

Classical Athenian Democracy and Democracy Today: Culture, Knowledge, Power

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THE YEAR 2002 IS NOT ONLY the British Academy's Centenary, it also marks the semi-centennial of the publication of Charles Hignett's influential study of the *History of the Athenian Constitution*.¹ That book is primarily concerned with political institutions as nodes of formal authority and with the distinction between 'moderate' and 'radical' forms of ancient democracy—the latter marked by the active participation by ordinary working men in the processes of government. I first read Hignett as a student in the 1970s, but a quarter-century later I find it is still frequently included on university course reading lists—I counted 150 'Google hits' at a recent check.

The issues I will raise this evening seem to me especially important in light of the enduring, indeed apparently growing popularity of Greek democracy as a topic in school and university curricula.² How, fifty years after Hignett's *History*, should we explain to our students the nature and meaning of ancient Athenian democracy? Are questions about institutions as formal nodes of authority and about the development of 'radicalism'

Read at the University of Bristol 28 October 2002.

¹ Charles Hignett, *A history of the Athenian Constitution to the end of the fifth century BC* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

² There are currently at least three collections of essays on Athenian democracy recently published or in preparation, designed for course use (edited by P. J. Rhodes, K. Raaflaub, and E. W. Robinson), which suggests that textbook publishers see the topic as a growing market. See also note 5, below.

what we should be focusing upon? Might the potential of modern (or even postmodern) democracy be reassessed in light of new approaches to studying the history of ancient Athens? These are pressing questions in the early twenty-first century, but they are not new ones: as Nadia Urbinati's recent book, *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government*, has demonstrated, the most influential British liberal of the nineteenth century was convinced that Athenian democracy might be an important and useful model for designing a modern democratic regime.³ Perhaps surprisingly, the portrait of Athens that I will offer you tonight is much closer to John Stuart Mill's mid-nineteenth-century reading of Athenian political culture than it is to Hignett's mid-twentieth-century study of the Athenian constitution.

J. S. Mill did not write Greek history for historians: he deployed his conception of Athens to defend democracy against French revolutionaries who had found in 'the ancient Greeks' (i.e. Sparta) a model of republicanism that delegitimated deliberation and individual rights, and also against British conservatives like William Mitford who used a tendentious interpretation of Athenian history in an attempt to show that democracy was both immoral and unworkable.

Today, some of Mill's battles have been won and so there is less need to spend time on the question of whether we should value democracy as such: 'Democracy' is now clearly enrolled in the pantheon of approbative political terms—right up there with justice, freedom, equality, and rights. Yet unlike those other highly favoured terms, 'democracy' describes a political regime: a potentially comprehensive way of organising legitimate public authority within an established collectivity. The regime described by 'democracy' is comprehensive in that it offers a system for institutionalising the moral intuitions and public practices that are implied by other favoured political terms.

Moreover, the system on offer is more than a utopian ideal, it has the potential of existing in practice: 'Democracy' is such a powerful concept in part because it renders it possible to imagine actually living our own lives, here and now, according to principles of justice, freedom, equality, and rights. Indeed, it is indicative of the success of democracy as an idea that living such lives has (in much of the world) become an expectation, if not yet a consistently experienced reality. The perceived gap between our current political regimes and the preferred democratic alternative is

³ Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

still perceptible, but that gap is now more likely to provoke impatience and demands for change than wistful utopian longing.

Democracy does all of this conceptual work under the (etymological) sign of power (*kratos*), a power that is wielded by ‘the people’ (*demos*). So it seems obvious enough to ask: What sort of power are we talking about when we say ‘democracy’—and what sort of ‘people’? But those are not the questions usually asked by either classicists or political theorists seeking to analyse how democracy works in practice. Instead, the usual approach is still to ask, with Hignett: What are the appropriate institutions of governance? and How is institutional authority distributed? In the US (and many other modern nations) it is quite easy to describe the basic framework of institutional authority and governance, because those matters are detailed in a self-consciously foundational document: a written Constitution. But of course, the act of writing a constitution is never the end of the story. The very existence of a formal Constitution in a system predicated on free speech and equal votes means that there will be a great deal of debate about how to interpret the language of the foundational document. Much academic political philosophy in the US is therefore devoted to problems of constitutional interpretation, with special reference to Supreme Court decisions, past and future.

