Commentary 1

Athenian Democracy

*Lysistrata* is a play about democracy. At the beginning, the women form a mock Assembly of the people. Lysistrata, in the role of demagogue, or charismatic, unofficial leader, persuades the others to swear to a sexual boycott. The older women make war together, storming the Acropolis, and the younger ones join them in defending it. The counterattackers, the Chorus of Old Men, suspect an oligarchic coup and repeat the accusation later. The Councilor, a member of a special government board that at this time largely superseded the Council of Five Hundred, enters to sort things out. He makes a resentful speech about the Assembly that voted for the ill-thought-out Sicilian expedition. Unable to cope with the women in scuffle and argument, he stomps off to tattle to his fellow board members. The raucous exchange of factional insults continues. Lysistrata works hard to consolidate her own faction. Cinesias cannot reassure his wife as to his intention to make peace, because he regards it as a decision to be made by the mass of male citizens. Fortunately, he is wrong. Meeting the Spartan Herald, who is on a peace mission, he instructs him to fetch ambassadors and sets off to the Council of Five Hundred to get Athenian counterparts. Under Lysistrata’s guidance, the negotiation is successful, and a celebratory banquet follows.

However critical of the system in other respects, this play shows the government functioning well enough to make peace when sensible people recognize the need. But the story contains sly modifications of democratic structures. If Cinesias were to stick to his plan for debating and voting about peace, a procedure that ordinarily entailed a motion from the Council but could not have left out the Assembly, any hope of a settlement would fizzle out. In the Assembly, all male citizens could participate, and the poor—with their shortsighted financial interest in war—were in the majority. In the play’s alternative universe, the handling of foreign policy solely by another body saves the day.

Aristophanes’ rewriting of the constitution has its historical context. The radical democracy had helped generate and aggravate the disastrous Peloponnesian War, in a brain fever lit by the
notion that the poor, just by being Athenians, could become endlessly better off through the wealth of empire. Aristophanes counters by stressing the need for farsighted, sensible leadership, cooperation, and compromise; these are for him the unradical components of peace. Had he been in the business of recommending constitutional reforms, Aristophanes would have suggested measures to reduce the power of the “lowlifes” mentioned in 170f. He makes a persuasive case that it was at least partly these citizens’ insecure, obsessive sense of entitlement that prevented necessary dialogue. He vividly sets out their attitude through the Chorus of Old Men.

Many of Aristophanes’ contemporaries recognized the damage done by radical intransigence, but by this time the government was too weak to defend itself against Persian, Spartan, and domestic intrigue. Only a few months after the play was performed, the dictatorial Four Hundred pushed aside the constitution and popular decision making. Still in 411 B.C.E., Theramenes brought in a moderate regime. Had it been up to him and not the rank and file of the navy, Athens would have made a quite favorable peace with Sparta after winning the Battle of Cyzicus in 410 B.C.E. Instead, the victory led back to hawkish radical democracy, presided over now by the demagogue Cleophon, pork-barrel distributor par excellence; and the grabby recklessness Aristophanes despised worsened. A far-right reign of terror followed Athens’ loss of the war in 404 B.C.E. I doubt the playwright went around saying, “If only you had listened to me . . .,” but he could have.

It is commonly thought that the Athenian democracy was the ideological model for participatory government in the modern world. God forbid. With a few exceptions, the American democratic experiment has been stodgy and cautious from its beginning. Most Americans prize its negative quality, the slowness of the government to do things to them or to prevent them from doing things.

Athenian democracy was far different, and one of the most important measures of this was the weight of esteem and expectation it bore. Accountable government was a recent, impressive invention. Draco had introduced written law to the city only in the late seventh century B.C.E. All over the Greek world, through Aristophanes’ time and beyond, the horrors of the Dark Ages (about 1100 to 800 B.C.E.) echo in characterizations of humanity as naturally brutal, quarrelsome, miserable, and in desperate need
of law. In Plato’s Protagoras, the sophist of that name identifies the sense of “justice” as the only human survival equipment that counts. Notions that justice could be independent of or in actual opposition to the state were in tiny infancy. Certainly in the popular mind, the city-state alone offered salvation, and the state was glad to reinforce this conviction by claimed contacts with the gods (oaths, sacrifices, curses, other ceremonies) and supervision of private religious functions like the Eleusinian mysteries.

