CHAPTER I

Meaning in context: how to write a history of Greek political thought

> What experience and history teach is this – that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on the principles deduced from it.
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> (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of History*
> [Philosophie der Geschichte], 1822–1831)

> [M]an
> Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
> Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
> Over himself.
> (Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 1820)

It is not hard to find quotations from major politicians to justify the importance of any study of the history of political thought. 'The principles of freedom and the topics of government . . . will always be interesting to mankind so long as they shall be connected in Civil Society' was how George Washington put it (*ap.* Rahe 1992: 581; see Thomas Jefferson *ap.* Rahe 1992: 709). Modern students are just a little more disenchanted, perhaps, or disabused, yet even the severest critics, whether they realise it or not, are performing an agenda prescribed over 2,400 years ago by Socrates, as reported by his best-known and most brilliant student Plato: 'The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being' (*Apology* 38A).

There is, however, a major difficulty or set of major difficulties in writing a 'history' – in any continuous or seamless sense – of political thought. Suppose, for example, that we choose (as recommended by John Pocock in 1962) to try to write a history of political discourse, including or even privileging rhetoric in its particular discursive contexts, as opposed to a history of more abstracted political thinking. It would still be questionable whether we really can reconstruct all the mentalities, paradigms, traditions, ideologies and languages of discourse available to any given society in any given context (Rahe 1992: 12). Alternatively, suppose that we were to adopt – as I think we should – a strictly contextualised approach that

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reads texts in their original dialogue with each other as well as with our own contemporary modes of discourse (Skinner 1969): this mode of 'Skinnerism' too has its critics (Rahe 1992: 916 n. 7), both for its choice of particular texts (set well below the level of the loftiest) and for the use it makes of them. Some critics are, of course, never satisfied.

EVIDENCE

Touching any history of political thinking or thought – as opposed to more or less high theory – in ancient Greece, we historians are hard up against certain unbudgeable or uncircumventable obstacles. There was no prose 'literature' anywhere in Greece before the second half of the sixth century, and none that survives earlier than the second half of the fifth. On the other hand, there is a very considerable compensation for that echoing silence. If we may paraphrase a famous quotation from Shelley and turn it on its head, early Greek poets from Homer (*c.* 700) to Pindar (518–446) were the 'acknowledged legislators of the word'. They were not just arbiters of elegance and taste but articulators, often enough controversially so, of ideologies and moral values. That was especially true of the Athenian Solon (*fl. c.* 600), who combined poetry and politics in the most practical way imaginable (chapter 4). A very special class of poets is constituted by the writers of Athenian tragedy, an officially recognised competitive vehicle of both religious reflection and mundane entertainment at Athens from at least 500 BCE. Theirs could be an explicitly didactic genre, though necessarily an indirect, analogical medium for commenting on current political affairs or ideas, since with very rare exceptions tragedy's plots were taken ultimately from the 'mythical' past of gods and heroes. (The one great exception is the *Persians* of Aeschylus: see narrative III.)

Formal written prose had been invented and published from *c.* 550 on (Anaximenes, Anaximander of Miletus), but it hits us with a thump only a century later, in the third quarter of the fifth century. Placed side by side, the magnum opus of Herodotus's *Histories* and the short, sharp shock of the so-called Old Oligarch's vitriolic pamphlet on the contemporary democratic *Politeia* of the Athenians (appendix II) together illustrate the extreme range of literary expression available both then and to us today. Contemporary Sophists (as defined in chapter 6) wrote and published small-circulation tracts, as well as teaching individually and giving epideictic (show-off display) performances before large audiences. Their writings are mostly lost, however, and it is usually hard to know what to make of the isolated 'fragments' attributed by later, often hostile commentators to the likes of

Protagoras and Democritus (contemporaries, and both, intriguingly, from Abdera in northern Greece). Nevertheless, the Old Oligarch, Herodotus, and – above all – Herodotus's great successor Thucydides are all clearly Sophist-influenced if not necessarily Sophist-inspired.

