

Eight Billion Cheers for Direct Democracy

Direct Democracy is
Humankind's Last,
Best, and Only Hope

Moti Nissani



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ISBN: 979-8-9865730-0-7

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Title: Eight Billion Cheers for Direct Democracy: Direct Democracy is Humanity's Last, Best, and Only Hope / Moti Nissani

First published: 2023.

Publisher: Dying of the Light Press

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Includes bibliographical references.

Subjects: Direct Democracy—Real Democracy—Oligarchy—Representative Democracy—Dictatorship—Sortition—Referendum—Athenian Model of Direct Democracy

Starvation—Human Extinction—Human Prospect—State of the Environment—Hunger—Nuclear War—Nuclear Power—Environmental tipping points

United states—United Kingdom—China

Plato—Thucydides—Plutarch—Robert Michels

Cultural Anthropology—Hunter-Gatherers—Ancient Athens—Ancient Thebes—Ancient Sparta—Persia—United States—Switzerland—Berlin Philharmonic—Mondragon Corporation—Iceland.

Cover photo: Nel Simon's 1998 sculpture, *Desenkadená'* (*Unchained or Break the Chain*), Curaçao.

Inspiration for subtitle: Barber, Benjamin, R., 2003, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*

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About The Author

Dr. Moti Nissani holds degrees in philosophy, psychology, and genetics. He taught at the Interdisciplinary Studies Program and the Department of Biology, Wayne State University, for 20 years and served as a Fulbright Professor at the Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. He taught university-level courses in biology, astronomy, history, writing, critical thinking, and interdisciplinarity. He taught in China, served as a visiting professor in Cuba and Myanmar, and worked as a postdoctoral fellow at Flinders University, South Australia. He was a recipient of the National Institute of Health postdoctoral fellowships at the Universities of Wisconsin and California. He is the author of *Lives in the Balance: The Cold War and American Politics, 1945-1992*, and *the Encyclopedia of Domestic Assassinations*, a co-author of *Flax Golden Tales*, and a contributor to academic book collections. He published original, peer-reviewed, academic articles in such diverse fields as politics, history, history of science, environmental biology, climate disruptions, media studies, cognitive psychology, genetics, developmental biology, biofeedback, and interdisciplinarity. Since 2008, he has posted dozens of articles in the alternative press, documenting the shortcomings and crimes of contemporary systems of governance, highlighting humanity's gradual and needless slide towards perpetual wars, greater wealth inequalities, neo-feudalism, and probable extinction; and showing that a far better world is possible.

Preface

Democracy does not exist in practice. At best we have what the ancients would have called elective oligarchies with strong monarchical elements. — John Burnheim¹

Strong democracy . . . is humankind's last, best, and only hope. — Benjamin R. Barber²

This book shows that direct democracy — as opposed to such token democracies as India, the Russian Federation, or the United States — provides the best hope for a free, just, prosperous, peaceful, and sustainable future. It defends the direct democracy framework as it was once practiced by the Athenians and other Greeks, and as it is practiced today by some subnational groups. It specifically indicts such minority-ruled systems as representative “democracies,” oligarchies, theocracies, president-for-life arrangements, and dictatorships.

There are many variations of direct democracy, but they all share one attribute: The people govern themselves. That is what the Greeks called democracy (rule of the people) and what is now called direct or real democracy. The qualifiers direct or real must be added since all contemporary countries calling themselves democracies are ruled by minorities and would be viewed by the ancient Greeks as oligarchies or dictatorships.³

Ancient Greeks almost certainly wrote many ingenious defenses of democracy, but their writings were destroyed by the ravages of time and by the oligarchies and dictatorships that followed the demise of Greek democracies. There are, however, many extant defenses of direct democracy, thus raising the question: Why write another?

Three features of this book justify its existence.

Empirical approach. Many treatments present a priori arguments for or against direct democracy,⁴ or, at times, a combination of theoretical and empirical arguments. Sadly, however, theoretical arguments in the social sciences and humanities, although instructive, are almost always inconclusive. Some writers believe that history will end with the dictatorship of the proletariat, while others glibly assure us that it has already ended — with neo-liberal economics. Similarly, some writers argue for economic equality, others for the concentration of wealth in a few hands, while still others for the idea that the best way to improve the economic situation of the poor is to give more money to the rich.

All such theorists mistakenly believe that they can reason their way to the truth. By contrast, for the most part, this book makes the case for direct democracy by relying on facts and empirical generalizations. And the one chapter that is partially devoted to theory does not set for itself the unachievable goal of proving the superiority of direct democracy. Instead, it only shows that direct democracy can be defended, at the very least, just as well as dictatorships, oligarchies, representative “democracies,” and totalitarianism.

Interdisciplinarity. Most writers on direct democracy are specialists, often anthropologists, political scientists, historians, or classical scholars. They thus frequently fail to incorporate crucially relevant cross-disciplinary insights.

By consciously trying to avoid the narrow vision of specialists, the more holistic approach of this book enjoys distinct advantages. It makes the case for direct democracy far more compelling.⁵ It underscores the urgency of replacing current political systems with direct democracy. It explains why, paradoxically, most people are, at best, lukewarm about the idea of governing themselves. It allows us to see that, far from being an oddity, direct democracy is the default condition of human societies. By covering Athens and Switzerland at great length, it allows us to appreciate the achievements, intricacies, and potential of direct democracy. By comparing direct and representative democracies, it allows us to see that we can do better than we are doing now, and that we can do so by combining the best features of both. By providing a few present-day illustrations, it shows that direct democracy can accomplish just as much now as it did in the past. Finally, this approach provides useful blueprints for the implementation of direct democracy in the contemporary world.

We live, however, in a world of specialists, and have been conditioned to view with suspicion holistic undertakings. “No man is thought worthy of a voice in politics,” says Bertrand Russell, “unless he ignores or does not know nine tenths of the most important relevant facts.” Intellectually, an interdisciplinary approach to complex topics is by far superior to the one-tenth approaches. Psychologically, however, it is far more likely to be misunderstood and ignored.⁶

Calling a fig a fig and a trough a trough. Besides its empirical and interdisciplinary emphases, this book is characterized by another idiosyncrasy. Most writers and academics naturally want to get published, keep their jobs, get promoted, be accepted by their peers, respect the sensibilities of their readers, and have their works reach an audience. To achieve these goals, they must hold back, consciously or subconsciously. They cannot readily say that what we call representative democracies are in fact oligarchies, a mockery of what real democracy meant to our hunter-gathering ancestors or to the ancient Greeks. They dare not write, or perhaps cannot even see, that the U.S./U.K.’s ruling oligarchs keep themselves in power by monopolizing sources of information, bribing politicians, rigging elections, and liquidating influential opponents.⁷

This book documents all these incontestable truths, and a lot more. Pedagogically and psychologically, this may alienate many readers. What then is the point of writing it? To begin with, it is possible that this book might help a few people see the world differently and struggle intelligently to make it better. For the most part, however, this book is written for the same reason that a child builds intricate sandcastles, knowing that they will be glimpsed by few and will soon be swept away by the rising tide.

Walt Whitman is my guide:

Take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men . . . re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book.⁸

Overview. Chapter 1 shows that humanity is unwisely, suicidally, scandalously, and heartlessly governed, thereby providing the rationale for the main theme of this book: A search for a free, sustainable, just, and peaceful system of governance. Chapter 2 argues that the rulers of humankind have always dreaded direct democracy, and hence resorted to propaganda, phony arguments, distortions, and oppression to make sure that real democracy never rises again. Chapter 3 shows that direct democracy prevailed everywhere throughout most of human existence, and hence, that liberty, equality, fraternity, stability, cooperation, and happiness are the default, naturally-occurring, condition of human beings. Chapter 4 reconstructs the democratic governance of ancient Athens and its unparalleled achievements, then shows that the Athenians achieved so much precisely because they were free. Chapter 5 underscores again the marvel of Athenian democracy by comparing it to the USA, leading to the conclusion that the ideal political system would merge the positive aspects of representative “democracies” with the Athenian political and judicial system. Chapter 6 argues that oligarchic Switzerland's remarkable achievements can be traced to decentralization and to the meager direct democracy component of its constitution. Chapter 7 explores five current exemplars of direct democracy, showing that direct democracy could bear just as many delicious fruits in the contemporary world as it did in hunter-gatherer bands and in ancient Athens. Chapter 8 argues that direct democracy can be better defended on moral, factual, and theoretical grounds than any other political system. Chapter 9 shows that we can comfortably apply the tried-and-true positive features of Athenian democracy to the contemporary world.

Style. This book does not follow arbitrary conventional styles of capitalizing titles, re-stating contents of subtitles in the text that follows them, and citing references. Instead, I chose formats that appear to me more logical and consistent.

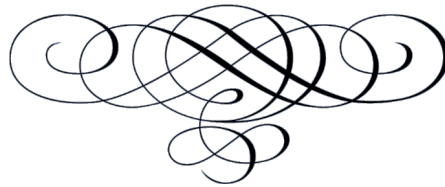
Likewise, instead of following the conventional style of summarizing the views of experts, the book often lets the experts speak with their own voice. This extensive reliance on quotations is perhaps a more appropriate approach for a book that traverses a variety disciplines.

Each chapter is preceded by a self-contained summary, which at times uses the same phrases as the chapter itself. The summaries provide a preview of each chapter and a shortcut for people who lack the time or inclination for reading the whole book.

Finally, notes and references provide internet links, when available. Unfortunately, such links gradually lose their usefulness, as they are often censored out of existence, placed beyond a firewall, updated, or die.



