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978-1-107-04168-4 - Politics and the Street in Democratic Athens

Alex Gottesman

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POLITICS AND THE STREET IN DEMOCRATIC ATHENS

This book is the first in-depth study of the classical Athenian public sphere. It examines how public opinion was created by impromptu theatrics and by gossip, and how it flowed into and out of the civic institutions. Athenians did not have hookah bars or coffee shops but they did socialize in symposia and gymnasia and workshops, and above all in the Agora. These represented the Athenian “Street,” an informal political space that was seen as qualitatively different from the institutional space of the Assembly, the Council, and the courts where elite orators held sway. The book explores how Athenians of all sorts, such as politicians, slaves, and philosophers, sought to exploit the resources of the “Street” in pursuit of their aims.

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Preface

“The Street” in the title of this book derives from a metaphor that has in recent years become quite prominent in the news media. This metaphor has an interesting history.¹ It originally derived from an Arabic metaphor (*al-shari*) for a general public mood or sentiment. Arabic writers might refer to the “British street,” the “American street,” or the “Israeli street.” Western social scientists adopted the term in the 1970s and 80s as a scare-quoted description of the Arabic concept. From there it entered media discourse as a *sui generis* phenomenon, applied exclusively to Arabic-speaking countries. The term appears more frequently after 9/11 but without its scare-quotes, crowding out the term “Arab public opinion” that appeared regularly until then. Unlike that term, however, it describes a distinctive kind of politics. As one newspaper writer put it: “The Arab street: the well-worn phrase evokes men clustered around dusty coffee-house tables, discussing the events of the day with well-earned cynicism between puffs on a hookah – yet suddenly able to turn into a mob, powerful enough to sweep away governments.”² I find in the metaphor a useful concept for what I propose to study, and a superior one to the Western concept of “public opinion.” There are two reasons for this. First, the metaphor has both negative and positive connotations that “public opinion” lacks (being in itself either positive or neutral). The passage quoted above captures both sets of these connotations. The positive connotations evoke a mood of sociality and political criticism almost resembling a Habermasian model of the public sphere. The term’s negative connotations conjure a threat of mob violence.

¹ See Regier and Khalidi 2009. ² See Kifner 2001.

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In “the Arab Street” informal discussion is always on the verge of mobilizing violence toward political aims.

The second reason why this metaphor is a useful concept for me is because it describes a politicized social space that is marginal to the governmental institutions. Note that the tables are “dusty.” The hookah-smokers gathered around them are not the opinion-leading elites our media are accustomed to focus on, such as business leaders and politicians. They are the politically marginal. And yet, though the occupiers of the Arab Street are politically marginal they are also politically engaged in a way that we Westerners are not. There is no comparable Western concept that describes a sphere of politically engaged sociality that is at the same time marginal to the political process. Perhaps the “kitchen table” metaphor comes close, but that image familiar from contemporary campaign rhetoric is strictly a domestic, private space usually crowded with unpaid bills over which concerned parents discuss which candidate’s policies are most likely to help pay them. Imagined conversations over the “kitchen table” rarely lead to violent demonstrations – although perhaps they should.

As I conceive it, the Athenian Street, like the Arab Street, had positive and negative sides that depended on one’s perspective. The positive side fostered political interaction across a wide spectrum of statuses and classes. Participants here were not just the institutionally active, elite orators but also the passive citizens who never attended assemblies or courts, as well as non-citizens such as foreigners, women, and even slaves. Athenians did not have hookah bars or coffee shops but they did socialize in symposia and gymnasia and shops, and above all in the Agora. These (especially the shops) were seen as informal, politically marginal spaces that were qualitatively different from the institutional spaces of the Assembly, the Council, and the courts where the orators held an uneasy sway.

The negative side of the Athenian Street is different from the negative side of the Arab Street. As far as we can tell, the Athenian Street did not erupt into regime-changing violence very often, nor was there a fear that it might. In fact, phenomena of political violence such as riots were quite rare in Athens compared to other times and places.³ This

³ For a possible exception see Ober 1993, with the response and counter-response in Raaflaub 1998a; 1998b; Ober 1998a.

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makes sense. A political system that gives its subjects the opportunity to exercise influence (or “allots them honor,” as Aristotle understood it) is less likely to be overthrown from within. The negative side of the Athenian Street, as critics both ancient and modern complain, is that it could derail institutional proceedings and lead to bad outcomes by introducing the emotional influences of the crowd.

This criticism also makes sense, for the Athenian governmental institutions *needed* the Street in a way that modern representative institutions and hierarchies do not. In the absence of an enforcement arm like a police force, Athenian governmental institutions needed Athenians to talk about their work and acts. This was just about the only way in which anything they decided would be carried out. Yet the institutions also needed the Street to remain marginal to the political process. It would defeat the logic of the governmental institutions if Athenians did not see them as an accurate representation of the entirety of politics. This paradox was the source of a tension. This book seeks to understand the role that tension played in the political life of the city, and how various Athenians (politicians, slaves, and philosophers) sought to use it in pursuit of their aims.

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