Athenians had a particularly high regard for their city-state, and their emotional and practical investment in it was huge. Never passive patriots, they thought of participation in government as a man’s proper daily occupation. Some much-cited evidence of this is the origin of our word “idiot.” Idios is the Greek word for “private person,” or one who minds his own business. In Athens, this could be an insult. Many conventions confirmed the expectation of civic activity. For example, men were herded out of the marketplace into the Assembly in the morning with a rope soaked in vermilion, which gave stragglers a mark of shame on their clothes. Even more emphatic were the public arts. Thucydides shows Pericles orating at a funeral for war dead, urging the crowd to contemplate Athens, to become lovers of Athens (The Peloponnesian War 2.43), and he apparently offended no one with the implication that the mourners had not already sacrificed plenty. What made the Athenians such junkies of government? The sketch of history that follows may help explain.

In the same speech in Thucydides, Athens is made out to be the original Greek democracy (2.37), and nothing contradicts this. There is, indeed, much to back it up. According to the ancients, one notable feature of Athenian history was autochthony, or the fact that the race had always been there; this was unusual in the Greek world, where people moved around like game pieces sliding and rattling in a box. The Athenians had certainly not, as they imagined, been there since the beginning of humankind, but their settlements are prehistoric, and the momentous Dorian invasion of the eleventh century B.C.E. missed their territory altogether. In the Greek world, more overrunning made for more authoritarianism; typically, an invading Dorian population turned the natives into a subject people who could never get out from under their masters. The people of Attica, although they were far from a classless society, did not have ethnic differences reinforcing their divisions. Relative
homogeneity must have contributed to more trust and interdependence and thus to democracy.

Another fairly unusual feature of Athenian politics is *synoecismus* ("living together"). In remote times, independent political centers were scattered all over Attica; Eleusis, which through myth retained memories of royalty into the historical period, was only one of the centers. The myth about the Athenian king Theseus uniting Attica says nothing about force, and this is borne out by people never (as far as anyone can now tell) having suffered diminished rights or privileges because of birthplace or place of residence. (Qualified citizens only had to make it to Athens to take part in the government, a hardship treated jokingly in the first scene of *Lysistrata.* ) The process of union was probably peaceful and gradual. That Attica consented to "live together" (while most other regions kept separate city-states or created loose federations), and then faced the problems of including such a scattered citizenry, doubtless conduced strongly to democracy.

Athens did have typical social stratification and typical social stresses, and the government might have remained dominated by nobility and wealth, or takeovers might have stuck. (The Greeks called these "tyrannies," not to indicate malign character necessarily, but irregularity: these were not oligarchies or inherited monarchies, but impromptu one-man governments; the Greeks therefore applied an Eastern name to the at first unfamiliar, un-Greek institution.) But Athens had unusual insight in recognizing trouble and unusual prudence in accepting reorganization, with the powerful ceding some of their interests in the name of long-term stability. At early stages, certainly, the Athenians had a justified confidence in creating better government.

Draco was lawgiver perhaps in 621/620 B.C.E. Solon's political leadership may have started around 600 B.C.E., and some years later he was chosen as a special constitutional arbitrator. He dealt with an economic emergency by canceling debts and promoting trade. He made officeholding dependent on income instead of family descent, as previously. The archonship or highest magistracy was now open to any citizen who could fulfill a wealth qualification, and men of moderate means were eligible for lower offices. Either now or somewhat earlier, the *thetes,* or those with an income as low as nil, could act in the Assembly, and he established under the Assembly's authority...
the prototype of the popular court. Other of Solon’s arrange-
ments are cloudier but probably included the creation or reform
of executive structures.

