THE PERPETUAL IMMIGRANT AND THE LIMITS OF ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

In the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, immigrants called "metics" (*metoikoi*) settled in Athens without a path to citizenship. Galvanized by these political realities, classical thinkers cast a critical eye on the nativism defining democracy's membership rules and explored the city's anxieties over intermingling and passing. Yet readers continue to treat immigration and citizenship as separate phenomena of little interest to theorists writing at the time. In *The Perpetual Immigrant and the Limits of Athenian Democracy,* Demetra Kasimis makes visible the long-overlooked centrality of immigration to the originary practices of democracy and political theory in Athens. She dismantles the interpretive and political assumptions that have led readers to turn away from the metic and reveals the key role this figure plays in such texts as Plato's *Republic*. The result is a series of original readings that boldly reframes urgent questions about how democracies order their noncitizen members.

DEMETRA KASIMIS is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. Her research on classical Greek thought and democratic theory has been funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Council for Learned Societies. *The Perpetual Immigrant and the Limits of Athenian Democracy* is her first book.

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To my family

Contents

Acknowledgments

This is a book about the figure of the immigrant. It is also a book about the routes we have taken to discount its vitality in classical Greek thought and the new ones we might now travel to engage it. It is in two senses, then, a book about genealogy. In the first sense, it is a book about the descent criterion Athenians used to deny democratic citizenship to resident foreigners (*metoikoi*) and their children and the ways that some Athenian thinkers critically explored the meanings of this nativist rule. In the second, it is a book about the origins of two practices, political theory and democratic citizenship, and the ways that our views about these quintessentially Athenian activities have been shaped in part by displacing the metic (*metoikos*) from the center of ancient democratic life and thought.

Metoikos is a word from my childhood. Yet as any speaker of Modern Greek will tell you, it is not the usual term for immigrant. How I came to care deeply about this figure does not always seem as deliberate as the years I have spent writing about it. I have come to see my relation to the metic as a sign of the winding paths that ideas (about the past) take and a gentle reminder to embrace one's useful prejudice, the term Gadamer coined to suggest that a reader's situatedness does not so much close down as open up one's understanding of a text.

In 1971, in the middle of Greece's military dictatorship, the singer Giorgos Dalaras recorded a version of "Le Métèque," a song Georges Moustaki had released a few years earlier in French. Although he kept the music the same, Dalaras used Greek lyrics that the poet and antiwar activist Dimitris Christodoulou had written under conditions of censorship. The Greek rendition recast Moustaki's ballad about a wandering Greek Jew as the nebulous story of a life derailed by sudden and forced mobility. The terms evoked but left unspoken the fate of Greece's political exiles. Within four years of the song's release, my father had left Greece. A decade later, we danced on the wood floor of our New York apartment to his Greek records. Among them was *O Metoikos.*

I owe this book to the zigzagging routes that the *metoikos* took to reach me – from Ancient Greek to French to Modern Greek and back again. In his *Untimely Meditations,* Nietzsche wrote that it was only to the extent that he had been a pupil of earlier times, especially the Hellenic, that though a child of the present, he was able to see the urgency of thinking critically and diagnostically about the relations we construct to the past and the matters we strategically leave out of these visions. I tend to think it was only because I was a child of a Hellenic present that, though a student of earlier times, the figure of the metic spoke to me years later in a classroom and I stopped to imagine its critical promise. I offer this anecdote about the reception of ideas in celebration of the different and unsung ways we come to classical Greece. Most of all, I offer it as a testament to my father's unyielding spirit and in gratitude for the energy and love with which he taught me his language.

*****

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Series Editors' Preface

Among students and scholars of ancient Athenian political thought, it has long been a refrain that Athenian democracy did not produce a systematic theory of democracy. For that we have had to rely on its critics – notably Thucydides, Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle. In *The Perpetual Immigrant and the Limits of Athenian Democracy*, Demetra Kasimis revolutionizes the terms of this discussion by showing how theories of democracy and citizenship were sustained through the invocation across multiple genres of certain key figures and concepts of exclusion. Athens practiced its political theory in multiple sites through religious rites, dramatic performance, assembly discussions, legal proceedings, and other civic rituals, and we misunderstand how Athenian political theory operated if we fail to recognize this. Within these civic conversations, one figure stands out in particular – the metic, the immigrant. Defining, regulating, and supervising metics became central to the project of Athenian citizenship.