“One important place in Athenian life was not a building: The hillside of the Pnyx where the assembly met towered above the city. Throughout the fifth century, citizens sat either on cushions or directly on the rocky ground that sloped from south to north, filling an area of 15,000 square feet. Around 400 BC the meeting place was evened out and enlarged, and benches seem to have been added. The adult male citizens of Attica gathered in all kinds of weather to listen to speeches and debates, to make motions, and to hold high officials to account.”⁹



Chapter 1: The World is So Wrong

We've got a system that is systematically inflating the wealth of the elite, rapidly suffocating everybody else, and . . . destroying the planet. . . . It's so absurd — psychopathic, in fact. — Russell Brand, 2014¹⁰

Electoral representative systems will fail to bring about responsive or good outcomes. — Alexander A. Guerrero¹¹

Chapter Summary. This chapter highlights the central paradox of contemporary civilization. On the one hand, humanity lives in an upside-down world of perpetual wars, tyranny, wage-slavery, injustice, materialism, selfishness, starvation, monstrous income inequalities, and ever-growing prospects of human extinction. On the other hand, a peaceful, just, free, self-actualized, and sustainable world is readily within reach. The obvious explanation of this paradox is that, to varying degrees, all countries in the world are either oligarchies or dictatorships, and are therefore misgoverned. A few random illustrations of worldwide misrule are provided, including needlessly risking human survival, diminishing freedoms, frequent massacres and genocides, starvation, war on drug addicts and users, homelessness, unemployment, and oligarchic-sanctioned pedophilia. By thus illustrating that humanity is unwisely, scandalously, and heartlessly governed, this chapter provides the rationale for the main theme of this book: A search for a better system of governance.

* * *

This chapter highlights the central paradox of contemporary civilization. On the one hand, humanity lives in an upside-down world of perpetual wars, tyranny, wage-slavery, injustice, materialism, selfishness, starvation, monstrous income inequalities, and ever-growing prospects of human extinction.

On the other hand, a far better world was inarguably within reach at least as far back as 1981:

It is now highly feasible to take care of everybody on Earth at a higher standard of living than any have ever known. It no longer has to be you or me. Selfishness is unnecessary. War is obsolete. It is a matter of converting the high technology from weaponry to livingry. . . . This is not an opinion or a hope — it is an engineeringly demonstrable fact. This can be done using only the already proven technology and with the already mined, refined, and in-recirculating physical resources. This will be an inherently sustainable physical success for all humanity and all its generations to come. It can be accomplished not only within ten years but with the phasing out forever of all use of fossil fuels and atomic energy.¹²

Indeed, “we live on a planet well able to provide a decent life for every soul on it, which is all ninety-nine of a hundred human beings ask. Why in the world can’t we have it?”¹³

Thomas Jefferson's obvious answer: "How soon the labor of men would make a paradise of the earth were it not for misgovernment."

This chapter shows that we do indeed live in an upside-down world because we are misgoverned. Succeeding chapters will show that all it would take to "make a paradise of the earth" is adopting a superior, tried and proven, political system.

Reign of Oligarchs and Dictators

In most countries in the world, misgovernment is traceable to oligarchic or dictatorial rule (for a fuller discussion, see Chapter 5). Real power is concentrated in a few or single hands. The best guess is that, at the very top of the worldwide pyramid of power and riches, there are a few low-profile banking families dedicated to an inter-generational project of enslaving humanity.¹⁴ It is also conceivable that these bankers are allied with other power centers, e.g., the British royalty or the Vatican.

There are major variations of oligarchic rule. Thus, in 2023, Qatar and Ukraine are pure oligarchies, known for their utter corruption, ruthlessness, and subservience to foreign masters. The Iranian theocracy shares the first two characteristics, but its policies are dictated by local oligarchs, not foreign ones. By comparison, citizens of the Anglosphere (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States) are freer, but their remaining freedoms are insidiously being taken away from them. The government of the People's Republic of China curtails freedom and fosters conformity to an even larger extent than its English-speaking counterparts. But China's oligarchs often serve the national interest, e.g., lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty, fighting corruption, or launching massive infrastructure and reforestation projects. Finally, a few oligarchies in northern and central Europe often strike a compromise between the interests of foreign and home-grown oligarchs on the one hand and the public interest on the other. Consequently, these few are among the happiest, freest, and most environmentally responsible countries on Earth.

It is easy enough for Western Europeans, English-speaking North Americans, Indians, or Japanese to see behind the democratic façade of countries like Honduras or South Africa. They find it harder to see that they themselves are ruled by a small clique of oligarchs that is at times referred to as the Invisible Government, the Deep State, or, following Huxley's *Brave New World*, simply the Controllers. Yet, meticulous, painstaking research clearly shows that this is so.¹⁵

Moreover, the real truth can sometimes be gleaned from widely-available sources. For example, an article in one of the oligarchs' chief propaganda organs clearly underscores who is really in charge of the U.K.:

Governed either by or on behalf of the people who fleece us, we cannot be surprised to discover that all public services are being re-engineered for the benefit of private capital.
. . . The financial sector exploits an astonishing political privilege: the City of London

[London's financial district, whose most prominent members are the Rothschilds] is the only jurisdiction in the UK not fully subject to the authority of parliament. In fact, the relationship seems to work the other way. Behind the Speaker's chair in the House of Commons sits the Remembrancer, whose job is to ensure that the interests of the City of London are recognised by the elected members.¹⁶

Similarly, the British royals are falsely presented to the world as powerless and benign, a mere symbol of national unity. To begin with, this family belongs to the handful of the wealthiest clans in the world, and wealth is power. Moreover, like the Rothschild and Rockefeller trillionaires, the royals are powerful enough to conceal their true wealth. In their case, they were actually able to pressure parliament to grant them exemption from the country's wealth transparency laws.¹⁷

And then of course there is the oddity of the Royals' consent to legislation, which is presented to the world as a mere formality. The reality is vastly different:

The anti-democratic potential of the consent process is obvious: it gives the Queen [or King] a possible veto, to be exercised in secret, over proposed laws. . . . All correspondence containing requests for consent, replies and the documentation of any related discussions have always been shrouded in absolute privacy. . . . It is now clear this process is far from merely symbolic. The documents uncovered . . . provide remarkable evidence that this process accords the Queen's advisers a genuine opportunity to negotiate with the government over changes in proposed laws, that they do sometimes secure such changes before giving consent, and that they are even prepared to threaten to withhold consent to secure their policy preferences. . . . There is no place for this process in the working of a 21st-century democracy.¹⁸

All this applies to Britain, which is widely viewed as a jewel of contemporary democracy. Needless to say then, all countries, with only a smattering of partial exceptions, are ruled by a small, privileged, minority.

A good society must promote actions that serve the public interest and suppress actions that undermine it. History shows, however, that oligarchs tend to serve their own narrow short-term interests — not the interests of society. For most of them, the sanctity of human life, the idea that we are all brothers and sisters, the wonders and mysteries of life and human existence, mean little.

Eduardo Galeano argues¹⁹ that we live in a looking-glass world in which justice has been "frozen in an upside-down position." Elsewhere he whimsically captures the essence of contemporary "democracies:"

The other day, I heard about a cook who organized a meeting of birds — chickens, geese, turkeys, pheasants, and ducks. And I heard what the cook told them. The cook asked them with what sauce they would like to be cooked. One of the birds, I think it was a humble chicken, said: "We don't want to be cooked in whichever way." And the cook explained that "this topic was not on the agenda." It seems to me interesting, that meeting, for it is a metaphor for the world. The world is organized in such a way that we have the right to choose the sauce in which we shall be eaten."²⁰

The Oligarchic Mindset

Oligarchs can be roughly divided into two groups. Some have been raised in an oligarchic setting and have conveniently and unquestionably adopted its values — in the same manner that most followers of organized religions internalize their parents' belief system. Other oligarchs are self-made individuals who were perfectly willing to do a lot of compromising on the way to their horizon of riches and power. "In order to get power and retain it," says Lev Tolstoy, "it is necessary to love power; but love of power is not connected with goodness but with qualities that are the opposite of goodness, such as pride, cunning and cruelty."

Apart from a few exceptions, what do oligarchs want? What drives the five Anglosphere nations to live by the sword, incessantly risk nuclear war, and spend more on war-related activities than all other countries combined? Why do Iran and Afghanistan viciously oppress women and peaceful dissidents? Why does Israel oppress Palestinians? Why is the free marketplace of ideas dead almost everywhere on Earth? Why did Canada force people to vaccinate themselves against Covid-19, even though there is no "discernible relationship between percentage of population fully vaccinated and new Covid-19 cases"?²¹ Why is humanity on a suicidal collision course with nature?

Similar questions can be raised about the past. Why did Athenian oligarchs murder the democratic reformer Ephialtes? Why did Spartan oligarchs make the lives of almost everyone in their own country and empire a living hell? Why did Caligula make his horse a Senator? Why did the U.K. kill 165 million Indians from 1881 to 1920?²² Why did the U.K. place thousands of South-Africans of Dutch descent in concentration camps, slowly killing in the process over 20,000 women and children? What drove Alexander, Genghis Khan, Napoleon, Hitler, or Joe Biden's handlers to invade and decimate faraway lands? What drives Russian and Chinese billionaires, who already have more money than they could use in 100 lifetimes, to accumulate more, and more, and more money?

Greed, envy, and ignorance of the higher aims of human existence certainly play a part. But the best guess is that humanity's overlords are just as sick as the fictional Eddorians:

While not essentially bloodthirsty — that is, not loving bloodshed for its own sweet sake — they were no more averse to blood-letting than they were in favor of it. Any amount of killing which would or which might advance an Eddorian toward his goal was commendable; useless slaughter was frowned upon, not because it was slaughter, but because it was useless — and hence inefficient. And, instead of the multiplicity of goals sought by the various entities of any race of Civilization, each and every Eddorian had only one. The same one: power. Power! P-O-W-E-R!!²³

A rare insight into the oligarchic mindset is provided by filmmaker and freedom champion Aaron Russo, shortly before his suspicious death:

So I had a friend, Nick Rockefeller, who was one of the Rockefeller family. . . . And one of the things that we used to talk about . . . the goals of the banking industry — not just the Federal Reserve System but the private banks in Germany, and England, all over Italy, all

over the world — they all work together, they're all central banks. . . . And so, the ultimate goal that these people have in mind is the goal to create a one-world government, run by the banking industry . . . there'll be no more cash. . . . And I used to say to him that . . . As much as I like you, Nick, your way isn't my way, we're on the opposite side of the fence. I don't believe in enslaving people.