These measures earned Solon a title to statesmanship he has
not lost to this day. (“Local Solons Meet,” reads the headline of a
small-town newspaper.) But for the immediate future, what he
had achieved was either too much at once, or too little too late, or
maybe an illustration of the impracticality of the middle of the
road. The nation snapped promptly into literal anarchy: during
several years (we do not know which ones, but they occurred in
the 580s B.C.E.) there were no archons. But the takeover by a tyrant
around twenty years later was, rather than a further blow to dem-
ocratic development, a means of bringing it about more quickly.

As in the modern world, authoritarian figures in Greece and
Rome could have a paradoxical status. Often they rose due to
popular acclaim and represented the common people better than
a previous oligarchy had. They were not necessarily hard to
depose, and when they did go, they might leave the elite, govern-
ing class with a higher standard for attention to the needs of the
poor. Pisistratus took up the cause of the Hill party, consisting not
only of hardscrabble highlanders but of the urban poor. He had
to seize power three times, by different stratagems (once, accord-
ing to legend, he disguised a tall peasant girl as Athena to act as
his sponsor), but when established he conducted himself fairly
beneficently up until his death in 527 B.C.E. Representative offices
continued to function; he only pulled strings. His land distribu-
tions were extensive and a great relief of need, and his rangy,
opportunistic foreign policy spread Athens’ power and opened
up new trade routes.

Pisistratus came up with a quintessentially Athenian mix of
pork-barrel and propaganda in the form of buildings and festi-
vals. One relevant festival was not even Athenian, but of the dis-
stant island of Delos, where Ionian Greeks from Asia Minor
celebrated the birth of Apollo. Pisistratus had Apollo’s temple
precinct cleared of graves, thereby giving Athens symbolic
patronage of the festival; Athens already had the status of mother
city of the Ionian colonies. The tyrant (or his son Hipparchus)
also founded contests in Homeric recitation at the Panathenae
festival in Athens, institutionalizing Homer, who had come from
somewhere in Asia Minor and written in the Ionian dialect of
which Attic was a newer form, as the archetypal literary genius.
Athenian Democracy

These moves helped to square off, in the popular mind, what was in reality a pretty fuzzy, long-diversified ethnic group, the Ionians, against another one almost equally so, the Dorians. A lot of what members of each group believed they had in common with each other actually consisted of propagandistic reconstructions. Sad. In effect, leaders were already preparing for the Peloponnesian War.

As is often the case, the one-man government show proved awkward to pass down. Pisistratus’ sons lost out to aristocratic rivalry and their own nasty performance, leaving the government again to figure out what to do with itself. In 508/507 B.C.E. Cleisthenes reformed the administration of Athens considerably by an ingenious reshuffle. The four ancient Ionian tribes had been the basis of representation, with a hundred men from each serving on the Council of Four Hundred. This made for factionalism, because the clans operating within the tribes all had their separate interests. Cleisthenes introduced a new federal system, but not with straightforward geographical divisions, which would have left substantial pressure groups intact. He instead created ten new tribes, each consisting of three groups of demes (administrative areas): one group from the coast, one from Athens or its surroundings, and one from inland. Fifty men, a certain number from each deme according to its size, represented each new tribe each year on the new Council of Five Hundred. Each fifty would take a turn as the steering committee for a tenth part of the year. These fifty were the “presidents” or prytaneis, so that the committee serving at any one time was called the Prytany Council. During the initial years of the reform, a preliminary election in the demes seems to have supplied candidates for a lottery, but a few decades later lottery alone staffed the Council of Five Hundred. It would have been much harder now to promote an interest group, in a temporary, randomly chosen contingent with two thirds of which one had little in common, and factionalism within the government probably did weaken.