Debates about those decisions require confronting genuinely complex issues of institutional authority: I need only mention the denouement of the US presidential election of autumn 2000, an outcome that presented a strange spectacle for students of democracy. In the end, the will of the ‘people’ (in the guise of the popular vote) was overridden by a constitutionally established but ordinarily invisible elite of super-voters (in the guise of the Electoral College), whereas the authority of each state to settle disputes about local elections (in the guise of superior court judges in Florida) was overridden by the national Supreme Court. Of course there has been a lot of academic ink spilled since about the implications of the 2000 election debacle for matters of formal constitutional authority.⁴ I have focused on an admittedly peculiar, and peculiarly American example, but *mutatis mutandis*, I dare say that that bulk of European academic work on democracy (and Canadian, Australian, etc.) also tends to focus on problems of elections, governance, and distribution of institutional authority.

⁴ See, for example, H. Gillman, *The votes that counted: how the court decided the 2000 presidential election* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); C. R. Sunstein and R. A. Epstein, *The vote: Bush, Gore, and the Supreme Court* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); R. A. Posner, *Breaking the deadlock: the 2000 election, the constitution, and the courts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

The modern penchant for reading the meaning of ‘democracy’ through the lens of ‘the authoritative institutions of government’ has had a substantial impact on the way ancient Greek democracy has been understood. An obvious example of this ‘modern to ancient’ interpretive approach is the habit of translating the Greek term *politeia* as ‘Constitution’. Young students of antiquity, when they are first confronted with the strange and polemical late fifth-century pamphlet entitled ‘The Constitution of the Athenians’ (in Greek: *Athenaion politeia*), written by an anonymous Athenian sometimes called ‘The Old Oligarch’, are likely to be deeply confused when they discover that, instead of a coherent account of government authority, they are confronted with a slyly ironic analysis of the cultural, material, and ideological means by which the ‘despicable many’ maintain their political power and prevent the rightful assumption of power by the ‘excellent few’. Obviously, in this text, *politeia* has little (if anything) to do with a formal ‘Constitution’.

Nevertheless, leaning heavily on parts of the other surviving text that goes under the name ‘The Constitution of the Athenians’ (that is, the *Athenaion politeia* written in the later fourth century BC by a student of Aristotle), a great deal of twentieth-century scholarly effort was devoted to explaining ancient Athenian democracy in explicitly institutional and even constitutional terms. Hignett’s *History of the Athenian Constitution to the End of the Fifth Century BC* is a distinguished example of the genre, as well as an example of the tendency to privilege the relatively ill-documented fifth century over the relatively well-documented fourth century, a tendency that was almost universal among Anglophone specialists in Greek democracy until the late 1970s. Even today, the academic preference for the democracy of the fifth century is evident in school and university curricula.⁵

Of course a great deal can be learned (and has been learned in the half-century since Hignett’s magnum opus) about the institutional structure of Athenian government. But much has also been learned about the ‘culture’ of Athenian democracy: about political ideology and discourse, social contestation and negotiation, and the public and private practices by which Athenian citizens came to understand themselves collectively as ‘we, the demos’. I have argued elsewhere and at length that a cultural/ideological approach has more to tell us about ancient Athenian democ-

⁵ The continuing sway of the fifth century is marked by the publication by the London Association of Classical Teachers in 1998 of a teaching manual entitled *Athenian radical democracy, 461–404 BC*.

racy per se than does a 'Constitutional' approach.⁶ But today, my main point is that looking at Athenian democracy as political culture rather than as a 'constitution' will have more to tell us about the potential for us as 'moderns' to learn something meaningful for our own situation.

Not that political institutions are ever unimportant for democracies: indeed, I'll spend much of this lecture talking about Athenian institutions. But I want to suggest that when we study democratic institutions we should augment our concern with institutions as 'discrete bureaucratic nodes of formal authority' by looking at institutions as 'interconnected nodes of knowledge exchange, of civic learning, and of public teaching'. Once we move to the level of culture, we see that the system of democracy (in antiquity and potentially today) is less predicated on the formal specification and separation of institutionalised powers than it is predicated on the aggregation and distribution of knowledge in the service of collective power. So, in a sense, what I am proposing this evening is that we reverse the usual approach: instead of domesticating Athenian democracy by reading it through the lens of modern constitutional governance, we should be focusing on ancient Athenian democracy as a culture and as a way of knowing, and one that was genuinely radical *ab initio*. Approached as a political culture, Athens begins to look genuinely startling, and might actually prove useful for rethinking the potential place of democracy in our own lives.