[Rockefeller said something like]:

What do you care about them? What do you care about those people? What difference does it make to you? Take care of your own life. Do the best you can for you and your family. What do the rest of the people mean to you? They don't mean anything to you. They're just serfs, they're just people." It was just a lack of caring. And that's just not who I was. It was just sort of cold.²⁴

The rest of this chapter provides a few illustrations of the topsy-turvy world that the oligarchs wrought.

The Human Experiment is Probably Coming to an End

Love the earth and sun and the animals. — Walt Whitman²⁵

No one knows whether the cessation of the waste radiation of atomic energy exploitation or the cessation of coal and shale conversion into fluid fuel will occur in time to permit the physical continuance of humans on planet Earth. — R. Buckminster Fuller²⁶

Although the chance of a disaster to planet Earth in a given year might be quite low, it adds up over time, and becomes a near certainty in the next thousand or ten thousand years. — Stephen Hawking²⁷

This section briefly explores numerous tipping points. It argues — given humanity's reckless record of fouling its own nest, its propensity to employ any profitable or militarily expedient technology regardless of its destructiveness, and the speed at which new technologies are implemented — that the probability of human extinction within the next 200 hundred years exceeds 90%. If so, everything — even freedom, justice, peace, space conquest, search for truth, or spirituality — pales into insignificance.

Warnings of Extinction are Growing in Number and Shrillness

In 1962, Rachel Carson warned:

The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road — the one "less traveled by" — offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth.²⁸

In 1981, R. Buckminster Fuller wrote:

All of humanity is in peril of extinction . . . At the present cosmic moment, muscle, cunning, fear, and selfishness are in powerful control of human affairs.²⁹

In 1992, some 1,700 of the world's leading scholars, including the majority of Nobel laureates in the sciences, warned that "human beings and the natural world are on a collision course."³⁰

According to a 2011 United Nations' report, "humanity is on the verge of breaching planetary sustainability boundaries" and heading towards "a major planetary catastrophe."³¹

By now, awareness of impending doom is capturing the popular imagination. In 2021, a teary-eyed actor, upon returning from space, noted: "The realization once again – the fragility of this planet, the coming catastrophic event, and we all have to clean this act up now."³²

As with all other challenges described in this chapter, the threat is traceable to an inherently vicious political system.

A Multi-Pronged Approach

Many scholars base their predictions of an environmental holocaust on a single technology. Some experts, for instance, just considering climate change, believe that it's already game over for humanity. Other scholars, only looking at the prospects of an all-out nuclear war, are convinced that it is precisely such a war that might spell our doom.

But one ought to look at our environmental predicament as a whole. What happens when we combine the probabilities of all potential extinction events? To be sure, the biosphere is extremely complex, resilient, and hence unpredictable. Still, such an integrative perspective is best suited to shed conjectural light on the human prospect.

Before starting, we should perhaps note that population growth partially undergirds all other environmental problems. For every person alive in 1800, there were eight in 2023. The more people on Earth, all things being equal, the graver the dangers posed by some of the environmental problems listed below. We have been warned about overpopulation but have failed to act — with the dubious exception, for a few notable decades, of authoritarian China. Likewise, in the last few decades, some countries have inadvertently achieved zero or negative population growth. Unfortunately, many scholars outside the ecological community, and most nations and organized religions, still preach the false doctrine of "be fruitful and multiply." Likewise, poverty and lack of social safety nets serve as an inducement to poor people to have many children. Consequently, by early 2023, it is still the case that every year the world's population grows by some 80 million.

The Tsiolkovski (or Fermi) Paradox

There are, in all likelihood, millions or more planets in the universe capable of sustaining life. On some of these planets, life probably emerged as it did in ours. On some of these alien worlds, technological civilizations must have come into being long before ours. It seems reasonable to suppose that such ancient civilizations would have solved the problem of interstellar travel, or at

least would have developed means of communicating over the vast distances of the cosmos. And yet, as best as we can tell, the universe is silent. Why?³³

Here we need to mention just one of the many plausible solutions to this paradox. Perhaps intelligence — as a product of blind natural selection — is capable of creating dangerous technologies but is incapable of controlling them.

It is possible that intelligence is a self-limiting property. Perhaps as soon as a species develops a sufficiently high technology, it destroys itself — as we, with our mounting stores of nuclear weapons and our penchant for overpopulating and for destroying the environment, seem to be doing.³⁴



Scream of the Earth (sculpture in the Carved Forest of El Bolsón, Río Negro, Argentina)

Nuclear Power

In 2022, there were some 440 existing nuclear power plants and more than 50 under construction.³⁵ Nuclear reactors are also used by the armed forces of the world, notably in ships and submarines. China, Russia, and some other countries plan to build dozens of additional reactors. We've already had three major disasters (Kyshtym, Chernobyl, and Fukushima), causing permanent loss of previously-habitable lands, increased radiation everywhere, and deaths. Extremely corrupt countries are particularly accident-prone; topping that list in 2023 was Ukraine with its 15 active reactors. Nuclear power reactors can also be targeted in times of war or civil strife. For instance, during the 2022-23 Russo-Ukrainian war, the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in the Russian-controlled area of Ukraine has been repeatedly bombed.

Indeed, many independent experts believe that nuclear power “is neither clean, safe, or smart; but a very complex technology with the potential to cause significant harm.”³⁶ So we can confidently expect many more disasters. Will we survive 10 more Fukushimas? Will we survive 50?

At the moment, we have no idea where and how to store the ever-growing piles of radioactive waste products. What happens when they eventually find their way to the environment?

Let us be conservative and make an educated guess that the probability of human extinction caused by multiple nuclear power catastrophes is 4%.



Fukushima tomatoes, coming, one of these days, to a grocery store in your neighborhood. It's freakish tomatoes now — and sick humans now and later. Oligarchs love nuclear power not because of its energy-generating capacity, which, in the long run, could be less than zero. They love its connection to nuclear bombs, profits, and an aura of sophistication. Nuclear power is also a measure of the scientific obtuseness of a country's rulers.

Nuclear War

Since 1945, American and English oligarchs have been trying to achieve the age-old dream of former empires: Subjugating the entire world and controlling its people and resources.³⁷

The 1947-50 [American oligarchs'] decision to start a World War III had two objectives: (1) to keep capitalism in business, and (2) to prevent the Russians from employing their industrial productivity to produce a higher standard of living for their own people than that demonstrated in the U.S.A. The oligarchs' decision to start World War III inaugurated history's greatest game of poker, with the U.S.S.R. as a very reluctant player.³⁸

Brinkmanship still rules American policies:

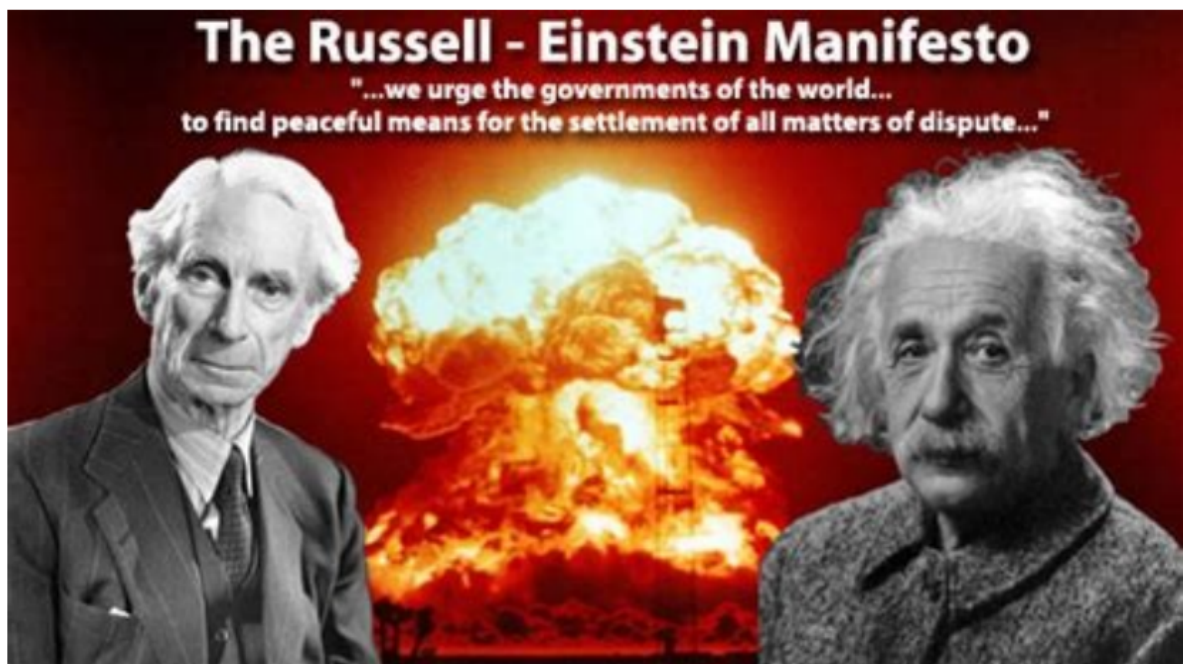
If the United States continues its high-risk policy of military brinkmanship with Russia and China, the outcome, however unthinkable, might be an Armageddon.³⁹

[An all-out war with China] is not the intent. The danger is miscalculation . . . Washington thinks only in terms of coercion because that is the only thing they are capable of — and

because winner-takes-all is the only strategic concept they are mentally capable of understanding.⁴⁰

How long can the U.S./U.K. continue playing nuclear chicken⁴¹ before these bombs are unleashed accidentally, through miscalculation, or on purpose? Nuclear war, in turn, some experts feel, could spell human extinction. Moreover, the probability of such a war in 2023 is greater than it has ever been.⁴²

One guess of an all-out nuclear war taking place and causing human extinction: 10%.



