later on, by ensuring full employment (as war always does).

Your Athenian women were a spirited lot, though, and their involvement in politics was at least discussed in jest. In Aristophanes’ “*Ecclesiazusae*”, Praxagora plots to take over the *polis*, occupying the Assembly by stealth: “We’ve got to get their first, at the front, all hidden in our husband’s cloaks, so that nobody suspects we’re women. We’ll put on beards and pretend we’re men..” [[54]](#footnote-55). Lysistrata was bolder, in Aristophanes’ play of the same name: she took control of the Acropolis. “We women met in immediate convention and passed a unanimous resolution: to work in concert for safety and peace in Greece. We have valuable advice to impart, and if you [men] can possibly deign to emulate our silence, and take your turn as audience, we’ll rectify you. We’ll straighten you out and set you right……Women, weaker vessels, Arise!”[[55]](#footnote-56)

It took our ‘modern’ democracies a very long time to grant women the vote; so I can’t complain that there is no lesson for us there.

 But tell me, Socrates, why you speak of a ‘tripod’: is there not a fourth ‘leg’ for the support of democracy? Freedom of speech, surely!

 “Freedom is found in the words used at Assembly meetings: “Who [among you all] has a proposal beneficial to the city and wishes to come forward with it?” … What could be fairer to the citizens than that?”[[56]](#footnote-57). Pericles said something along the same lines: ““As for poverty,.. if anyone can do the city some service, he is not debarred by the obscurity of his status.” Thucydides 2.37.1, quoted in ARD8[[57]](#footnote-58)

**S** Even forgetting (for a few more hours) my position on death row, convicted for asking questions, I have to say I am not hugely impressed by the Athenians’ record on ‘freedom of speech!’

**D** I heard that when Anaxagoras taught that the sun was not a deity but a huge hot “stone”, which is not far off the mark, the Athenians thought it was wrong to question the myths of their forebears, and he was driven into exile[[58]](#footnote-59). And according to Cicero, when your contemporary, Protagoras, wrote an agnostic book he was exiled from Athens (and, less plausibly, that his books were burnt publically in the Agora)[[59]](#footnote-60).

 I suppose that what lies behind this intolerance is always the fear that the moral and religious fibre of the community is being undermined[[60]](#footnote-61). Blasphemy was a serious public offense – lest the gods hold the community as a whole responsible, and punish everyone in it[[61]](#footnote-62).

**S** If I put on my philosopher’s hat one last time, I must argue that religious conformity and social conservatism are more the problem here, not Athenian democracy itself.

 Is that perhaps the situation in ‘modern times’ too?

**D** The lesson is that democracy does not equate to giving citizens ‘inalienable rights’. Rather, because it has to operate within a society and not in a vacuum, there must be a balance between freedom *of* the individual and freedom *from* the individual. In modern times we need protection from individual terrorists, for example, so we go along with Aeschylus; “Be advised by me, Athenians: avoid both the extreme of tyranny and the extreme of complete freedom.” [[62]](#footnote-63)

**S** There was one other occasion when a democratic decision was worse, much, much worse, than convicting an old man of so-called ‘blasphemy’, exiling a would-be astronomer, or burning a few books. I’d like to know if you draw any lesson from this.

The Athenian general or ‘strategos’, Paches, subdued the rebellious community of Mytilene, and sent to the Assembly there for instructions about how to procede. Massacre the men, enslave the women and children, was the answer. “The next day brought a sudden change of heart and recognition that the decree was savage and excessive in destroying a whole city rather than the guilty few. As soon as they realised this, the Mytilenean ambassadors in Athens and the Athenian supporters induced the authorities to hold another debate. They were more easily persuaded because they realised that most Athenians wished to be given a second chance to reconsider the matter. A meeting of the Assembly was summoned forthwith…”[[63]](#footnote-64) with the result that a faster trireme was dispatched to overhaul the first and contradict the order.

**D** Obviously the Assembly got it horribly wrong, but had the wisdom to think again. Socrates, I’m beginning to wonder which of us is the Time Traveller! You seem to be hinting at a modern referendum when the result was (many say) unprecedentedly harmful.

**S** Alas, my ideas might travel forward in time, but not me. My day is numbered.

I have enjoyed your visit, though – you were right in thinking dialogue would be fun. Please tell me your name.

**D** ‘The Doctor’.

**S** Doctor who?

**D** Just, ‘The Doctor’!

**S** ‘Doctor’, before you go, tell me one thing, please. I would like to know how Athenian democracy fared in my future. Are there lessons for your so-called ‘modern times’ to learn from the ending of our democracy – for end it surely will?

**D** The monarchy in Macedonia developed superior military power about eighty years hence, and I am sorry to say that your Athenians failed to act in time. Maybe factional interests distracted the politicians and they did not see the danger that Macedonia posed until it was too late.

In modern times, we pursued a policy of a ‘balance of power’: not overt hostility, necessarily, but sufficient military might to deter attack. For a long period of ‘cold war’ our democracy defended itself against threat. I can’t say that we learnt to do that as lesson from the end of democracy in ancient Athens, though: probably it was just a rare period of wisdom.