But useful *where* in our lives? I do *not* intend to argue that the political culture of ancient Athens provides a particularly useful model for the modern nation-state. Despite the possibilities of what is sometimes called 'teledemocracy' (i.e. employing modern communications technology to foster deliberation and voting on issues by large populations), despite remarkable and ongoing technological advances, I am not convinced that the problem of political scale can readily be solved. For the time being, I think, the Athenian model is likely to be more useful for thinking about groups consisting of thousands of individuals than it is for groups numbering in the millions.⁷ Nor, despite the optimism of communitarian theorists, am I yet convinced that the highly participatory political culture typical of an ancient city would actually be able to guarantee what we have now come to regard as essential human rights.

Even if we do *not* regard slavery or the political exclusion of women as necessary prerequisites for democracy in the Athenian style (as I do

⁶ J. Ober, *Mass and elite in democratic Athens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁷ Compare, for example, C. D. Slaton, *Televote: expanding citizen participation in the quantum age* (New York: Praeger, 1992).

not), we may still doubt that an Athenian-style democracy would ever be as deeply committed to the rights of individuals or of minorities as modern liberals will demand of any respectable nation-state.⁸ But the nation-state is only one of the sites at which modern people come together as purposeful collectivities, only one of the many sorts of organisation that might be structured more or less democratically. If we assume the persistence of a regime of nation-states, committed to providing an enduring ‘umbrella’ guarantee of fundamental human rights, we are free to imagine how various other sorts of organisations might become more fully participatory, more ‘Athens-like’, in adopting more strongly democratic cultures of self-governance ‘by their people’. The potential democracies I have in mind include voluntary and not-for-profit organisations, but also for-profit business firms. I would offer the Athenian model as a practical, time-tested alternative to anyone dissatisfied with organisations governed as oligarchies or tyrannies, as a resource to anyone interested in the potential of strongly democratic self-governance at (say) her own place of work.⁹ This sort of thinking is very much in the spirit of J. S. Mill, who as Nadia Urbinati points out, ‘proposed to reconfigure the family and the workplace according to the principles of equal partnership and mutual responsibility so as to make them a school of democracy for the moderns’.¹⁰

My ideal and imagined interlocutor in the enterprise of thinking about ‘what democracy could mean in our lives today’, knows that there was a spate of work in the mid 1980s on ‘democratic workplaces’, believes that it never achieved its full potential, and wants to know more about Athenian democratic political culture. She will look in vain for useful answers as she turns to Hignett’s *History of the Athenian Constitution*. But I think ancient Greek historians can offer her something worthwhile by specifying the relevant and defining features of Athenian democratic political culture. First was a set of core values concerned with the individual: that is to say, a cultural commitment to valuing the freedom, equality, and security of each citizen. Next, was a commitment to the notion that ‘the people qua citizenry both *constitute* the polis (as an organisation) and are (collectively and directly) its rightful rulers’. And

⁸ See, further, J. Ober, ‘Quasi-Rights: Political boundaries and social diversity in democratic Athens’. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 17 (2000): 27–61.

⁹ This section of the paper draws upon B. Manville and J. Ober, *A company of citizens* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

¹⁰ N. Urbinati, *Mill on democracy: from the Athenian polis to representative government*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 2002), p. 26.