From 501/500 B.C.E., the Cleisthenic tribes began to elect one general each, and this popular election was to take on great importance a few years later when the commander-in-chief came to be chosen by lot. It being unsustainable for an office so prone to mediocre incumbents to maintain its considerable power, the power slipped away to the elected generals, who were to play vivid roles in a government where official position usually meant obscurity.
Popular history credits Cleisthenes with introducing ostracism; at any rate, ostracism was practiced a couple of decades later, as archeologists confirm through their finds of hundreds of pottery shards (ostraka) with names etched on them. During an ostracism, citizens could vote for the ten-year expulsion of any citizen they wished, on any or no grounds. (The usual grounds were that someone was gaining enough influence to threaten a political balance.) Six thousand votes cast constituted the legal threshold for the ostracism to take effect, and the man with the most votes was condemned. Ostracism was a yearly opportunity presented to the Assembly, but after a fad in the 480s B.C.E., people were not as enthusiastic. But the possibility of abrupt exile did continue to serve the purpose of discouraging wealthy and prominent men from negotiating Athens’ political future privately with domestic and foreign powers alike. Ostracism lasted almost until the final decade of the fifth century.

From 487 B.C.E. onward, even the archonships were filled by lottery. Under the leadership of Ephialtes (early to middle fifth century B.C.E.) and Pericles (c. 495–429 B.C.E.), Athens completed its radical democracy. Ephialtes deprived the aristocratic Council of the Areopagus of all its powers except to try homicides and similar crimes, and all other jurisdiction fell to the popular court. Pericles opened the archonship to a lower income group and introduced pay for officeholders, including jurors. In line with his populist program, he was a hawk. Because the government was strongly redistributive, the internal resources of Attica could never have sufficed for the workfare and welfare and public facility commitments of the regime, including the Parthenon and its massive gold and ivory statue of Athena. Athens had to exploit its empire single-mindedly through tribute and other impositions, although this was one thing that led to rebellions. At this point we are in the Peloponnesian War.

The health of the completed system has come under attack by certain aristocratic and antidemocratic writers (among whom perhaps Aristophanes should be counted), though this does not mean that the system was healthy. Even if it wasn’t, it would seem rather cruel to pass, as these writers sometimes do, moral judgment on the Athenian populace, the poorest of whom were clothes-on-their-back, rudimentary-shelter, maybe-enough-food-for-today poor. It is hardly amazing that they fought to get and
keep government benefits. Moreover, many of their measures have the look of reactions to dismal treatments under previous governments. But understandable motivations did not mitigate the character of the radical democracy, which like many revolutionary regimes recapitulated in more-damaging forms the abuses it intended to suppress forever. But before I go on, I must stress that I am not a historian, much less an expert on the poorly attested and controversial nature of the Classical Athenian state. I can only record my impressions, based on the facts but admittedly sympathetic to Aristophanes.

Elitist factionalism could not be cured by the exclusion of elitist factions. Aristophanes’ own proposal for coping with oligarchical cliques without some change in the system is flaky: they’re like mats in raw wool, so card them out and pluck their heads off (577f.). The clubs were nothing like tangles in the fiber of the state; the democracy had long ago made them an alien substance. How could the government, without violence or repression, control forces outside of its official self, forces to whom it could offer no incentives for good behavior? Elites have a natural expectation of participating in government, and Athens’ elite became viciously frustrated in its long exclusion from campaigning for anything but generalships and diplomatic appointments. Wealthy young men did not systematically prepare for political office, because it was unlikely that any individual would hold one for more than a few weeks, no matter how well he prepared. (Aristocratic young Roman men, after an intensive education in rhetoric and an administrative apprenticeship, took up elective offices in a fixed order, each one serving as training for the next.) Instead, leisured youth roamed around town with Socrates, listening to him explain how obvious it was that the “best” people should govern, while a popular dramatist like Aristophanes could get away with maintaining that Athens actually detested its “good” citizens (Frogs 1455f.). When Critias and his friends came to power as the Thirty Tyrants after the coup of 404 B.C.E., they turned with alacrity to killing democrats and moderates. Privileged groups are selfish, but when properly integrated into a government, they evolve a selfish interest in competence, order, and stability. And when the privileged operate in a sanctioned system, it is easier to keep control of them.