**S** Well, ‘Doctor’, can you list all the lessons you have learnt?

**D** Some are only parallels between your time and mine, but I will enumerate them:

1. Balance of power to control factionalism;
2. Democracy needs good leaders;
3. Constitutional restraint on greed and corruption;
4. Conspicuous justice for all;
5. Inclusiveness – which we do better than you did;
6. Freedom of speech – and that too, we do better – up to a point;
7. The durability and power of political satire, giving people power over leaders; and lastly,
8. If we want democracy to continue, we have to be vigilant for danger both within and without.

Perhaps we should not call these lessons, if we could draw the same conclusions without knowing anything of Athens; the similarity of our concerns and yours just reinforces the popular notion expressed by Mark Twain, that “although history does not repeat itself, it does rhyme”. And yet - we do learn by seeing our common problems in a different context. A Kipling had it, “What know they of England, who only England know?”

Finley would say there is another lesson, that we have learnt that the young need to be brought up to take their place in the political domain; but Jeremy Corbyn seems to be doing a good job at awakening their political instincts; and so will austerity, when it comes.

On topics where emotions run high (Brexit and Scottish independence, in our case; punishing the Mytilenians in the Athenians’), the lesson might be to make the public vote not once but ‘best of three’. Cooling off overnight saved the Athenians from committing what we would call ‘a crime against humanity’. In our recent political debates the stakes are so high, and the warnings about self-inflicted damage are so grave, that it seems prudent to copy the ancient Athenians’ example.

Finally, if ever we follow the lead given by you, the founding fathers of philosophy, and ask, what is any political system *for*? – then it does rather seem that democracy is not particularly good for what matters most. During my travels through space and time, I have observed that humans are fabulously good at being inquisitive, and being creative. Perhaps there has never been an organism so talented in this respect, in the history of the universe. But only a minority of humans actually make an impact, discovering something or creating something, or having an idea. Those that have done so have come from extraordinarily diverse backgrounds; and parental wealth and occupations predict nothing about the achievement of genius and hard work. Is it not self-evident, then, that a society should try to discover rare talent and nurture it? Athenian democracy condemned you to death, exiled Anaxagoras, and maybe burnt the books of Protagoras. It was undeniably hostile to new ideas, and clung to antique myths. The lesson for modern times, a lesson taught more than once in history, is not to do the same. The stability that democracy provides should not inadvertently promote intellectual rigidity.

**S** My final question is this. Do you think your experiment of writing an essay in the form of a dialogue worked?

**D** That is for others to judge. I certainly enjoyed writing it; and my use of this format is my tribute to the philosophers and witty dramatists I have been reading.

I would say this, too: the dialogue format did allow me to make my points at least as concisely as a monologue would have done. Perhaps it made the subject approachable, too. “Highbrow” can be off-putting. I prefer to wear my scholarship lightly, like a toga.

**S** It is the best way!

*Finis*

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1. DS p56 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. eg Plato. *Republic*. Tr. GMA Grube, pub. Hackett, 1992 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Xenophon. *Memorabilia* – eg dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, 3.6, quoted in

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4. *De Oratore, De Re Publica* and *De Legibus*. ML p258 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Herodotus 3.80.6, cited in ARD p7 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Peter Green. Class War in Ancient Athens. London Review of Books 39, 20 April 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. DS chapter 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Quoted in RR Palmer, “Notes on the use of the word ‘Democracy’, 1789-1799”.

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9. Plato *Protagoras* 319 B-D, quoted in DS p176 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. RB p75 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Thucydides 6.1-25, cited in MIF p39 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Aristophanes. Akharninans. 636-640 quoted in ARD section 133 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Thucydides 3.38.5-7, quoted in ARD section 135 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Thucydides 6.24.4, quoted in ARD section 136 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. WS Churchill 11th November 1947 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Thucydides 6.38.5-39.1, quoted in ARD section 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Constitution of Athens, 3.1, cited in MIF p23 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. MIF p28 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. MIF p30 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. ML p101 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Thucydides 2.40.2, quoted in MIF p30 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. MIF p31-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Constitution 24.3 cited in ARD section 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. ARD section 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Herodotus 7.144.1 cited in ARD section 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Old Oligarch 1.2 cited in ARD section 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. MIF p29 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. MIF p44 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. MIF p47 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
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 quoted in ML p259 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. MIF p70 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. quoted in MIF p74 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
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34. Constitution of Athens 23.1 quoted in ARD section 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Thucydides 2.65.8, quoted by MIF p41 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Aristophanes *Wasps* 1033f, quoted in ARD section 268 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
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38. Thucydides, quoted in MIF p41 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. MIF p39 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Thucydides 6.1-25, cited in MIF p39 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. ARD p81 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Aristophanes *Knights* 177-193 and 211-219, quoted in ARD 265-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Aristotle, *Politics* 1273b35-1274a21, quoted in ARD section 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. MIF p125 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. As explained by Plutarch in *Aristeides* 7.4f, quoted in ARD section 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. MIF p26 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. MIF p72 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Plato, *Republic*, as described in ML p154ff [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. DS p54 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Euripides. *Suppliant women* 399-441 quoted in ARD 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. Aristotle, *Politics* 1281a 12f: quoted in DS p177 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Aristotle 1317a-1318b, quoted in DS p54 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Aristotle, *Politics* 1281a 12f, quoted in DS p177 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae* 84ff. quoted in RB p48 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
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57. Thucydides 2.37.1, quoted in ARD8 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
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62. Aeschylus, Eumenides 696ff, quoted in RB p76 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
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