finally, there was a commitment to the idea that it is nothing other than participation by the citizens in the day-to-day practice of self-governance that makes the core values real (that is, renders people free, equal, and secure in fact). It is participation in democratic practices that teaches people to ‘become what they are’—that is, citizens of a democratic polity. Each of these commitments was predicated on an expansive (although far from universalistic) definition of citizenship. In Athens the citizen was ordinarily defined as ‘a native adult male who had been formally acknowledged as such by his fellow citizens’. Democratic citizenship can be best understood, I believe, not as a constitutionally guaranteed status, but as a sort of ‘social knowledge’. And it is a distinctive pattern of circulation of knowledge (social knowledge and technical knowledge alike), encouraged by democratic culture, that makes the Athenian model particularly worthy of our contemporary attention. If that claim sounds both grandiose and peculiar, let me again have recourse to Mill, who focused on the importance of both a widely distributed ‘deliberative capacity’ and specialised ‘technical knowledge’ for modern democracy. For Mill, ‘democracy was a legal system of communicative interaction in which knowledge was passed “from one citizen to another” and made each a protagonist of social and political life, willing to revise opinions and adapt to new circumstances’.¹¹ Yet, unlike the now unproblematic notion that democracy is desirable, reconceiving democracy in terms of the exchange of social knowledge still, 150 years after Mill, requires some explanation.

This is in part because our standard modern way of thinking about ‘knowledge’ tends to privilege the technical at the expense of the deliberative. As such it bears some similarities to Platonic epistemology: not in that dominant modern epistemologies are committed to Plato’s Theory of Forms, but we are (for the most part) committed to ‘expertise’ and to segregating the realm of ‘true knowledge’ from that of ‘social practice’. As a result, in modern pedagogy, ‘knowledge’ is gained from communion with appropriate experts, and it is seen as something different from the ‘political skills’ that might be learnt through participation in the processes of self-governance.¹²

As academics, we are likely to have a substantial investment in technical expertise. The entire modern academic enterprise concerns the proper

¹¹ Urbinati, p. 62, citing Mill.

¹² On the distinction between social learning and the dominant learning paradigm, see Etienne Wenger, *Communities of practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

transmission of knowledge from experts to students, and issuing the appropriate credentials (e.g. university degrees, professorships) only to those who have demonstrably achieved the right level of knowledgeability. Now that surely makes lots of sense in many domains: I certainly want the people who designed the planes in which I fly back and forth between New York and London to be certified experts, and ditto medical doctors, architects, etc. But should we follow Plato in supposing that expert knowledge must play an equally central role in the realm of politics?

The Athenians did respect technical expertise in various spheres and sought it out when making collective decisions about technical matters (as Plato freely acknowledges in his dialogue, *Protagoras*), but they remained unconvinced that governance was a realm in which technical expertise should be dominant. And thus for example (and scandalously from where Plato sat), they decided matters of justice in the People's courts without recourse to anyone even vaguely resembling a legal expert. And they decided major policy in the Ecclesia by majority vote among whosoever among the citizens showed up for a given assembly. Moreover, any citizen could be a magistrate if his name were chosen in a lottery.

Each of these Athenian institutions (judicial, legislative, and executive) was structured around the active participation of 'knowledgeable amateurs' — that is, people who were assumed to bring to their political service a useful body of non-specialised knowledge; who were assumed, moreover, to be engaged in an active and ongoing process of knowledge exchange in the course of their participation, and whose decisions and actions as participants in the system would help to educate others. This recursive relationship between 'knowing and (political) doing' appeared a patent absurdity to Plato, but it was essential to the functioning of the democratic system. Except for certain age requirements for specific forms of service (e.g. Assemblymen must be 18; jurors 30; public arbitrators 60), there was no privileged entry-point into the system: a citizen taught others as he himself learned. There was no knowledge-certification, no expert direction, no automatic disqualification for inadequate knowledgeability.

How could it possibly have worked? Notably, Plato's objections to democracy are moral rather than practical: again he freely acknowledges (e.g. in the *Gorgias*) the success of the democratic system in providing the city with the trappings of wealth and power. Plato's concerns centred on the capacity of democracy to corrupt the individual soul, especially by its celebration of diversity. But my imagined interlocutor, interested in exploring the potential of Athenian-style self-governance for improving her workplace, does not regard diversity as inherently corrupting. She is

interested instead in whether Athenian-style democracy might actually promote an organisational environment in which she (and her fellow workers) could operate as free, equal and secure persons; she wants her organisation (whatever it is) to flourish, and as a self-governing community. Familiar with the standard arguments for the essential role of specialised experts in the effective governance of any complex organisation, she is not concerned that democratic diversity poses a danger to her soul, but she is worried about the danger that participatory democracy (with its reliance on 'knowledgeable amateurs') might pose to the capacity of her organisation to achieve its goals.