"There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death."— Russell-Einstein Manifesto, 1955⁴³

Climate Disruptions

Now we can only wait till the day, wait and apportion our shame.

These are the dykes our fathers left, but we would not look to the same.

Time and again were we warned of the dykes, time and again we delayed:

Now, it may fall, we have slain our sons, as our fathers we have betrayed.

—Rudyard Kipling⁴⁴

"The critical criterion of definitive global warming is the atmospheric concentration of [carbon dioxide], rising from 280 to 419 ppm . . . Other parameters of climate change, such as the level of methane and nitrous oxide, have risen about 3-fold."⁴⁵ In particular there is the risk of a runaway thawing in northern latitudes and release of vast amounts of methane, a potent greenhouse gas. This in turn could heat the atmosphere to levels that might even fry the world's ruling oligarchs in their underground hideouts.

Estimates of climate-caused extinction range from zero all the way to 100%.⁴⁶ Here we shall choose a middle ground and assign it a probability of 20%.

Nanotechnology

The world's ruling oligarchs and their compartmentalized Drs. Strangeloves are already unleashing all kinds of minute particles (around a millionth part of a millimeter or less than 10 millionth part of an inch) with strange and powerful properties. Like sentient computers and genetically modified organisms, nanotechnology often involves self-replicating entities. No one knows how that experiment is going to end,⁴⁷ yet many doomsday projections can be imagined. For instance:

"Plants" with "leaves" no more efficient than today's solar cells could out-compete real plants, crowding the biosphere with inedible foliage. Tough omnivorous "bacteria" could out-compete real bacteria: They could spread like blowing pollen, replicate swiftly, and reduce the biosphere to dust in a matter of days. Dangerous replicators could easily be too tough, small, and rapidly spreading to stop — at least if we make no preparation. We have trouble enough controlling viruses and fruit flies.⁴⁸

Such projections could stem from a "simple laboratory accident," military research, or intentional malevolence.

Let us say that nanotechnology only poses a 1% likelihood of human extinction.

An Awake Computer

Sophisticated computers are already problematic. For instance, they have, since their invention, significantly refined our capacity to kill each other. Also, such computers have engendered an "unprecedented level of surveillance across the globe by state and private actors" — a gross infringement of privacy and human rights.⁴⁹

The worst, perhaps, is yet to come. Some experts suspect that we're nearing the point where a computer or an interconnected computer network could become sentient. Such a singular event, which might or might not come to pass, could be humanity's only lasting legacy. We're talking here, of course, about Karel Capek's R.U.R. scenario of revolting self-aware computers. Here, for instance, is Stephen Hawking:

The development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race. It would take off on its own and re-design itself at an ever-increasing rate. Humans, who are limited by slow biological evolution, couldn't compete, and would be superseded. If a superior alien civilization sent us a message saying, "We'll arrive in a few decades," would we just reply, "OK, call us when you get here — we'll leave the lights on"? Probably not — but this is more or less what is happening with artificial intelligence.⁵⁰

Let us assign such an extinction event a mere 3% likelihood.

Chemical Contamination of Soils, Air, Waters, and Living Organisms

Why should we tolerate a diet of weak poisons? — Rachel Carson⁵¹

The fundamental problem, in most countries of the world, is lack of democratic control over the economy. One example is the use of cancer-causing pesticides. In a genuine democracy, where people are well-informed and in charge, such poisons would be banned. After all, who wants to die of cancer? — R. Buckminster Fuller⁵²

“Today there are 100,000 to 350,000 commercially available chemicals. Shockingly, only about 1% of these chemicals have been tested to assess their impact on human health and the environment.”⁵³ Tap water in the USA provides one example:

For too many Americans, turning on their faucets for a glass of water is like pouring a cocktail of chemicals. Lead, arsenic, the “forever chemicals” known as PFAS and many other substances are often found in drinking water at potentially unsafe levels, particularly in low-income and underserved communities. . . . when some Americans drink a glass of tap water, they’re also potentially getting a dose of industrial or agricultural contaminants linked to cancer, brain and nervous system damage, fertility problems, hormone disruption and other health harms.⁵⁴

Some small parts of the oceans are already dead while much of the seafood is polluted. The topsoil, water, and air in most places are not as healthy as they used to be. Our bodies are loaded with a concoction of poisons – and this is just the beginning. How long till the point of no return? No one knows, but the possibilities are endless.

Two random illustrations capture the heartlessness and ineptness of the world’s ruling oligarchs.

I. Some of the chemicals in our environment might have already caused a significant reduction in the quality and quantity of human sperm and children’s sexual development. What’s in store for us if, one day, these declines reach critical levels?⁵⁵ One leading epidemiologist, for instance, warns that falling sperm counts are “threatening human survival” and pose risks that are comparable to the climate crisis.⁵⁶

II. The next example involves America’s public schools.

Quietly, over the past decade, a national epidemic of obesity and diabetes has appeared in children as young as five. The connections between food, lack of exercise, and these twin plagues have been recognized for a long time. Diabetes is the principal cause of blindness and amputations in the US, and obesity is the leading cause of heart disease and self-loathing. In the face of these sobering facts, that thousands of schools still serve familiar fast food — and also non-proprietary fatty foods like liverwurst and bologna as nutrition — should have already caused you to realize that school is literally a risk to the mental and physical health of the young. Coupled with the curious legal tradition which makes serious lawsuits against school-generated human damage impossible, I hope you will try to convince yourself that behind the daily noise and squalor, a game is afoot in this institution which has little to do with popular myth. Standardizing minds is a big part of that game.

We must also remind ourselves that there are numerous untested chemicals out there. So thousands more will find their way to the environment, plants, animals, and our bodies without the slightest regard for their potential consequences.

Let's be conservative and say that the probability of chemically-induced extinction is 20%.

Genetically-Modified Organisms

Some governments and companies are busily creating chimeras that never existed on Earth. How long can this go on before unleashing an extinction event?

The transformation of plant genetics is being accelerated from the measured pace of biological evolution to the speed of next quarter's earnings report. Such haste makes it impossible to foresee and forestall: Unintended consequences appear only later, when they may not be fixable, because novel lifeforms aren't recallable.⁵⁷

The precautionary principle (PP) states that if an action or policy has a suspected risk of causing severe harm to the public domain (affecting general health or the environment globally), the action should not be taken in the absence of scientific near-certainty about its safety. . . . Genetically Modified Organisms . . . fall squarely under the PP because of their systemic risk . . . A rational consumer should say: We do not wish to pay — or have our descendants pay — for errors made by executives of Monsanto, who are financially incentivized to focus on quarterly profits rather than long term global impacts.⁵⁸

Let us give a 5% probability to extinction caused by existing and yet-to-be-unleashed engineered, self-replicating, life forms.

Biodiversity and Ecosystem Degradation

On the banks of the Volga in 1921 a refugee community was visited by an American newspaper correspondent who had come to write about the Russian famine. Almost half the people in this community were already dead of starvation. The death rate was rising. Those still surviving had no real prospect of prolonged longevity. In an adjacent field, a lone soldier was guarding a huge mound of sacks full of grain. The American newsman asked the white-bearded leader of the community why his people did not overpower this one guard, take over the grain, and relieve their hunger. The dignified old Russian explained that the sacks contained seed to be planted for the next growing season. "We do not steal from the future," he said. — William R. Catton⁵⁹

Besides busily creating new life forms, we are rapidly destroying old ones. Let us ignore aesthetics, morality, and potential future benefits of existing species, and just zero in on extinction projections. According to one study:

Globally — biodiversity intactness, which represents the proportion of the original number of [remaining] species in an area . . . and their abundance — is measured at 75%. This is significantly below the 90% average set as the 'safe limit' to maintain the ecological processes such as pollination and nutrient cycling that are vital to our survival. . . . Governments possess the power — economic, political and legal — to address the planetary emergency, and there may still be time, but they must act now.⁶⁰

We have no way of knowing for sure whether a certain level of biodiversity is a precondition of our own survival, and if so, what particular species are indispensable. Nor do we know the biodiversity threshold.

So let us give species extinction a mere 1% probability of triggering human extinction.

Biological and Chemical Weapons

In Kurt Vonnegut's prescient novel, *Cat's Cradle*, the U.S. Marines wished to avoid wading in water and mud. So, at their request, a scientist develops ice-nine, a new substance that instantly freezes any body of water it comes in touch with — and any living organism — at any temperature below 54°C (130°F). Eventually, ice-nine finds its way to the environment, causing the extinction of almost all living organisms.

Unlike the genetically-modified organisms scenarios above, the stated goal of weapons is to do harm. Such weapons have been used in the past and research in this area is continuing apace, employing thousands of scientists in many corners of the world. This raises the question: How long until an ice-nine is invented? And once developed, what is the probability that it would accidentally or deliberately escape the laboratory and bring human life to an end?

Let us give such a catastrophic result a mere 1% probability.

Stratospheric Ozone Layer Depletion

This particular threat is receding, thanks to delayed but meaningful action — perhaps the only collective action humanity has ever taken to stave off a possible cataclysm.

But we cannot declare total victory yet, so let's assign this an extinction probability of 1%.

Other Known Risks

For the sake of brevity, the list above omitted other worrisome technologies. Let's say that all other suspected risks, e.g., pollution;⁶¹ lower oxygen levels and acidification of the oceans; wholesale destruction of aquatic systems;⁶² or alterations of the biosphere's biogeochemical cycles of nitrogen and phosphorus;⁶³ carry a combined human extinction risk of 3%.

Unsuspected Existing Risks

Another grave threat to our existence lies in extant threats that we are not yet aware of. It took a long time, for instance, for scientists to be aware of anthropogenic threats to the ozone layer, and one can imagine that there are other lurking, yet unknown, threats out there.

Let's give this a 1% extinction-causing probability.