The system did not provide even for popular leadership to operate officially. Since government officeholding was in a forum
of forced and obscure cooperation, charismatic people gained power by speaking in the Assembly and prosecuting in the courts. The reckless Cleon, whom Aristophanes loathed, was a “leader of the people,” or demagogue. (*Knights* is a whole play about demagoguery: Cleon is an evil new pet slave of Demos ["The People"] and terrorizes the whole household until deposed by a sausage-seller.) We naturally read more about the scandalously bad advisors of the citizen body than about useful and informative speakers, but there does seem to have been a tendency for Athenians to reward those demagogues who spoke with all the responsibility and restraint of casino ads and later to display the rage of someone who has blown a month’s food budget on slot machines. Athenian politics exudes an air of goofiness partly because of the detachment of so many players from administrative reality. An officeholder in a political system more like our own at least gains over time some sense of possibilities and probabilities. In *Lysistrata*, the Councilor’s description of the proposal to make war on Sicily (387ff.) parodies decision-making frippery in the radical democracy.

That the government functioned with reasonable efficiency is a testament to the prevalence of literacy and public spirit in Attica. Moreover, political corruption often being a function of long-term connections, coming to an office unexpectedly must have lessened the chances of exploiting it shrewdly, Aristophanes’ constant complaints about graft notwithstanding. Lines 490f. and 577f. of *Lysistrata*, in condemning abuses, actually give hints of how challenging they were. Those who may come across to a modern reader as electoral hopefuls were most likely winners of offices by lot who had to stir up trouble before their tenures in order to skim from fines and profit from other measures during the cleanup. As to how successful the corrupt might be, it should be kept in mind that some astute rules combated mismanagement: independent government bodies confirmed appointments and audited tenure, and skilled slaves, whose loyalty was necessarily to their owner, the state, gave administrative support.

But this seems a cumbersome apparatus for what elections could by and large have achieved. The apparatus can look a little like a carnival ride, designed to give a long line of ticketholders the brief thrill of “driving” a vehicle whose steering wheel doesn’t work. Government as entertainment was not a good deal. Mediocrity was a general drag on the city-state’s ambitions.
Moreover, scantily gifted citizens prizing the equal chance to hold office were aware of the rarity and fragility of the setup, and they evolved a politics of touchy jealousy. Aristophanes’ Chorus of Old Men may be paranoid within the economy of the comedy, but within the economy of history such people knew what they were talking about. They were prone to losing their privileges. They had to treat anything outstanding with suspicion.

An anecdote illustrates egalitarian potshots in Athens. Aristides, who had been a commander at the Battle of Marathon and was styled the Just, once wrote his own name on a ballot for ostracism at the request of an illiterate man and asked him why he wanted Aristides ostracized. “Because I am sick of hearing him called the Just,” the man answered. Episode after episode of Athenian history glides before the reader’s eyes, with a series of creative, even brilliant generals. But hardly any seem to have been able to retire in calm and esteem. A notable number, driven away, went over to the enemy of the time. Pericles, with his long tenure, was a great exception, but toward the end of his life he was prosecuted and fined, and had he lived a few years longer, Athens would have gotten him decisively, I am sure. There was little balance in considering generals’ successes against their failures, and little account taken of circumstances outside their control. Six of those commanding at the great naval victory at Arginusae in 406 B.C.E. were put to death later because a storm had prevented them from fishing survivors from their own side out of the water. This was only the culmination of abuse of authority—in the opposite of its usual sense. For a long time, the state had simply been throwing away talent.