Athens built up its notions of citizenship around a fantasy of blood descent and Athenian exceptionalism. Yet the metic constantly threatened to expose this fantasy and the implications of the possibility that a metic might successfully pass as a citizen were deeply troubling to its democracy. Metics' insider-yet-always-outsider status made them crucial figures for mediating Athenian reflections on the conditions of citizenship. In a series of incisive readings of Euripides, Plato, and Demosthenes, Kasimis reveals the contours of an Athenian debate in which supposedly natural differences between Athenian citizens and noncitizens were fabricated through performance, resulting in the fatal condition that citizen status would always be vulnerable to the quality of that performance. In this civic drama, the metic plays a crucial role as an almost-citizen, a limit-case, who lacks the ultimate blood qualification to act the part of citizens but whose performance is otherwise perilously indistinguishable from that of Athenian citizens. And, as we know, sometimes their civic performance did enable metics to qualify for citizenship, a fact that only exacerbated

concerns about the stability of a secure, pure conception of native Athenian citizenship.

In Kasimis's argument, Plato, one of Athenian democracy's arch critics, emerges as the theorist who, in holding up a "metic lens" to Athenian democracy, exposes the aporias of the civic drama of membership performance. Instead of Plato's attack on democracy's "open society," as Karl Popper saw it, *The Perpetual Immigrant* finds Plato in Book VIII of the *Republic* critical of the fundamental hypocrisy of natural differences and the climate of political exclusion that they engender. This hypocrisy means that the equality between citizens is compromised by the suspicion that, while all may act like citizens, not all may qualify equally for citizenship, with the presence of the metic nibbling away at the fiction of the autochthonous Athenian, born not made.

Throughout this book, Kasimis explores multiple forms of reception. She lays bare the different ways in which interpretations of Athenian democratic theory are mediated by the disciplines and schools in which scholars have been trained. For its part, *The Perpetual Immigrant* weaves a rich interpretative web. In its deployment of the critical tools that characterize modernity and postmodernity, this is a work that could only emerge "after Antiquity"; this is a work that both informs and is informed by contemporary theory. In Chapter 2, Euripides' drama of citizenship identity in the *Ion*, in which citizen descent is paradoxically suppressed, is paired with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of closeting. In the discussion of Plato in Chapter 5, another theoretical axis points to Homi Bhabha's theorization of colonial mimesis, which exposes, through a regression of mimicry, the play-acting at the heart of the putative "original." Similarly, in Kasimis' wry summary of Plato's critique, "remove a citizen's mask and you will find a metic lurking underneath" (p. 106), we are reminded of Ralph Ellison's exposition of the mask at the heart of American cultural identity, in the essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (first published in *Partisan Review* in 1958). There Ellison dissected the constitutive work that masks do in shoring up the myth of Americanness in an elaborate cultural masquerade: "when American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical."[1] Metics stand in the wings of the *polis*, as understudies of citizen actors, showing up the stagecraft of Athenian, democratic citizen identity.

[1] Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, edited by John F. Callahan; preface by Saul Bellow. New York: Random House, 1995: 100–112 (quoting from p. 108).

Demetra Kasimis leaves us with the question, "What if the metic is the critical figure of our time?" This is a timely suggestion as scholars of ancient Greek political theory attempt to find lessons for contemporary immigration debates in ancient Greek texts and vice versa. By exposing the deep entanglement of the metic in Athenian democratic identity, *The Perpetual Immigrant* delves deeper, offering a bold theoretical provocation for future studies. In Kasimis's persuasive analysis, the metic presence leads to a "perpetual" aporia that defines not only Athenian thinking about citizenship but also our own.