New Technological Breakthroughs

Almost all the hazardous technologies listed above have come into being in the last century or so. There is every reason to believe that newer innovations are in store for our species, and that — barring the overthrow of the oligarchs — they would be rapidly adopted regardless of risks.

Let's assume that such unknown and future risks pose a 24% joint probability of causing humanity to perish.

We are Playing Russian Roulette for no Reason Whatsoever (Except Giving more Profits and Power to Oligarchs)

We can collectively decide not to develop artificial intelligence, or at least take extreme precautions before doing so. We can, if we wish, stop deforestation in its tracks. We can use natural materials to wrap our food and drive our cars, and we can build everything so that when it's discarded, all its components can be easily recycled. We can, and we should, apply the precautionary principle to any existing and yet-to-be-discovered technologies.

Instead, we do the opposite. Here are several examples of the irrationality of our environmental policies.

We often hear — from journalists and intellectuals at the pay of oligarchs or who are disciples of koalemos — that we are on a collision course with nature because we have no choice. We must, they say, use pesticides and other poisons to feed everyone on Earth (as if oligarchs care about feeding anyone but themselves, see the “prisoners of starvation” section below). This is a lie: Organic farming, from an economic standpoint alone — and not talking about such externalities as soil degradation, decline in insect populations, cancer, or Parkinson's disease — can be just as profitable as Earth- and health-destroying agricultural practices.⁶⁴

Genetically-modified crops, which are often accompanied by the massive use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, are unhealthy. They are often soaked with poisons or they themselves produce poisons, they are one cause of rampant farmer suicides in India, and they pose health and financial risks to growers, consumers, livestock, and wildlife. They are permitted to exist because, to varying degrees, the political system of most countries in the world is dysfunctional.

The next example involves built-in obsolescence. We can alleviate environmental decline by making sure that our flashlights, computers, refrigerators, or cars are long-lasting. And yet, in a world ruled by profiteers, shoddy products are deliberately manufactured because they increase profit margins — even though this entails greater costs to consumers and the biosphere. Here is one example:

In the late 1960s the "Big Three" automobile companies of America found that their distributors were disenchanted with decreasing financial returns and with frequent bankruptcy. To hold their distributors G.M., Ford and Chrysler deliberately manufactured

a few of their mechanically well-designed parts with inferior materials that were guaranteed to deteriorate electrolytically or otherwise. The replacement of these parts guaranteed that all the distributors' car buyers would have to return to them for service on a high-frequency basis, at which time the distributor would replace the parts catalogue-priced so high that the distributor was guaranteed a profitable business. This continuing deceit of the customers — we the people — was the beginning of the end of the American automobile business and the once-great world esteem for Uncle Sam. U.S.A. discreditation has been brought about without the U.S.A. people's knowledge of the money-maker-world's invisible cheating.⁶⁵

The dust bowl provides another illustration of our collective irrationality and callousness.⁶⁶

Another illustration of heartlessness and irrationality involves climate disruptions. Oligarchs are averse to letting anyone cook their fossil fuels goose. So they bribed or brainwashed everyone influential — politicians, judges, academics, journalists — to deny, for decades, the existence of this threat.⁶⁷ Now, a few decades later, when it is harder to downplay that threat, they are working out financial schemes of making billions while pretending to do something about the possible spectre of approaching cataclysm.

Only a few experts were courageous enough to tell the world's people that all along there existed painless solutions. By the early 1990s, people like Amory Lovins and organizations like the U.S. National Academy of Sciences⁶⁸ clearly showed that the USA alone could minimize those threats through conservation. Conservation could have in turn saved Americans between \$56 to \$200 billion a year and vastly improved their health and quality of life. Worldwide, the saving would have been much greater. We could and still can, to give just one example of conservation measures, quadruple or perhaps octuple gas mileage of the global fleet of cars, saving money, protecting our health, and meaningfully beginning to address possibly catastrophic climate disruptions.

So why don't we do it? Simple, the bankers who own the fossil-fuel companies are not content with the trillions and power they already have. If we increase gas mileage, oil price would go down to slightly above the cost of production. Here is a 1996 academic essay:

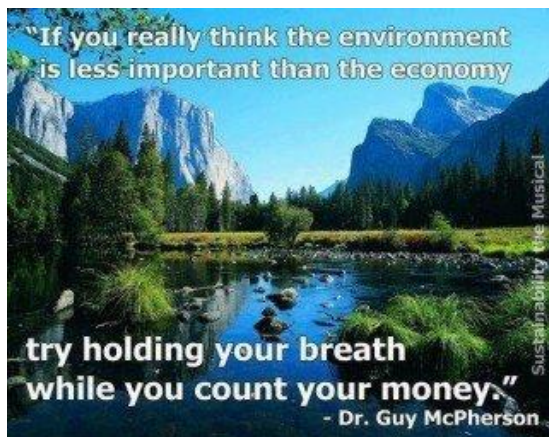
For argument's sake, a conservative and arbitrary estimate is adopted, assuming that the chances of adverse greenhouse consequences within the next century are 10%; of a cataclysm, 1%. Such chances, this review then conclusively shows, should not be taken, because there is no conceivable reason for taking them: The steps that will eliminate the greenhouse threat will also save money and cut pollution, accrue many other beneficial consequences, and only entail negligible negative consequences. Thus, a holistic review leads to the surprising conclusion that humanity is risking its future for less than nothing. Claims that the greenhouse controversy is legitimate, that it involves hard choices, that it is value-laden, or that it cannot be resolved by disinterested analysis, are tragically mistaken.⁶⁹

Here are Amory and Hunter Lovins, writing in 1991:

Global warming is not a natural result of normal, optimal economic activity. Rather, it is an artifact of the economically inefficient use of resources, especially energy. Advanced technologies for resource efficiency, and proven ways to implement them, can now support present or greatly expanded worldwide economic activity while stabilizing global climate — and saving money. New resource-saving techniques — chiefly for energy, farming, and forestry — generally work better and cost less than present methods that destabilize the Earth's climate.⁷⁰

Summing up: What are the Chances of Human Extinction?

It's extremely difficult to make predictions about a system that is as complex as the biosphere. So all these probabilities are nothing more than educated guesses. Each one could be non-existent, lower, on the mark, or higher. Still, if we settle for the conservative estimates above and sum them up, we arrive at a frightening conclusion: Unless we learn at long last to cherish and respect the biosphere, the probability that human beings (and most other life forms) will vanish from Earth



within the next couple of centuries or so could be as high as 94%.⁷¹

Extinction: Parting Words

It takes a novelist to fully grasp the irony and hopelessness of our plight.

In Karel Capek's humorously pessimistic *War with the Newts*, sentient and prolific salamanders are encountered in some far-off bay. At first, their discoverers offer them knives and protection from

sharks in exchange for pearls. Gradually, however, many of the world's nations avail themselves of these sentient creatures for other purposes, including war. In a few years, the salamanders run out of living space. To accommodate their growing numbers, they flood countries, one at a time. To do this, they need supplies from other countries and from merchants of the soon-to-be ravaged country itself. Needless to say, the salamanders have no trouble securing everything they need. At the end, humanity is on the verge of sinking and drowning; not so much by the newts, but by the greed, shortsightedness, and colossal stupidity of its rulers.

Freedom

You get freedom by letting your enemy know that you'll do anything to get your freedom.
— Malcolm X⁷²

Worldwide, freedom and human dignity are under attack. The quotes below highlight that decline in the USA, a country that is still freer than most.

All of those freedoms we cherish — the ones enshrined in the Constitution, the ones that affirm our right to free speech and assembly, due process, privacy, bodily integrity, the right to not have police seize our property without a warrant, or search and detain us without probable cause — amount to nothing when the government and its agents are

allowed to disregard those prohibitions on government overreach at will. This is the grim reality of life in the American police state. In fact, in the face of the government's ongoing power grabs, our so-called rights have been reduced to mere technicalities, privileges that can be granted and taken away, all with the general blessing of the courts. This is what one would call a slow death by a thousand cuts, only it's the Constitution being inexorably bled to death by the very institution (the judicial branch of government) that is supposed to be protecting it (and us) from government abuse. . . . As a result, the police and other government agents have been generally empowered to probe, poke, pinch, taser, search, seize, strip and generally manhandle anyone they see fit in almost any circumstance. . . . When such instances of abuse are continually validated by a judicial system that kowtows to every police demand, no matter how unjust, no matter how in opposition to the Constitution, one can only conclude that the system is rigged. . . . A review of critical court rulings over the past several decades, including rulings affirming qualified immunity protections for government agents by the U.S. Supreme Court, reveals a startling and steady trend towards pro-police state rulings by an institution concerned more with establishing order, protecting the ruling class, and insulating government agents from charges of wrongdoing than with upholding the rights enshrined in the Constitution. . . . The American dream of freedom and justice for all has turned into a living nightmare.⁷³

All across the country . . . men and women . . . are being terminated for daring to believe that they . . . should not be forced, against their conscience or better judgment, to choose between individual liberty and economic survival; and that they — and not the government . . . have dominion over their bodies. . . . This is how freedom falls and tyranny rises. . . . More than terrorism, more than domestic extremism, more than gun violence and organized crime, the U.S. government has become a greater menace to the life, liberty and property of its citizens.⁷⁴

Surveillance cameras, biosensors, scanners, and face recognition technologies track our movements. When a government watches you twenty-four hours a day you cannot use the word "liberty." This is the relationship between a master and a slave. Full surveillance, as political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote, is not a means to discover or prevent crimes, but a device to have "on hand when the government decides to arrest a certain category of the population."

Only when ruling elites become worried about survival do they react. Appealing to the better nature of the powerful is useless. They don't have one. Our prison-industrial complex, which holds 2.3 million prisoners — 22 percent of the world's prison population — makes money by keeping prisons full.

Prisoners are charged for visits to the infirmary and the dentist. Prisoners must pay the state for a fifteen-minute deathbed visit to an immediate family member, or for a fifteen-minute visit to a funeral home to view the deceased. New Jersey, like most other states, forces a prisoner to reimburse the system for overtime wages paid to the two guards who accompany him or her to the visit or viewing, plus mileage cost. The charge can be as high as \$945.04 in New Jersey. It can take years to pay off a visit with a dying father or mother when you make less than \$30 a month.