Some would say that Greek political theory properly so-called was invented by Plato. I would beg to disagree (for the reasons advanced in chapter 6). Still, allowance has to be made for his towering genius, complemented by that of his greatest pupil, Aristotle (chapter 8). Thereafter, the extant tradition is again spotty and lacunose, until we reach Cicero and Plutarch (chapter 10), in, respectively, the last century BCE and the first/second CE. Polybius (*c.* 200–120), however, in emulation of Thucydides, practised a theoretically self-conscious and politically specific sort of historiography, often enough in sharply critical reaction against predecessors whom he despised. One of those, the third-century Athenian Phylarchus, has a special relevance to the practical utopianism of mid/late-third-century BCE Sparta (chapter 9).

On top of the more or less literary sources in poetry and narrative prose, we have a number of inscribed prose documents that betray political ideology. At Athens, indeed, there was a recognised connection between published official documentation on stone or bronze and the practice (and theory) of democracy: to take a local as opposed to 'national' example, the honorific inscriptions of the fourth century BCE set up in the Athenian demes (constituent wards of the *polis* of Athens) celebrated and sought to encourage further *philotimia* (ambitious civic do-gooding) and other such qualities of the admirable man and citizen.

Besides the various kinds of written evidence, there is also the mute evidence of archaeology. For example, the ideological programmes of great public monuments such as the Parthenon speak louder than, if not always as distinctly as, the words of a written text (Castriota 1992; Buitron-Oliver, 1993; Hedrick and Ober, 1993). Major public statuary too can make a political point: the statues of the 'Tyrannicides' at Athens leap to the mind – or would if they had survived (the bronze originals of *c.* 500 BCE were removed to Susa by Persian Great King Xerxes in 480 and replaced in 477; we have access only to Roman marble copies of the latter). So too does the combined figure by Praxiteles' father Cephisodotus showing the goddess Wealth holding the infant goddess Peace a century and a quarter later. Humbler political messages could also be inscribed, literally or figuratively, on painted pottery (Neer 2002) or sculpted on funerary or votive reliefs. Town planning too has its political implications. The very layout of a whole town (on the egalitarian 'gridiron' plan ascribed to the

fifth-century BCE Milesian theoretician Hippodamus, author of the earliest known political treatise: see chapter 9), or the inegalitarian design of a private house, or the inclusivity or exclusivity of a city's graveyard – all these urban plans are making explicit or implicit political statements, of a more or less consciously ideological character. I shall attempt to exploit appropriately all these different kinds of evidence.

PROBLEMATICS

Of special concern throughout will be the following three problematics. First, the relationship of theory and practice – or *theôria* and *praxis*. Greek *theôria* had at its root the notion of sight, but it branched out to include both what we would call cultural sightseeing (Solon of Athens, Herodotus) and religious pilgrimage (for example, participation in official delegations to the Olympic Games). *Praxis* is the agent noun of a verb *prattein*, which also gave rise to the abstract phrase *ta pragmata*, literally 'doings' and hence 'transactions' or 'business', but also specifically political business, the business of government. To be politically active was 'to have a share in *ta pragmata*' (chapter 2), and that was considered in Greek antiquity to be a wholly good thing. On the other hand, *neôtera pragmata*, 'too new transactions', were thought unambiguously bad.

Hegel (epigraph) was surely too sceptical or cynical about the impact of political thinking on practice: does not the revolutionary political success of the 'philosophies' of communism and Nazism count, decisively if also sadly, against him? A career such as that of Martin Heidegger, though, whose philosophically motivated political engagement with Nazism ironically blinded him to the real nature of events, does neatly illustrate how complex the relationship between human thought and political reality can be (Rahe 1992: 795 n. 22; see Macintyre 1983). One particular, foundational aspect of that problem will be addressed in chapter 5, dealing with the origins of democracy and democratic thinking: how far may that usefully be classified as a political 'revolution', and, if so, was it in any sense caused by political thought, theory or philosophy?

The second main problematic is the relevance of class (however defined) and/or status to explaining political behaviour. This has its direct corre-lates in ancient Greek thinking and vocabulary. In ancient Greek culture, from highest to lowest, the habit of binary polarisation – seeing every-thing in terms of either black or white, with no shades of grey between, or reducing complex social phenomena to two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive constituents – was deeply engrained (Cartledge 2002). In

socio-political analysis Aristotle was the greatest theoretician of ancient Greek citizen politics; we note that ultimately – in the last analysis – he found most fruitful a binary polar classification of citizens as either rich or poor (though he was well aware that there were both moderately rich and moderately poor citizens). He based this governing taxonomic dichotomy on real life – that is, on the ownership and exploitation of property, including especially land and slaves. Quantitatively translated, that dichotomy could be expressed in another way as the distinction and opposition of the (elite) few and the many or the mass.

