My Work, Research, and Future Plans

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I fell in love with the ancient Greek world in the 1970s as an history student at the Universities of Minnesota and Michigan. I was attracted to Athens after the Peloponnesian War – the age of Plato and Aristotle – for two reasons. First, the nightmarish war in Vietnam was a defining event for my generation of Americans. I thought that the experience of an ancient imperial, democratic state fighting and losing a long, terrible war would speak to my own situation. And next, the rich sources for the postwar century included over one hundred speeches given by elite Athenians to mass audiences of citizens in legislative assemblies and People's Courts. I had the idea that these speeches, long studied as examples of classical eloquence, held a partial answer to a puzzle that my doctoral advisor had posed: «The real question» he said, «is not why the democratic city-state ultimately failed, but why it lasted for more than 20 minutes». How, in short, how did a small state, governed by ordinary citizens, survive and flourish in a competitive environment featuring large, aggressive autocracies?

My dissertation focused on the Athenian response to failure in the Peloponnesian War. That took me to Athens where I spent a happy year and a half working on history and archaeology – my hypothesis was that the Athenian countryside and its economically valuable resources became essential after the loss of Athens' overseas empire, and that this drove a new military strategy. Rather than abandoning the countryside and defending only the walled city, Athenians must now defend the whole of their 2500 sq km home territory. The archaeological remains of fortifications on Athens' mountainous frontier were testimony to that new policy – yet had never been systematically studied. I published my dissertation in a Dutch monograph series, under the title *Fortress Attica*, landed a job as an Assistant Professor at Montana State University, and

planned for a career divided between archaeological fieldwork in Greece and fly-fishing in Montana's trout streams. My plans were, however, cut short when the Greek government changed the rules for archaeological field surveys, terminating the projects I had underway.

So I defaulted to my second idea: that analyzing the form and content of public rhetoric might help answer the "democratic resilience" puzzle my advisor had posed. As I got to work on that project, I won a junior Fellowship at an interdisciplinary research center where the senior Fellows generously guided me in reading rhetorical theory and political sociology. The result was a book on *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* with the subtitle *Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People*. Athenian political and lawcourt speeches often took the form of an elite citizen (wealthy, well-educated man from an aristocratic family) addressing a mass audience who were not elite. The stakes were very high: The vote of the audience determined the outcome of the policy debate or trial – with grave consequences for speaker and community alike. By close analysis of surviving speeches, I was able to show that public rhetoric in Athens involved two-way communication between speaker and audience. The elite speaker remained highly attuned to audience responses – and he conditioned his speeches accordingly. The successful speaker demonstrated both that his elite status was useful for the community – that is, he had consistently used his wealth and education to advance public goods – *and* that he was a "man of the people", committed to the democratic values of his mass audience. Moreover, rhetorical professions of "being of use" and "loyal to the democracy" alone were not enough: each public speaker was judged by his public behavior and record of advancing effective policies. Ordinary Athenians became sophisticated judges of rhetoric; they enforced norms of public speech to parry two primary threats to democracy: populist demagoguery and elite/expert capture of government.

Mass and Elite was more influential than I had dared hope, and I was offered a Professorship at Princeton University. The rivers of New Jersey were less lovely than those of Montana, but Princeton's intellectual resources were irresistible. There, a distinguished political philosopher informed me, to my surprise, that I was not only a historian, but also a political theorist. I took him at his word, began to attend Princeton's Political Philosophy workshop, and realized that my answer to the "resilient democracy" puzzle was still incomplete. I had accounted for the role of mass audiences and elite leaders, but I had

failed to account for the criticism of democracy by, among others, Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle. Their critiques were not mere carping but rather carefully worked out theoretical arguments that called the legitimacy and efficacy of collective self-government into question. So, I began work on *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule.* I argued that the tradition of theorizing that arose in Athens in the later fifth and fourth centuries BCE was a response to democracy's relative success. In the face of the catastrophic failure of tyrannical and oligarchic alternatives, elite intellectuals, dissatisfied with democracy, could no longer complacently assert that "aristocrats, being inherently good, naturally govern well". Plato, for example, undertook in the *Republic* to construct a political utopia, to demonstrate that *true* knowledge, available only to philosophers, was the precondition for any just and happy community. Not only was democracy the context of the political philosophy that arose in classical Athens, but democracy was improved by the democratic response to philosophical critique. The execution of Socrates proved to be exceptional. Critical challenges helped to drive democratic reforms in the 80 years following the end of the Peloponnesian War.