If a prisoner who is fined \$10,000 at sentencing relies solely on a prison salary, he or she will owe about \$4,000 after making monthly payments for twenty-five years. Prisoners often leave prison in debt to the state. And if they cannot continue to make regular payments — difficult because of high unemployment among ex-felons — they are sent back to prison. High recidivism is part of the design.

The United States, from 1970 to 2005, increased its prison population by about 700 percent . . . Private prisons account for nearly all newly built prisons.⁷⁵

Or take Russia:

A man believed to be an inmate at the tuberculosis facility can be seen lying strapped to a bed and screaming while staff repeatedly violate him with a stick in a horrifying minutes-long ordeal. Other clips . . . show prisoners being urinated on and forced to perform sexual acts in front of the camera.⁷⁶

Massacres and Genocides

Massacres and genocides are depressingly common in human history.⁷⁷ Historian Michael Parenti describes a few, with a special focus on the U.S.:

Through much of history the abnormal has been the norm. This is a paradox to which we should attend. Aberrations, so plentiful as to form a terrible normality of their own, descend upon us with frightful consistency.

The number of massacres in history, for instance, is almost more than we can record. There was the New World holocaust, consisting of the extermination of indigenous Native American peoples throughout the western hemisphere, extending over four centuries or more, continuing into recent times in the Amazon region. . . .

There was the slaughter of more than half a million socialistic or democratic nationalist Indonesians by the U.S.-supported Indonesian military in 1965, eventually followed by the extermination of 100,000 East Timorese by that same U.S.-backed military.

Consider the 78-days of NATO's aerial destruction of Yugoslavia complete with depleted uranium, and the bombings and invasion of Panama, Grenada, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Western Pakistan, Afghanistan, and now the devastating war of attrition brokered against Syria. And as I write [early 2013], the U.S.-sponsored sanctions against Iran are seeding severe hardship for the civilian population of that country. . . .

The world's dreadful aberrations are so commonplace and unrelenting that they lose their edge and we become inured to the horror of it all. 'Who today remembers the Armenians?' Hitler is quoted as having said while plotting his 'final solution' for the Jews. Who today remembers the Iraqis and the death and destruction done to them on a grand scale by the U.S. invasion of their lands? William Blum reminds us that more than half the Iraq population is either dead, wounded, traumatized, imprisoned, displaced, or exiled, while their environment is saturated with depleted uranium (from U.S. weaponry) inflicting horrific birth defects.

What is to be made of all this? First, we must not ascribe these aberrations to happenstance, innocent confusion, and unintended consequences. Nor should we believe the usual rationales about spreading democracy, fighting terrorism, providing humanitarian rescue, protecting U.S. national interests and other such rallying cries promulgated by ruling elites and their mouthpieces.

The repetitious patterns of atrocity and violence are so persistent as to invite the suspicion that they usually serve real interests; they are structural not incidental. [my italics] All this destruction and slaughter has greatly profited those plutocrats who pursue economic expansion, resource acquisition, territorial dominion, and financial accumulation.⁷⁸

Prisoners of Starvation

Is it a just a world when, every minute, three million dollars are wasted on the military, while at the same time fifteen children perish from hunger or curable disease? Against whom is the so-called international community armed to the teeth? Against poverty or against the poor? — Eduardo Galeano⁷⁹

When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist. — Archbishop Hélder Câmara⁸⁰

All the organizations, scholars, and governments who are interested in the subject agree on one fact: Earth produces enough food to feed all its inhabitants — and even four or five billion more. — Martín Caparrós⁸¹



Jose Guadalupe Posada's (1852 - 1913) artwork mocks, and his life (including frequent jail stays) proves, the topsy-turviness of our world: "Because this gifted and hardworking man was perennially out of official favor, he died . . . as poor as he had been born. He was buried in a sixth class grave (the lowest category) in the Dolores Cemetery. Since nobody claimed the remains, they were thrown out seven years after his death."⁸²

Since ancient times, oligarchic rule has often been accompanied by a deliberate policy of food deprivation. Chronically-hungry people are too weak physically and mentally, too willing to work for starvation wages, too preoccupied by their bodily needs, and too helpless, to revolt against an unjust system. Apart from such obvious benefits, some oligarchs might be simply indifferent to the suffering of others, while others might derive pleasure knowing that they have so much while their fellow passengers to the grave have so little.

British oligarchs — who still wield enormous power in the international pecking order — are especially fond of the starvation strategy. Their centuries-long pursuits of enclosures provides one early illustration.

Enclosure in Britain involved a massive and brutal dispossession program. It entailed the fencing off or hedging of more than half of all British land⁸³ and evicting the poor farmers who until then depended on this land for their subsistence. Often, entire villages were forcibly expelled from land their families had worked on for centuries. Thanks to enclosures, oligarchs could make more

money from raising sheep in the newly closed-off fields than from rents received from their tenant farmers.

The dispossessed often revolted and rioted, but their rebellions failed, in part because they lacked appropriate revolutionary strategies. Many emigrated. Many others moved to city slums, where they suffered from extreme poverty, hunger, and premature death.

Around 1516, Thomas More described the depravity of British oligarchs and the horrors of enclosures:

Wherever it is found that the sheep of any soil yield a softer and richer wool than ordinary, there the nobility and gentry, and even those holy men, the abbots! not contented with the old rents which their farms yielded, nor thinking it enough that they, living at their ease, do no good to the public, resolve to do it hurt instead of good. They stop the course of agriculture, destroying houses and towns. . . . for when an insatiable wretch, who is a plague to his country, resolves to enclose many thousand acres of ground, the owners, as well as tenants, are turned out of their possessions by trick or by main force, or, being wearied out by ill usage, they are forced to sell them; by which means those miserable people, both men and women, married and unmarried, old and young, with their poor but numerous families (since country business requires many hands), are all forced to change their seats, not knowing whither to go . . . What else is to be concluded from this but that you first make thieves and then punish them?⁸⁴

The poet Robert Crowley, writing in 1549, said that British oligarchs were

men without conscience. . . . Men that would have all in their own hands; men that would leave nothing for others. . . . men that be never satisfied. . . . men that would eat up men, women, & children. . . . They take our houses over our heads . . . they enclose our commons! No custom, no law or statute can keep them from oppressing us in such sort, that we know not which way to turn so as to live.⁸⁵

Thus did British oligarchs set in motion the blueprints of their particular brand of the starvation strategy, a strategy that still decimates Britain,⁸⁶ the USA, and the world at large.

The Irish holocaust provides another early illustration: A country ravaged by hunger yet exporting massive quantities of food.⁸⁷ The colonized Irish were heartlessly butchered:

The slaughter of Irishmen was looked upon as literally the slaughter of wild beasts. Not only the men, but even the women and children who fell into the hands of the English, were deliberately and systematically butchered. Bands of soldiers traversed great tracts of the country, slaying every living thing they met.⁸⁸

The survivors were deprived of their lands, which were handed over to British oligarchs and their subordinates. The dispossessed Irish had to cultivate marginal lands and to subsist for the most part on an inadequate potato diet. When the potato crop failed in 1845-1850, British colonizers had a choice: Enrich themselves further by continuing to export grain, beef, and mutton to England, or feed their starving neighbors. Greed and callousness won, causing anguish and

suffering to most residents of that Emerald Isle, the needless deaths of a million, and the emigration of yet another million.⁸⁹

British oligarchs likewise colonized India, starved millions, thwarted the rise of the life-saving Gandhian ideology, and so left behind them two feuding countries and the current, utterly corrupt, Indian, Pakistani (and later Bangladeshi too) oligarchies. These colonial leftovers follow the exploitative policies of their former masters. India, for example,

is constant proof that those who govern don't give a damn about those who don't. The filth, the decay, the state of the roads and streets, the neglect of all public spaces and services, of all sanitation — it's glaringly obvious that those who have no choice don't matter in the least to those who run things and can avoid the grime and chaos of the streets if they so choose . . . "There's no scarcity of food. There is usually, each year, a surplus of about fifty or sixty million tons, which gets exported, while two hundred and fifty million go hungry. The Indian situation is incredible: we have the hungry, we have the food, but the problem isn't being addressed. It's shameful. How can we be a major exporter of food and have the largest number of malnourished people in the world?" . . . It's pretty obvious that nobody is interested in ending hunger. Or, more accurately: many are interested in keeping people hungry, because a hungry person is someone you can exploit. It's more difficult to exploit someone with a full belly.⁹⁰

Argentina provides another example: "How can a country that produces enough food for 300 million people not manage to feed its own 40 million citizens?"