What does a modern organisation require in order to flourish in today's highly competitive environment? This 'managerial' question may seem to take us a very long way from ancient Athens, but at least part of the answer is straightforward and directly relevant to the concerns I have raised this evening. Whatever else they require, modern purposeful organisations certainly require quick, effective access to 'relevant knowledge' if they are to achieve their goals. As a mass of contemporary business management literature asserts, effective use of knowledge is a key differentiator between failure and success in the highly competitive markets in which today's organisations (both for-profit and not-for-profit) typically operate.

Not too long ago, 'superior technology' (the Internet, local intranets, information banks, teleconferencing etc.) was being trumpeted by business gurus as *the* answer to the 'problem of knowledge'. Many companies built elaborate and expensive data banks, only to find that they were seldom actually used. The problem is, as the Athenians realised, that organisations depend heavily on the 'tacit' knowledge that exists largely inside people's heads. Data bases (e.g. written lawcodes) are indeed necessary as adjuncts, but knowledge is only valuable *in use*, and people will only choose to access data bases in the context of an appropriate organisational culture, one that allows ready interplay between the tacit knowledge people already have in their heads and what they suppose they might find in some data base. So the new management mantra is 'human capital'—leveraging the social knowledge about people and practical know-how that is typically embedded in the processes and practices of people working together and solving problems together over time. Yet as the mordantly amusing Dilbert cartoon strip points out, 'people' are not necessarily ready to be 'rebranded' as 'human capital' and tacit knowledge has proved to be extremely hard to codify. The dilemma is summed up by the wry comment attributed to a former director of the Research Laboratories at the Hewlett Packard Corporation: 'If only HP knew what HP knows . . .'

So the big issue in any complex organisation is how to get what ‘we (collectively) know’ to ‘the right place at the right time’—how to focus all the relevant knowledge of the organisation’s people on a given problem? If the answer is not ‘technology’, neither is it ‘knowledge management’ (another largely defunct business slogan). Command and control managerial approaches to knowledge are counter-productive in a culture in which people value freedom and equality. Under the hierarchical systems of patronage and cronyism that characterise many modern organisations, knowledge is hoarded rather than freely shared. ‘Knowledge is power’, as we all know, but the problem that hierarchies face is that private, local knowledge is used to gain and keep private, local power: e.g. to build and defend personal fiefdoms within the organisation. And as a result the organisation’s overall capacity to perform effectively is substantially lessened.

What organisations need, then, is a culture of voluntary sharing of knowledge, effective knowledge circulation, and constant mutual instruction. Which of course brings us back to democracy in the Athenian style. I won’t attempt, this evening, to analyse the entirety of the Athenian democratic system in terms of its capacity to integrate core values with effective public practices, and thereby to solve the problem of organisational knowledge. Instead, and more modestly, I’ll look at just one ‘institutional node’, a favourite of Hignett and other specialists in Athenian democracy: the Council of 500, established in the aftermath of the epochal revolution of 508/7, through the leadership of Cleisthenes.

After the revolution, the Athenians designated (presumably though vote of the citizen assembly) 139 existing villages and urban neighbourhoods as self-governing communities (*demes*): those 139 districts covered almost the entirety of Athenian territory.¹³ Every Athenian would belong to one of these demes, and, for purposes of local self-governance, he would regard his neighbours as ‘fellow-demesmen’. The business of the deme would be carried out in public, through public assemblies at which all the demesmen could gather to debate and decide upon issues of local concern.

These relatively small assemblies (most demes would not have a population of more than 300 adult men) immediately began to serve vital functions. The demes became the key institutional nodes for making deci-

¹³ There are a couple of exceptions, notably the island of Salamis. For the deme system, see D. Whitehead, *The demes of Attica, 508/7–ca. 250 B.C.: A political and social study* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

sions about Athenian citizenship. Among the primary duties of the deme assemblies was inducting new members, judging the legitimacy of the claim of each local boy to become a full member of the deme (that is, born to an Athenian father who had contracted a legitimate marriage), and thereby a citizen of Athens. Next, the deme assembly would take care of essential local business, including the appointment of local magistrates. Yet most important of all was the *educational* role of the deme assembly. Carrying out the public business of the deme, in cooperation with his fellow demesmen, taught each Athenian the political habits of participatory decision-making and follow-through.

