The Fragility of Democracy: lessons from the classical past

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The decline of democracy in print
Classical Greek political thinkers

Thucydides

Plato and Aristotle

Socrates
Democracy in classical Athens

The Pnyx, where the Athenian citizen assembly was held
Pericles addresses the Athenians
Athens as ‘a model for others’

Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people... We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. (Thucydides 2.37.3-4)

... his successors, who were more on a level with each other... adopted methods of demagogy which resulted in their losing control over the actual conduct of affairs. Such a policy... naturally led to a number of mistakes, among which was the Sicilian expedition (2.65.10-11)

Pericles (c. 495-429 BCE), Athenian politician and general
Democracy
The result of this excessive enthusiasm of the majority was that the few who actually were opposed to the expedition were afraid of being thought unpatriotic if they voted against it, and so they kept quiet. (6.24.4)
You will perhaps find it hard to believe me, just as you have others, in what I have to say about the reality of this invasion, and I am aware that those who express or repeat views that seem incredible not only fail to carry conviction but are actually thought to be out of their minds.

Nonetheless, I will not be inhibited by this fear at a time when our city is in danger, since I am sure in myself that I am better informed than others in what I have to say.

Thucydides 6.33.1
The debate at Syracuse:
Athenagoras’ response

You talk of the Athenians. Anyone who does not want them to be so misguided as to come here and fall into our hands is either a coward or a traitor to the city. As for those who spread this sort of news and make you frightened, I don’t wonder so much at their audacity as at their lack of sense if they think we don’t see through them. The fact is they have reasons of their own to be frightened and they want to reduce the city to panic so that public fears overshadow their own.

Thucydides 6.36.1-2
Athenagoras’ response (2)

People here are the ones fabricating stories which are not true and never will be, and I have been aware, not just for the first time but from way back, that what they want is to strike panic into your populace at large, either with reports of this kind (and still more mischievous ones) or through direct action, in order to take control of the city themselves.

Thucydides 6.38.2
A failure of political knowledge?

‘I might compare them to a man who studies the moods and desires of a mighty strong beast who is fed by him. He would learn how to approach and handle him, also at what times and from what causes he is dangerous or the reverse, and what is the meaning of his various cries...

You may suppose further, that when he has become perfect in all this, he calls his knowledge wisdom, and makes of it a system or art, which he proceeds to teach…’

(Plato, Republic 6.493cd)
The demagogue

A demagogue or rabble-rouser is a leader in a democracy who gains popularity by exploiting prejudice and ignorance among the common people, whipping up the passions of the crowd and shutting down reasoned deliberation. Wikipedia
Plato’s Republic: the soul of the tyrant

Now, however, under the tyranny of erotic love, he has permanently become while awake what he used to become occasionally while asleep, and he won’t hold back from any terrible murder or from any kind of food or act.

But rather, erotic love lives like a tyrant within him, in complete anarchy and lawlessness as his sole ruler (monarchos), and drives him, as if he were a city, to dare anything that will provide sustenance for itself and the unruly mob around it...

Plato Republic 9.574e-575a
Democracy and reconciliation

‘Mourning Athena’
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References and further reading

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