A further refinement suggests that the archetypal or underlying model organising classical Greek thought and mentality regarding politics was the polar opposition of slavery and freedom. Nonetheless, within the citizen body, however differently defined from city to city, the relevant polarity was more typically expressed qualitatively, as by Aristotle, as rich against poor. The leading Roman political theorist Cicero (in his *De Officiis*, or *On Duties*) went far further and argued that it was actually the main business of government, as well as the main cause of the origins of states, to protect private property. Many ancient Greeks, sometimes the majority, disagreed violently, however: this was indeed a principal cause of what the Greeks rather puzzlingly at first sight called *stasis* (literally a 'standing', so a standing-apart and a standing-against, or civil faction, at the limit civil war).

The third major problematic to be addressed here is the history or histories of ancient Greek democracy: of special concern will be its invention (in the late sixth century BCE at Athens, according to the story told by me in chapter 5), development and expansion, and extinction, in antiquity, prior to its relatively very recent (nineteenth-century CE) resuscitation and even apotheosis. If there was ever a 'Greek revolution' in politics, it was the invention of democracy (and democratic political theory) and its extension, thanks largely to Athens' role as imperial capital and 'city hall of Wisdom' (Plato's phrase in the *Protagoras*, 337e), such that in Aristotle's day democracy was one of the two most prevalent constitutional forms in the Hellenic world. Not long after Aristotle's death, however, democracy had been snuffed out first in its birthplace, then throughout the Greek world, with the rare and isolated lingering exception, such as Rhodes.

Of all the many political systems devised by men since the coming of the state (in the sense of some form of organised political community), democracy has always had the fiercest critics and opponents. Aristotle and Plato were themselves not the least of them, but their mentor in this as in many other ways was Socrates (469–399). It is a conventional view that

Socrates paid too high a price and suffered a gross injustice when he was condemned to death by his own democratic Athens. At any rate, no history of political thought in the ancient Greek world can afford to bypass the trial of Socrates in 399 BCE: as a paradigm of free thought – or political subversion – on public trial, it continues to have the deepest resonance for Western liberal political thought and practice (see chapter 7). Nevertheless, the major problem of getting at the 'democratic beliefs of ordinary men' (Brunt 1993: 389) must always remain.

For Cicero and his contemporary Romans, democracy was no more than an unpleasant memory, and, indeed, until as recently as two centuries ago 'democracy' remained a dirty word in refined political society, despite or because of the American and French Revolutions. One of the founding fathers of the United States, Alexander Hamilton (a product of a long and intense engagement with Greek and the classics), wrote: 'No friend to rational liberty can read without pain and disgust the history of the commonwealths of Greece . . . a constant scene of the alternate tyranny of one part of the people over the other, or of a few usurping demagogues over the whole' (1781; see Rahe 1992: 585, 953 n. 115). Today, in the sharpest possible contrast, we are all democrats (if not necessarily party-card-carrying Democrats). We may well ask: how come? One – too simple but poignantly accurate – answer is that the term 'democracy' has become etiolated to the point of meaninglessness, in contrast to its original, full-blooded sense or senses of 'people power'.

EQUALITY

To conclude this opening methodological chapter, I take as a test case the problem of equality in ancient Greek theory and practice. (It could equally have been freedom: see below.) What Raymond Aron (1972: 87–8) nicely calls 'the democratic gospel of equality' has never been more insistently or globally preached than it is today. Equality of what, however, and for whom? Can humans ever be, really, equal, or is the best that can be achieved to treat equally those deemed to be relevantly equal?

All of us, presumably – whether we are ancient historians, political philosophers or just plain citizens – are mainly interested in explaining, or understanding, the ways in which political concepts are negotiated through discourse and implemented in institutional or other forms of practice. Both in ancient and in modern democratic discourse, equality seems to be one of the two most fundamental of these concepts (the other being freedom). Because language is constituted in political action, however, and political

action in turn conditions or determines language, there is a dialectic – or more often a tension – between political theory (or ideology) and political praxis. This is especially likely to be so in an antagonistic, zero-sum political culture such as that (or, rather, those) of classical Greece. It follows that we should expect the meanings of a core concept such as equality to be especially unstable, and to become extraordinarily hotly contested in situations of civil strife or outright civil war. Thucydides' famous account of the civil war on Corcyra (see further below) neither confounds nor disappoints that expectation.