Once the demes had been designated, the next organisational step was more challenging: how to seamlessly integrate the many diverse local networks (the demes) into the *master network* that was the total citizenry of Athens?¹⁴ This step required, of course, the prior step of re-envisioning the citizen body as constituting a ‘master network’ of human relationships and then of imagining that master network as having a sort of architectural form: as consisting of a large number of smaller, self-governing networks. Those steps required a huge leap of imagination and a bold implementation plan. But the anticipated benefits were immense: the specialised knowledge resources possessed by the members of each local network, each deme, would potentially be made available to the polis as a whole. And, by the same token, that which was learned in any part of the polis could potentially be distributed throughout the organisation. Once again, I find myself treading in the footsteps of Mill, who argued that modern democracy required ‘the growth of an intermediary network of communication that would both prevent the representatives from becoming a new oligarchy and unite the whole country “simultaneously into one *agora*”’.¹⁵

A dynamic and well integrated ‘master network of local networks’ would preserve the autonomy and specificity of local knowledge in cases where that knowledge was uniquely valuable within a local framework. Each local network, each deme, remained free to respond to local needs and local emergencies by deploying local resources and locally developed expertise—but now with the added assurance that the diverse and vastly greater resources and expertise of the entire polis were available as a

¹⁴ Note that this ‘master network’ was also a ‘virtual network’ in that it could never be grasped visually, and was not in any tangible way accessible to the senses. And yet, like modern ‘virtual networks’ it had the possibility of doing real work in the world, the possibility of making things happen.

¹⁵ Urbinati, p. 9.

‘backup’ in cases where local solutions proved inadequate. So, for example, demes located near border-zones, faced with incursions of foreign raiders from across the frontier, could potentially call upon the military might of the entire citizenry-in-arms.

The conviction that the many self-governing divisional networks could in principle be quickly and seamlessly integrated into a master network was translated into practice through an elegant institutional design. Each deme was made responsible, each year, for appointing one or more of its citizen-members (depending on the deme’s population) to the national Council of Five Hundred. The five-hundred annual appointees to this all-Athenian Council would, therefore, represent all of the territorial ‘parts’ of Athens. The Council, physically located in the city-centre, was responsible for much of the day-to-day administration of the city. But its primary responsibility was setting an agenda and preparing legislative recommendations for each meeting of the polis-wide citizen Assembly, which might be attended (at least in the fourth century) by as many as six thousand to eight thousand men, each an active, participatory citizen, each expecting to exercise his equal vote and, perhaps, his equal right of public speech.

The Council of Five Hundred did *not* function as a ‘representative legislative body’: the members of the Council were not legislators (legislation was left to the Assembly) and councillors were not expected to serve the interests of their ‘local constituencies’.¹⁶ Rather, the five hundred councillors chosen each year by their fellow demesmen were the human embodiment of the *knowledge resources* of the entire Athenian polis. Their duty as councillors was to bring local knowledge to the centre—to participate in open discussions, bringing to bear all the relevant information they possessed, in order to best serve the needs of Athens as an independent city-state. Moreover, working together with their fellow councillors built knowledge—it served as a deep education of each councillor in the functioning of the organisation as a whole. And the newly educated councillors were in turn teachers. Upon return to his home deme, a councillor became a local source of knowledge about how Athenian governance worked at a macro-level. And thus, for each Athenian the ‘virtual’ became real and tangible through the presence of a man (and in time many men) who had participated directly in the processes of what I am calling the ‘master network’.

¹⁶ Of course Mill saw modern democracy as based on representation. But note that (as Urbinati shows in detail) Mill himself regarded a properly constituted democracy to be about the development and maintenance of ‘political culture’ and not about the promotion of pre-existing interests.