Millions of Argentinians or Indians — and millions in other countries — are starving mostly because their countries "were colonies and their owners designed them for their own benefit."⁹¹

The oligarchs' starvation strategy is still in force in many other countries besides Britain, India, and Argentina. According to one source, "Today, nearly 2.5 billion people — almost one-third of the world's population — have some level of hunger."⁹² "More than a billion people, mostly in the developing world, lack regular access to safe, sufficient, and nutritious food. . . . A quarter of the world's children are malnourished and thousands of children die each day simply because they do not have enough food to eat."⁹³

In 2011, the U.N.'s Jean Ziegler wrote:

The destruction, every year, of dozens of millions of men, women, and children through hunger constitutes the scandal of our century. Every five seconds a child under ten years old dies of hunger on a planet that is overflowing with riches. In its present state, world agriculture could feed twelve billion human beings . . . A child who dies of hunger is a murdered child.⁹⁴

Besides deaths, chronically hungry children are often sickly, acutely underweight, and shorter than they would otherwise be. They are often physically and cognitively impaired. Their immune system is compromised and they often die of infections that well-nourished children can readily fend off. "At present, approximately 150 million children, roughly a quarter of all children under five in the developing world, are stunted." The effects of such early food deprivation are often irreversible.⁹⁵

More recently, owing to the Covid-19 lockdown, the number of additional hunger-related deaths probably exceeded the total number, worldwide, of Covid-19 related deaths.⁹⁶

One typical result of chronic hunger is iron-deficiency anemia, a condition that affects some 1.6 billion.⁹⁷ Another consequence is vitamin A deficiency, which is

the leading cause of preventable blindness in children worldwide. An estimated 250,000 to 500,000 children become blind every year because of vitamin A deficiency. Half of these children die within a year of losing their sight. In pregnant women, vitamin A deficiency causes night blindness and may contribute to maternal mortality. Vitamin A deficiency also harms the immune system (the body's ability to fight disease). This increases the chance of death from malaria, measles and diarrhea.⁹⁸

That global tragedy could be solved by providing vitamin A capsules to these 500,000 children twice a year, at an approximate total annual cost of \$500,000⁹⁹ — at this writing, a quarter of the price of a single Lamborghini Centenario Coupe, and less than 1/600 the cost of a single F-35 Pentagon boondoggle.¹⁰⁰

The underlying cause of chronic hunger and malnutrition bears repeating: For the most part, millions fall ill, starve, and die because they don't have enough land to grow their own food and because they are too poor to buy food and nutritional supplements. For instance, just "three dollars of food and conventional medicines to each new mother could prevent five million child deaths annually."¹⁰¹ Clearly, it is oligarchic apathy and wealth inequality that is blinding, stunting, wasting, sickening, and killing poor people. Wars, demographic pressures, climate change, and environmental degradation (see below) play a more limited role in this ongoing holocaust of starvation.

Poverty is the primary cause of chronic hunger and malnutrition most everywhere in the world. While food might be available in local markets, it is often beyond the reach of the poorest households. In fact, hunger and malnutrition frequently exist within the context of food surpluses. Not only do the poor struggle to purchase sufficient food, but they rarely have the land, water, seeds, tools, technology, and other resources needed to grow food for themselves and their families. The food that is consumed is generally of lower quality and lacks the vitamins, minerals, and other micronutrients needed to maintain good health. Because poor communities spend a larger portion of their income on food than wealthy communities, price increases have a more adverse and destabilizing impact. Poverty and hunger are mutually reinforcing outcomes: poverty causes hunger by depriving people of the means to buy or produce sufficient food while hunger causes poverty by limiting the ability of people to work to their fullest potential.¹⁰²

[There are] 1.4 billion poor people . . . men and women the globalized system doesn't need but must tolerate because quick genocides don't look good on TV, and might give nightmares to the weak of heart. Hence, without risking exaggeration: this is the world that US capitalism and democracy have produced. The poverty and hunger of those millions is the consequence of that world — not its mistake.¹⁰³

Causes of Hunger

This in turn raises the question: How do the oligarchs manage to deprive one-third of the human race of sufficient food in a world that could comfortably feed 12 billion? Why are so many people landless and poor?

I. Regime-Change Operations. Often, leaders appear in some poor ex-colony, intent on fighting endemic corruption, oppression, and hunger. At times, they understand that their country should produce its own food, not cash crops, for exports. They believe that the natural resources and agricultural productivity of their country belong to their fellow citizens. They want their people to be literate, long-lived, and healthy. They consequently propose cutting the profit margins of foreign corporations and striking a more independent agricultural and foreign policy courses.

Sadly, such leaders are almost always deposed, incarcerated for “corruption,” or murdered. They are then replaced, once again, with scoundrels willing to enrich and empower themselves by serving their foreign masters. The end result of almost all such interventions is always the same: Corruption, fascism, racism, increased poverty, hunger, desperation, and death.

The most often reiterated strand insists that the governments in poor countries are corrupt and divert the aid that should go to feed their citizens. It’s true: they are corrupt, and they do steal money. . . . Those corrupt governments stay in power with the support of those same Western governments and organizations that complain about their venality; they need them to obtain raw materials and military advantages.¹⁰⁴

The USA, for instance, has waged war on the people of Nicaragua for over a century, installing, whenever it could, a blood-curdling fascist dictatorship (President Franklin Roosevelt cynically captured the reality of American policy, remarking that the American-installed corrupt ruler of that country might be a scoundrel, “but he is our son of a bitch”). In Chile, democracy and social justice were put on hold with the murder of democratically-elected Salvador Allende, his replacement with the fascist Pinochet, and the murder of thousands. In Indonesia, somewhere between one to three million people lost their lives after the U.S. and U.K. installed Suharto, a man who, besides massacres, specialized in enriching himself (to the tune of some \$25 billion),¹⁰⁵ his cronies, and his CIA/MI6 masters.

In Bolivia under Evo Morales, the first indigenous president in the Americas, “extreme poverty fell from 38.2% to 15.2% in 13 years. Life expectancy increased by 9 years. The minimum wage rose from \$60 to \$310. . . . Bolivia was declared a territory free of illiteracy in 2008. School dropout rate fell from 4.5% to 1.5% between 2005 and 2018,” and infant mortality fell by 56%.¹⁰⁶ Although American oligarchs frequently lie about their motives for the restoration of fascism in so many countries, one of their number was refreshingly candid about the removal of Morales, who just barely escaped with his life. When asked about the propriety of “the US government organizing a coup against Evo Morales in Bolivia so this oligarch could obtain lithium,” the oligarch responded: “We will coup whoever we want! Deal with it.”¹⁰⁷

It is no accident that in 2020, Afghanistan, the country suffering from the highest level of chronic hunger in the world (93%), was also the recipient of half a century U.S./U.K. of destabilization efforts, nor that similarly destabilized South Sudan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen were among the top 12 hungriest countries.¹⁰⁸

Hundreds of such regime-change operations have taken place all over the globe since the rise of Britain and the USA to world power. These operations in turn provide a partial explanation for world hunger: Influential patriots who embark on hunger-elimination projects are deposed or murdered and replaced by fascist marionettes who aid and abet their overlords' starvation strategy.

II. Debt. Another dagger in the starvation arsenal involves debt. The U.S./U.K. coerce or bribe their overseas puppets to take loans from such oligarchic outfits as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Such odious loans are in turn deployed by the local puppets and their IMF's corporate sponsors to enrich themselves. The goal is not to help people, but to sink them into a quagmire. Targeted countries are then forced to hand over water, land, and other national resources to the foreign oligarchs, to discontinue public projects, to further impoverish the majority, to cease to protect workers and the environment, to evict people from their land, and to starve them.

For countries with large external debts, simply making annual interest payments can absorb a significant percentage of foreign exchange earnings. Resources that could have been used for social protection programs or investments in agrarian development are absorbed by these interest payments. Moreover, the governments of highly indebted countries often expand export agriculture, lease agricultural land and territorial waters to foreign interests, and exploit fragile natural resources in order to generate the foreign exchange needed to service their debts. Each of these measures increases food insecurity at home.¹⁰⁹

III. Land theft. Theft is another, related, tentacle of the starvation octopus. Agrarian reforms — unlike charity — could readily solve the starvation scandal. Give the poor of the world enough land to grow their own food and raise their animals, and the nightmare of starvation would partially vanish. But today, as during the enclosure centuries in Britain (and as in the ongoing British privatization drive), the oligarchs are carrying out the opposite strategy: Robbing the poor of the little land they have.

If land grabbing is a form of colonialism, it is, like all forms, taking advantage of the weakness of the states they are colonizing. No corporation, public or private, could obtain thousands of acres of land in a country whose government had the means and the will to keep it for their citizens. . . . Governments then make sure to vacate the land they are giving over to their new benefactors, thereby displacing entire populations; sometimes this is done under the guise of improving living conditions. But, to cite just one example, the multimillion dollar contract the Ethiopian government signed with Sai Ramakrishna Karuturi, an Indian mogul, says very clearly that the land must be turned over empty, and that the government "shall ensure during the period of the lease, the lessee shall enjoy peaceful and trouble-free possession of the premises [with] adequate

security free of cost . . . against any riot, disturbance or other turbulent time as and when requested by the lessee.¹¹⁰

Thus, foreign and local oligarchs bribe or coerce local politicians to push their own citizens off land they and their ancestors cultivated sustainably for generations. These oligarchs, in turn, are “less likely to adequately preserve the land and local ecosystems. Areas where large-scale land acquisitions have taken place are marked by increased topsoil erosion, aquifer depletion, water pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss.”¹¹¹

IV. Environmental Crimes. For most oligarchs, their fellow passengers to the grave and the planet itself are nothing more than a mere externality, a means to an end. Their policies undermine the life-support system of Earth, causing climate disruptions, more frequent heat waves and storms, drying up of mountain glaciers, desertification, deforestation, loss of pollinators and other useful life forms, droughts, floods, growing scarcity of fresh water, destruction of fisheries, and degradation of soil, water, and air quality. So, in some places, people who could once feed themselves can no longer do so — thanks to the oligarchs’ philosophy of profit and power über alles.

V. Civil Strife and Wars. Another way of controlling poor (and rich) countries involves the divide and rule strategy: Fostering strife among people of different classes, ideologies, ethnicities, and religions. That is one reason the U.S./U.K. alone spend more on their military than all other countries of the world combined. That is one reason they have 945+ overseas bases all over the world. That is why they maintain the largest undercover assassination and special operations forces the world has ever known.¹¹² One real but undeclared aim of this military overkill is to destabilize and weaken poor countries so that they cannot resist the encroachments of foreign corporations.

VI. Sanctions, Economic strangulation, and Theft of Overseas Assets of such defiant countries as Syria, Venezuela, or Iran, cause hunger and death too.