Then there is the question of money. Aristophanes’ most frequent political complaint is that people cannot keep their snouts out of the trough. The democracy could not have blossomed without salaries and stipends to allow everyone to take time off work. (Starting late in the fifth century even attendance at the Assembly was paid.) But had the range of services paid for been less generous—more in line with what the state needed than with what unemployed people wanted to perform—the outcome would have been better. The need for and the cost of the navy were intertwined: the triremes had to ensure their continuing finance by patrolling the empire. The trial courts, on the other hand, were essential in basic function but very wasteful in their
setup. That there are twelve jurors in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* does not say anything about a standard jury size; jurors for a single case could number a thousand or more, each of them earning a sum that was somewhere around a subsistence wage. Some men connived to double dip by registering for more than one tribunal at a time. In Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, a son locks up his father, who is addicted to jury service. The old man proves unconfined (“I’m smoke coming out the chimney,” 144), except when he gets the chance to sit in judgment over two dogs in his own household.

In this play and others, Aristophanes brands the legal system as self-serving and merciless. He undoubtedly exaggerates, but the Athenian law courts do seem to have epitomized one evil of overparticipation in public life: people treating politics as a career were liable to turn procedures, like prosecutions, that should have been only recourses of necessity, into expeditions for profit, influence, revenge, and so on. This is of course a fault of professional politicians everywhere, but imagine a large part of the population becoming professional politicians. And imagine these people, with no legal training and with only loose procedural guidelines, even having the power to rescind laws as unconstitutional and to punish these laws’ proposers.

The nadir of sliminess in Aristophanes’ depictions is the sycophant (“fig-shower”), a man who sniffed out trivial contraband in order to prosecute the possessor for an official reward or shake him down for a bribe. The sycophant stood for a contingent of informers, who would have had no opportunities had the state not reached far into an individual’s life. Diligence, frugality, chastity, and other family obligations; ritual observance and purity; the details of military and civic performance; the satire of a playwright—none of this was considered private or protected in the first place. The radical democracy supplied the machinery to grind any of it to a pulp. And as it was not culturally congenial to limit the state’s activities, abuses like sycophancy simply (or not simply—complicatedly) provoked laws to deal with themselves in turn. Official interventions grew in layers.

It did not help that the police were not law enforcers or investigators (but merely keepers of order at public gatherings and bodyguards for officials—both functions appear in *Lysistrata*), or that the state’s role in prosecution was occasional, and in defense nonexistent. Private people had to act for themselves, and an
immense arrogance arose from the lack of distinction between the state’s interests and one’s own motives.

Old Comedy repeatedly encapsulated the persecution citizens were vulnerable to. Plays show government-sanctioned pests—pressure groups, officials, informers, soothsayers—trying to stop healthy political acting up or raid preparations for a feast. In *Lysistrata*, the veterans and the Councilor are the intruders. Even discounting Aristophanes’ comic mania, something disturbing is visible here. Things were too open; competition was too hectic. Political agents in their great numbers and wide spheres had little sense of natural limits, little incentive to learn “shame,” as the Greeks called the vital quality of self-limitation.

This carried over to foreign policy, in which the democrats could not manage to treat other states with even self-protective accommodation. Athenians refused generous peace offers at times of Spartan weakness. The pre-Christian ethics of revenge and suspicious looking out for one’s own normally created wide polarizations in Greek politics, but the Athenians were the real pros.

The comedy of *Lysistrata* is somewhat pathetic in the final scenes, where Aristophanes imagines that the Greeks—even the Athenians—can be utterly changed to merit another future. The prospect of losing forever that most satisfying coming together of difference, sex, has panicked the Spartan government, Cinesias, the Council, and the Ambassadors into leaping straight to a deal. The negotiation scene (1106ff.) is a short, absurd tale of extremist cooperation. The parties can barely take in the sermonizing against squabbling, so aroused are they by nude Reconciliation. They make brain-numb stabs at defending old positions and then agree to peace in mere anticipation of unspecified territorial compromises. *Lysistrata* is like a mother’s fantasy of pouring bourbon into toddlers to keep them from whacking each other with their toys. Sadly, there is no evidence that the play did anything to hasten the peace.

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