It must have been clear from the beginning that the many self-governing local networks would only work effectively as a master network if Athenians from diverse territorial regions worked closely together with other Athenians from all parts of the polis. On the Council there would be a natural tendency for councillors who lived in coastal demes, for example, to gravitate towards other councillors from the coast, who would share more experiences with them than the men from the inland districts or from the urban centre. If the work of the Council came to be dominated by conflicting regional interests, the goal of creating a genuinely integrated network would be lost, and the overall goal of creating a workable system of self-governance would never be realised. In order to achieve a more thorough integration, the new Council structure must ensure that councillors would work, day by day, with men from very different parts of the polis. The Athenians effected this by arranging for much of the work of the council to be carried out by fifty-member teams (*prytaneis*). Each team was made up of the councilmen from one of ten newly created 'tribes' (*phylai*).

Part of the innovation of the new governance system was that, while the demes were, in a sense, *natural units*—pre-existing villages and neighbourhoods, the ten new 'tribes' were *blatantly artificial* units. Each tribe was composed of a number of demes from distinctly different parts of Athenian territory: roughly one third of each tribe's population hailed from coastal districts, another third from inland regions, and a final third from urban areas. Each tribe thus included natives of coastal villages specialising in (say) fishing and trade, farmers from the agricultural inland, and craftsmen from neighbourhoods of the urban centre. Each 'tribal team' was, therefore, made up of a diverse cross-section of men from across Athenian territory, men with different backgrounds, different skill-sets, different networks based on kinship, friendship, and neighbourhood.

Just as the Council of Five Hundred as a whole represented in human form the 'knowledge base' of the entire organisation, so each fifty-man 'tribal team' embodied a microcosm of that same organisation-wide body of shared and 'shareable' technical and social knowledge. When he began his year of service on the Council, each councillor knew that he would be working closely with the other men from his 'tribal team'—he would be talking constantly with them, and for part of the year, eating and sleeping in the same room with his team-members from diverse parts of Athens. He would get to know these men intimately. The success of the Council as an institution depended directly on his capacity to work effectively with his team-mates—to share what he knew when it was relevant,

and to defer to others when they had more relevant knowledge to offer: in short, the Council as an institution depended on the councillors' capacity to deliberate. Each councillor learned the value of working intensively and cooperatively on a team. He learned to place his trust in men from very different parts of the polis: a trust based on developing a personal knowledge of them as individuals, and on a shared dedication to the flourishing of the organisation to which they all belonged. Furthermore, the ten tribal teams had to learn, in turn, to work together. As they dealt with the daily business of Athens, and with the recurrent task of designing an agenda for the meetings of the Assembly, the five hundred councillors learned how to move from the relatively intimate society of their tribal teams, to the much larger bodies of the full Council and ultimately to the vast citizen Assembly itself.

Each councillor returned to his deme, after a year's service, with an expanded 'Rolodex'—a personal network of men he knew well. His contacts were no longer just local folks—they were now 'organisation-wide'. He knew, from personal experience, how the polis organisation was run at virtually every level. He had participated in making tough decisions that might affect the future of the polis as a whole. He had been among the first to receive the reports of generals, ambassadors, and foreign embassies. He had helped to conduct elections and votes in the huge citizen Assembly. He had scrutinised the accounts submitted by magistrates. In brief, he had sat at the very hub of the public business of the city, participating actively in all the manifold business that allowed the citizens of the city to govern themselves. It was an immensely useful education: it taught him, in detail and through his own day-to-day practice, how self-governance really worked.

The valuable experience of a year's service on the Council was not limited to a small elite of influential and wealthy citizens. Terms of service on the Council were only for one year. Although a citizen might serve a second (non-consecutive) year some time in his life, it appears that few Athenians actually did so. And by law no one could serve a third term. And so, there was a constant turnover among councillors. As a result, there was little tendency for the development of constraining 'institutional traditions', and no place for the elaboration of complex parliamentary procedures that would allow expert 'government insiders' to control the system: There were no experts as such, this was governance by dedicated amateurs. A very high percentage of all Athenians over age thirty (the legal age minimum for councillors) spent a year on the

Council.¹⁷ The system ensured that the extraordinary experience of a full year's work as a member of a tribal team, seeking to further the interests of the entire community, was a common one for adult Athenians—and thus that the educational benefit of Council service was widely diversified throughout the citizenry. At any moment in Athenian history, a high percentage of Athenians had been councillors, and virtually everyone could count a number of former councillors among his intimates.