Plato's argument that democracy was predicated on mere opinion, rather than true knowledge, made sense in its own metaphysical terms, but Athenian citizens, operating within democratic institutions – legislative, executive, judicial – made countless choices among policy options every year. If their opinions were untethered from reality, it would be impossible to explain the "democratic resilience" puzzle. So how did the Athenians organize available information about the world, such that their choices led to relatively better public outcomes – often enough to achieve the prosperity and stability that, so I supposed, characterized the postwar polis?

This final piece of the resilience puzzle was especially challenging. I completed about half of a book manuscript when I took up a residential fellowship at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. Discussions at the Center and with Stanford faculty had unexpected consequences. I threw out my half-completed manuscript, rethought the project from the ground up, and moved from Princeton's Classics Department to the Political Science Department at Stanford. The book that emerged from this new start, *Democracy and Knowledge*, used data analysis (I digitized relevant data from a recently published Inventory of Classical Greek City-States) with organizational theory (drawn from the literature on knowledge management in modern

business firms), social network theory, and social epistemology. I concluded that Athens recovered from its postwar shock, and then out-performed rival states, because democratic institutions efficiently aggregated, aligned, and codified useful information distributed across a socially and epistemically diverse citizen population. As a result, the Athenians found the right balance between competing organizational demands of bold innovation (devising new approaches to state defense and finance) and deep learning (employing well established routines, drawing on citizens' experience with the operations of government). The upshot was that Athens built state capacity and addressed many of the thorny issues confronting classical Greek city-states. Following on *Mass and Elite* and *Political Dissent*, *Democracy and Knowledge* completed an "Athenian trilogy" that finally answered the puzzle that my advisor had set me at the start of my career.

The next step in my research was to move beyond the intensive focus on classical Athens to address two wider issues. First, was the so-called "Greek Miracle". How did several million Greek speakers, living in hundreds of independent states, bring about an extraordinary cultural efflorescence in, for example, visual and performance arts, literature, history, moral philosophy, and mathematics? I was now working in a Political Science department and unlikely to impress my colleagues with "miracle" and "high culture" as explanatory and outcome variables. So, with their help, I reconceived efflorescence as a problem in institutional economics and got to work on a book on *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*. Thanks to a rapidly accumulating and increasingly quantified body of material evidence, I built on the scholarship of Stanford colleagues in Classics to demonstrate that, in the half-millennium between the ages of Homer and Aristotle, there was substantial and roughly measurable growth in the economy of the ancient Greek world. That growth was evident in demography (a twenty-fold increase in Greek speakers) and in welfare (from bare subsistence to consumption rates comparable to early modern Holland). Sustained economic growth was promoted, I argued, by the development of norms and institutions enabling greater levels of social cooperation and productive competition within and among city-states. Trade in commodities exploited differences in relative advantage (in, say, grain production in Sicily and South Italy). A common language, standardized coinage, and a shared background culture lowered transaction costs. Competition encouraged emulation of best practices. Economic growth provided the material basis for cultural development,

while norms of freedom and equality limited income inequality and broke down traditional constraints on intellectual and aesthetic innovation. So, not a miracle, after all – but well worth thinking about as a historical case study with implications for our own time.

Of course, efflorescence did not last forever – the "political fall" of the independent Greek states came with their failure to develop, quickly enough, effective forms of intra-state cooperation capable of competing with the empires of Macedon and Rome – both of which freely adopted many of the social and political technologies, along with the military and financial innovations, of the city-state world. But as recent work by Hellenistic historians has made increasingly clear, there was no sudden economic or cultural collapse. Indeed, the third and second centuries BCE were in many ways a continuation and expansion of the "miraculous" classical era.