One useful way of approaching this infinitely delicate topic is constructive comparison, both within ancient Greece and between ancient Greece and other political communities. For some scholars, the aim of comparison is to discover the universal. For disciples of the 'Cambridge School' of 'conceptual history', on the contrary, among whom I should count myself, comparison ought rather to emphasise particularity and above all difference (cf., as applied to a different topic, Cartledge 1985). In the present case, at all events, it is hoped that comparison will serve, first, to make us 'clearer about features of our own social and political environment, features whose very familiarity may make it harder for us to bring them into view' (Miller 1990: 427); and, second, to help us specify the peculiarities of ancient Greek constructions of equality by contrasting the set of meanings then potentially available to political actors with the range available today.

In the first place, then, we must ask what kinds of equality were at stake in reference to ancient Greek politics, and within what value system. Negatively, we are not dealing here with the – or a – liberal sense of the equality of individual rights against the State. Even if the Greeks did recognise a notion of individual autonomy, they did not have the fortune to know the separately instituted 'State' in any post-Hobbesian sense, and they did not construe the individual in a modern, oppositional way (see further chapter 2). Ancient Greek claims to equality can therefore only be said to have, at most, implied an appeal to rights in our sense. Nor is the equality of all humankind in the sight of God at issue, nor, finally, is there any question here of sexual or gender equality.

Positively, there were basically two kinds of meanings of equality in question in classical Greece. First, and most broadly, there was political (or civic) equality. That meant equality of status and respect within the conceptual framework of the Greeks' normative socio-political system of polarised hierarchy. Insofar as the Greek citizen was by definition male not female, free not slave, native insider not stranger or outsider, and adult not a child, he was equal to all other citizens, and deserving

therefore of equal respect, privilege, consideration and treatment. Aristotle advanced a peculiarly strong – that is, peculiarly exclusive and exclusionist – version of this equalitarian notion of citizenship (Cartledge 2002). By implication, Greeks, especially those Greeks who considered themselves democrats, operated with some idea of equality of opportunity. All relevant citizen contestants in the (too often literally) life-and-death race of public, political action ideally should start from behind the same line and run across a more or less level playing field. As Aristotle for one was well aware, however, inequalities of birth (aristocrat against commoner, *agathos* against *kakos*) and, especially, of wealth (rich against poor, *plousios* against *penês*) frequently frustrated the translation of formal equality of citizen status into universal equality of outcome.

Second, there was equality of generalised *eudaimonia*, or 'well-being', 'well-faring'. Strict economic equality 'was not a serious issue and belonged in the sphere of comic surrealism or abstract theoretical schemes' (Raaflaub 1996: 155), but the good life, in a sense that was not narrowly materialistic nor mathematically calculated, was theoretically a possible and viable individual option or social goal. Ancient Greece was no exception to the rule, cross-culturally valid, that equality is urged as an idea or ideal against some perceived inequality, particularly in moments of revolutionary upheaval. In 427, for instance, the democratic partisans of Corcyra were loud in their demand for what they styled *isonomia politikê* (Thucydides 3.82.8). Thucydides regarded this as merely a sloganising cloak for the selfish ambitions of a power-mad clique, however, and certainly a phrase amounting to something like 'constitutional government with the equal sharing of power by all people' was vague to the point of vapidity – for what in practice was to count as an 'equal' sharing of power, and who were the 'people' entitled to share it? *Isonomia* indeed might be appropriated just as easily by Greek oligarchs (Thucydides 3.62.3) as by Greek democrats, and Aristotle was not the only oligarch to propound a theory (or ideology) of 'geometric' equality according to which some citizens were literally 'more equal' than others (Harvey 1965). Even democrats, who more honestly espoused the opposite 'arithmetical' conception (every citizen must count strictly for one, and no one for more than one), were prepared to concede that, in practice, equality was not everything (Cartledge and Edge 2009).