The institutionalisation of the master network of local networks through the workings of the Council of Five Hundred facilitated the practical integration of very widely diversified knowledge resources, beginning at the workable face-to-face level of the fifty-man 'tribal team'. The knowledge-work of the teams was quickly leveraged at the higher level of the discussions and decisions of the entire Council of Five Hundred. And the work of the Council was immediately leveraged at the level of the organisation-wide Assembly, through the agendas formulated by the Council and through the Council's recommendations on legislative items that came before the Assembly. The result was that a vast body of highly diverse local knowledge—technical and social—was effectively aggregated and made practically available to the organisation as a whole. This helps to explain how legislative decision-making by a mass of six thousand or more participatory citizens, which sounds initially like a recipe for chaos and disaster, quickly became an effective method of governance for a complex organization constantly faced with difficult challenges.

The core governance principles of equality, networks, and self-governance immediately proved applicable across the organisation of the polis. In every area of organised endeavour, the Athenians sought to exploit the synergies that arose within networks of people who regarded one another as equals. On juries, and on boards of magistrates, and in the armed forces, just as on the Council of Five Hundred, the Athenian system combined men with diverse but compatible skill sets into teams (large and small), teams that both served the needs of the organisation and, in the process, furthered the education of each individual. Service to the polis in the capacity of councillor, magistrate, juror, or soldier provided a chance to develop a sense of trust in a broad cross-section of fellow Athenians, men who might come from very different social backgrounds and who had quite different personal and local interests. That trust was

¹⁷ Scholarly estimates vary, but at least one-third of all Athenians over thirty, and in some periods perhaps virtually all of them, served a year on the Council. It is worth noting that the philosopher Socrates, who claimed that he avoided most forms of participation in governance, duly served his year on the Council.

developed both on the basis of personal knowledge of individual character, and on a recognition of a common loyalty, a shared commitment to advancing the common good of the entire organisation.

As a result, although Athens was never actually a ‘face to face’ society, it had the feel of a face-to-face society. Although no Athenian actually knew more than a small percentage of his fellow Athenians, virtually every Athenian had access to a network of personal contacts that was based in part on local residence, and in part on knowing a cross section of Athenians from distant parts of the territory. Because the system of governance and the public life of the city actively encouraged this networking, every Athenian was connected to every other Athenian by only one or two ‘degrees of separation’. And this in turn had profound consequences for knowledge sharing. If one Athenian needed access to specialised knowledge held by some other Athenian, there was a very good chance that he could work through his local/national network to identify the right person, and that he would be able to establish the conditions of mutuality and trust which would facilitate the sharing of relevant knowledge.

The new governance system worked right away because it was based on the deep-felt commitment of the ordinary people of Athens to the idea of Athens as an independent, self-governing organisation. They were committed to the idea that Athens should continue to exist as an independent organisation not subject to Sparta or any other outside entity. And they were committed to the idea that Athens should be ruled by the consensus of the citizenry, not by a few aristocrats or by a single tyrant. They backed their commitments with a willingness to offer a substantial part of their time, their wealth, and if necessary even their lives. The new system of self-governance allowed those deep-felt convictions, which had first been made manifest in the Revolution of 508 BC, to be translated into actual policy. The system allowed timely and binding decisions to be made, on the relevant questions, and facilitated carrying out the specific practical steps demanded by those decisions. All this was possible because the system of democratic self-governance facilitated the working of the organisation as an effective network of people, of knowledge, and of trust.

A very considerable conceptual leap is required if we are to move from thinking about democracy as a ‘constitution’ suited primarily to nation-states to thinking of democracy as a ‘political culture’ suited to purposeful non-state organisations. However, a similar conceptual leap had already been made by J. S. Mill in the mid-nineteenth century. And the leap is surely no greater than that of Athenians in the late sixth century BC.

In ancient Athens extraordinary payoffs followed from making the great conceptual leap of re-envisioning their community as a master network of local knowledge networks. Whether we moderns are ready to make a similarly bold leap remains to be seen. But my remarks this evening were meant to suggest that our leap would *not* be into the dark—as J. S. Mill realised 150 years ago, when he argued that a proper understanding of the history of Athenian political culture could illuminate the way to a more democratic future.