The second extension of my research was in the domain of democratic political theory. I had begun work in classical political philosophy after arriving at Princeton and had published quite extensively in that field. Then, in 2010, the so-called Arab Spring presented a new challenge. Suppose, I thought, a representative from, say, Tunisia came to me for advice on a regime that was democratic, in that it rejected the rule of an individual or an oligarchic junta, but must be established within a framework of a community with a shared religious heritage, rather than in a liberal, pluralist, religiously tolerant, western state. Was it possible, in brief, to imagine democracy without liberalism?

My answer was a book entitled *Demopolis: Democracy Before Liberalism*. Classical Athenian democracy provided a case study, and was the subject of one chapter, but the book was predicated on a thought experiment. Imagine a country in which a substantial majority of citizens have rejected autocracy, are willing to take on the costs of self-government, but are *not* committed to inherent, pre-political human rights. What would be their form of government? The rest of the book was devoted to the elaboration of what I called "basic democracy" as distinguished from both liberal democracy *and* from pseudo-democratic "illiberal democracy." I claimed that even without a commitment to liberal values, collective self-government requires certain conditions, including free political speech, political equality, limits on economic inequality, and the provision of education and medical care sufficient to enable ordinary citizens to participate actively in the work of self-government. Basic democracy could, I suggested, provide a foundation for a liberal democracy of the sort I personally prefer. It *might* also be

adapted to a society committed to religious traditionalism – but such a society would need to meet the freedom and equality conditions without which self-government by citizens is a fraud.

A few years later, my friend, Brook Manville, and I wrote a public-facing book: *The Civic Bargain: How Democracy Survives.* As in *Demopolis*, we assumed that the fundamental meaning of democracy is "no boss, other than ourselves". Collective self-governance requires establishing institutions, but also civic norms and habits. We emphasized the role of fair bargaining among those with divergent interests and maintained that political bargains must be "positive sum" in that all parties to the agreement are better off inside the bargain than outside it. The conditions of fair bargaining include a norm of civic friendship (as opposed to a "friends vs enemies" logic of politics as domination). And sustaining civic friendship in a pluralistic society in turn requires the education of citizens, by citizens, in the habits and dispositions essential to maintain shared civic norms.

My most recent book-length scholarly project returned to Greek political philosophy and its contemporary relevance. In *The Greeks and the Rational: The Discovery of Practical Reason* I sought to demonstrate that Greek intellectuals of the late fifth and fourth centuries BCE developed theories of instrumental, strategic reasoning that anticipated the intuitions behind contemporary Rational Choice Theory – and moreover, that strategic rationality was manifest in Greek economic and political behavior. Greek philosophers also developed sharp critiques of instrumental reasoning; they were alive to the practical limits of means-to-ends, cost-benefit analysis. The point of the book was to show that modern choice theory is not simply a product of modernity – of neo-liberal market fundamentalism or the threat of nuclear war. The question of how to incorporate the logic of strategic reason into political practice, while recognizing irreducibly irrational aspects of human interaction, *and* the necessity of moral clarity and ethical judgment, remain just as relevant to contemporary politics as it was in the time of Plato and Aristotle.

So, what's next? For my "young scholars program" I have proposed a project on "revitalizing democracy" with special emphasis on the problem of how democracy has been regained and restored in the wake of tyrannical or oligarchic interludes. I plan for my own contributions to include publications on the ethics and politics of Artificial Intelligence and a book on *Civil War and Civic Duty*. While I wish that this topic was *not* so timely as I believe it has become, I remain

convinced that "revisiting Athenian democracy" – thinking back and forth, between ancient and modern, history and philosophy – offers valuable insights into democratic practice.

I am profoundly grateful that the Balzan Prize committee thought so as well.