The Greeks had a notably rich and flexible appraisive vocabulary of equality. Besides *isotês* and *to ison* ('the exactly, mathematically equal thing'), they deployed a wide range of compound nouns prefixed by *iso-*. *Iso-nomia* stood for the most general and unspecific principle of political equality; *iso-kratia* and *is-êgoria* connoted, respectively, its oligarchic and democratic

constructions. *Iso-timia*, not certainly attested before the third century BCE, captured the social notion of equality of consideration or respect, parity of esteem; and, finally, *iso-moiria* did the same for the economic idea of the equal distribution of some communal goods.

This verbal flexibility in itself improves markedly on our own restricted and ambiguous vocabulary. The Greeks went further still, however. They recognised that equality by itself was not in all circumstances fair or just. So *isotês* was complemented pragmatically by *homoiotês*, especially in prepositional phrases meaning 'on an equal and fair basis', acknowledging that the operative criterion governing equality's implementation is not sameness or identity but similitude or likeness. For Aristotle, a *polis* had to consist of similars (*homoioi*); indeed, according to one of his definitions, the *polis* is 'a kind of association of similars' (*Politics* 1328a35–6). A properly Aristotelian golden mean is struck in his formulation that 'the *polis* aims at being composed, as much as possible, of similars and equals' (*homoioi kai isoi*, 1295b25–6).

One of the strongest theoretical charges pressed against ancient democracy by its diehard opponents was that it treated unequals equally, a procedure that was manifestly absurd and unjust. At any rate, in democratic Athens from about 460 BCE onwards, all Athenians were indeed considered to be officially equal on principle *qua* citizens. That strong principle of citizen equality was grounded in the claim that the essence of democracy was freedom, so that all Athenian citizens were *ex hypothesi* free – both by birth and by political empowerment, since they were 'kings over themselves' (to borrow Shelley's oxymoronic phrase) and masters of each other's collective destiny. On the grounds that they were all equally free in this civic sense, they were all equal. In hard material fact, though, Athenian citizens never were, nor were they always treated as if they were, all exactly equal, identical and the same, in all relevant respects. For example, the Athenians resorted pragmatically to the use of election to fill the highest public offices, which favoured the privileged elite few, the seriously rich, rather than employing dogmatically the peculiarly 'democratic' mode of sortition (use of the lottery).

Athens was only one of about 1,000 (at any one time) separate, usually radically self-differentiated Greek communities (Hansen 2006). Most of them in Aristotle's day could be classified straightforwardly as governed by variants of either democratic or oligarchic regimes. The classification of classical Sparta proved problematic, however, as indeed it still does for modern students of the ancient Greek world. The Spartans identified themselves as citizens under several titles, the most relevant of which to the

present discussion is *homoioi,* meaning 'similars' or 'peers', not (as it is too often translated) 'equals'. Despite their universal and communally enforced educational system, and their membership of communal dining messes (both, we learn from Aristotle, considered by outsiders to be 'democratic' features), Spartans did not recognise or seek to implement *isotês* in any sense other than the ideal enjoyment of an exactly equal lifestyle (*iso-diaitoi*: Thucydides 1.6.5) – a peculiar local variant of the *eudaimonia* sense of equality (above). Towards all outsiders, Greek and non-Greek, Sparta turned a homogeneous and exclusive face, but, internally, Spartan citizens were self-differentiated according to multiple hierarchies of birth, wealth, age and 'manly virtue' (*andragathia*). In political decision-making, too, the Spartan method of open voting by shouting in the formally sovereign Assembly (Thucydides 1.87) implicitly denied the egalitarian one man, one vote principle.

Probably the major cause of these sharp differences between democratic Athens and (on the whole) oligarchic Sparta was the Spartans' servile underclass of helots ('captives'), native Greeks enslaved upon and tied to the territory their free ancestors had once owned, who were politically motivated and far more numerous than their masters (Cartledge 2003). There was no place for genuine equality in the state of 'order' (*kosmos*) that Sparta ideally represented itself to embody. Spartans could not afford to practise genuine egalitarianism, only the pseudo-egalitarian 'geometric' variety favoured by Athenian oligarchs. This key difference between the *politeiai* – 'ways of life' as well as 'constitutions', as we shall see – of Sparta and Athens is a suitable point with which to end this opening chapter.