VII. Invasions. If everything fails and the country still sticks to its pro-people stance, an outright invasion can be arranged by Western powers themselves or by such proxies as paid mercenaries, Cuban oligarchs, Ukrainian fascists, Wahhabi fanatics, or Nicaraguan soldiers of fortune. Such invasions are often accompanied by genocides, instability, environmental catastrophes, sky-high corruption, millions of displaced persons, and starvation. Recent examples include Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan,

VIII. Food Waste. Minimizing food waste could, by itself, feed all the world’s starving people.¹¹³

IX. Deliberate Food Destruction. The logic of supply and demand often leads to the deliberate destruction of food which could be consumed instead by the starving millions of the world. For instance, as I am writing this, Australian farmers are solving the “problem” of avocado glut in a hungry world by composting or running over with tractors tons of avocados.¹¹⁴

X. Overpopulation. In some cases, “a country’s natural resources, especially its land, water, forests, and fisheries, may be insufficient to meet the nutritional needs of a rapidly expanding population.”¹¹⁵

Three Bright Spots

Before concluding this sordid tale of needless anguish, poverty, hunger, vitamin deficiencies, miscarriages, stunted growth, and premature deaths, we must recall three bright spots.

The first is that, apart from oligarchs, most well-fed people would probably be in favor of eradicating hunger — once they understood its extent and the availability of painless solutions.

Another bright spot is the many thousands of idealists, all over the world, who are doing everything they can, often at a great cost to themselves, to bring starvation to an end.

Above all, we must mention the Chinese miracle. Poverty-stricken Chinese were once just as numerous and famished as their Nepali and Indian neighbors to the south. Then one day, China’s rulers declared that the enemies of the Chinese nation were not the poor and the hungry, but poverty and hunger. Here is what followed, once that political decision had been made:

China has reduced the number of poor people by close to 800 million since 1980. Whatever the specific numbers, China’s poverty reduction is a remarkable achievement. . . . Following the eradication of absolute poverty, China has set the year 2035 as the target date to achieve common prosperity. This is understood as providing the opportunity for a decent standard of living to all Chinese citizens. Ensuring equal access to education, health care, and other services.¹¹⁶

In particular, by 2020, extreme poverty had been nearly eliminated in China:

The successful implementation of China's targeted poverty alleviation program, culminating this year [2020] in lifting out of poverty the last of the 89.6 million rural poor identified in 2014, is a remarkable accomplishment. Many of them were living in the most remote regions of the country, cut off by distance and arduous topography from the benefits of the rapid economic growth that helped reduce poverty elsewhere in the country.¹¹⁷

China’s achievement thus provides one more empirical proof to the main point of this section: Starvation is over, if you want it.

The Mystery of Mass Compliance

Why do decent people everywhere, people who are justifiably horrified by the senseless murder of one child or by the cruel treatment of one dog, fail to react to the agonizing, readily preventable, death of millions? And even when people of good will do react, why do they run around aimlessly, like ewes whose lambs have been taken to slaughter, never planning a counter-attack that might possibly work?

The passivity of the victims themselves — who have little to lose but their hunger pains — is even harder to explain. Martín Caparrós:

I have spent — I spend — a lot of time in poor places, with very poor people. What surprises me most, every time, over and over again, is that they don't react; that each one of them, that so many millions allow themselves to be starved or be abused or lied to or mistreated in the most diverse ways and they don't react as I believe, some believe, they should.¹¹⁸

Hunger: Conclusion

Martín Caparrós writes:

The main questions remain the same: how can we live in a world that, despite its capacity to feed all of its inhabitants, cannot provide millions of people with enough food to live and live healthfully? Why does hunger, humankind's oldest problem, remain its biggest problem? Why have we not solved an epidemic that kills more people than malaria, tuberculosis, and AIDS combined? If we have made advances toward containing and eradicating those afflictions, why do we struggle to do so for world hunger?¹¹⁹

The answer to these questions is exceedingly simple. Hunger is traceable to a rotten, heartless, political system.

It is true that authoritarian regimes and representative democracies do at times make remarkable progress on the starvation front, but such advances are occasionally driven by fear that the people at long last would revolt, especially once they become aware of the Chinese miracle. Such advances can also be undone at any moment and often involve oppressive political systems. We shall see later that hunger and other scourges will only be permanently eliminated from the face of the Earth when all current political systems are replaced by direct democracies. It is only direct democracies in the prey countries that can successfully resist the depredations of foreign oligarchs. And it is only direct democracies in the predator countries that can prevent obscene income inequalities and the rise of conscience-less oligarchs to positions of power.

War on Drug Addicts and Users

We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. — Ursula K. Le Guin¹²⁰

The worldwide war on drugs — just like the profit-motivated Prohibition in the USA — serves the political purposes of some oligarchs, but miserably fails to accomplish its stated goals. You could certainly achieve better overall results by educating people about the dangers of drugs like heroin than by locking them up or killing them. This is clear on theoretical, empirical, and philosophical grounds.¹²¹ This is further confirmed by the experience of countries like Portugal, which mostly decriminalized drugs.¹²² And yet, in most of the world, the war on drugs continues, often leading to chaos and deaths, prolonged incarcerations and, in countries like China or Iran, executions.

Homelessness

In the last 14 years or so, the official number of homeless people in the USA alone, including children, hovered around 600,000.¹²³ In 2020, there were 17,000,000 vacant homes in that country and the USA was spending over a trillion dollars on its military-industrial complex, with a sizable portion of that money being wasted on boondoggles and corruption. Over the years too, policies of the Central Bank and the government have deliberately endowed billionaires with trillions of dollars. So it's not lack of physical or economic resources, but lack of political will, that accounts for the homelessness tragedy. In rich countries like the USA, the problem could be solved in a matter of days. A similar situation prevails in other rich countries that could also easily solve the problem, e.g., France, the Netherlands.

Unemployment

During the first half of the twentieth century, as the productivity of the labor force rose, and as the Soviet Union challenged capitalist ideology, the workweek in many countries was considerably shortened. Since then, productivity increased by leaps and bounds and a larger fraction of women entered the workforce, and yet the workweek stagnated. Consequently, many people suffer the deprivations of unemployment while others are working too many hours. Why can't we shorten the workweek everywhere, to the point where no one is unemployed and everyone enjoys more leisure? Why did Russia raise the retirement age in 2019, instead of lowering it?¹²⁴

Oligarch-Sanctioned Pedophilia

At this point in history, the capacity to doubt, to criticize, and to disobey may be all that stands between a future for mankind and the end of civilization. — Erich Fromm¹²⁵

Sexual abuse of children is rampant. As long as the perpetrators are members in good standing of the oligarchy, they can break the law and harm thousands of young lives with impunity.¹²⁶

It would take an encyclopedia to document all the overlooked cases of pedophilia in oligarchic circles. Here we shall cite the finding of a commission, set up by the Catholic Church of France. The commission

had uncovered between 2,900 and 3,200 pedophile priests and other church members who operated since 1950 . . . [this] was "a minimum estimate." The most terrible thing . . . was to see the most absolute of evils — an attack on the physical and mental integrity of children — which is to say a work of death perpetrated by people whose mission was to bring life and salvation. . . . Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the church was completely indifferent to the victims. They didn't exist, the suffering of children was ignored" . . . Clerics were greatly interested in protecting the church and retaining offenders in the priesthood. . . . the estimated number of potential victims mentioned in the report will be well over 100,000.¹²⁷

Conclusion: Is This the Best We Can Do?

By showing, through a few representative illustrations, that humanity is injudiciously, scandalously, and heartlessly governed, this chapter provides the rationale for the main theme of this book: A search for a free, sustainable, just, and peaceful system of governance.

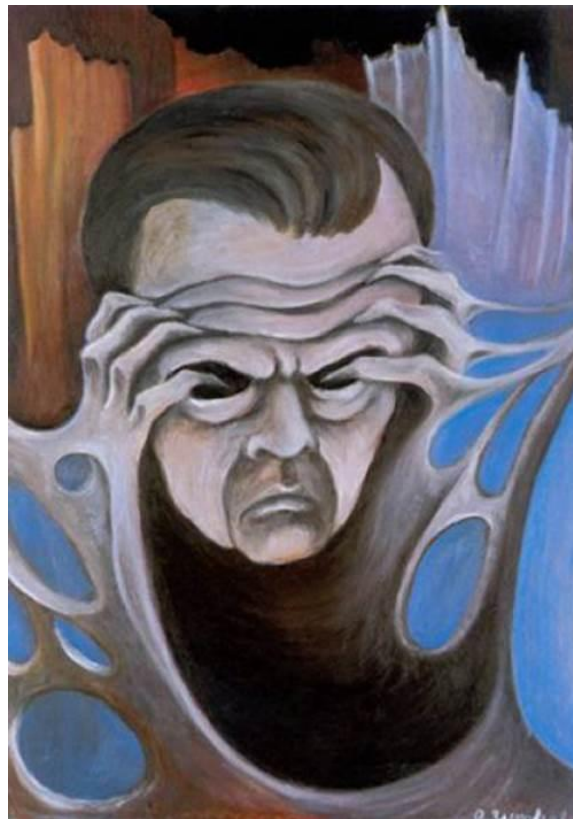


Chapter 2: Conceptual Barriers against Direct Democracy

[Democracy] did not sleep for a hundred years only, but for almost two thousand . . . When she was roused from her sleep, she was feared by princes, detested by philosophers and found impossible by statesmen. — Mogens Herman Hansen¹²⁸

The simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him. — Lev Tolstoy¹²⁹

An attempt must be made in this short time to take away from you this slander, which you acquired over a long time. — Socrates of Athens¹³⁰



Alexander Zinoviev's Self-Portrait: Thinking is Painful: "Striving after the painful truth has become the fate of exceptionally rare loners."

Chapter Summary. Why, despite its superiority to all other systems of governance (to be documented in succeeding chapters), has direct democracy been dormant and friendless for the last 2,345 years? Ever since the conquest of Athens by Macedonian tyrants, direct democracy has posed a threat to the rulers of humankind. So, alongside outright oppression and slaughter, they used any conceivable intellectual weapon to make sure that it never, ever, rises again. These overlapping weapons include: 1. Ignoring or undervaluing the direct democracy features and accomplishments of hunter-gatherer societies. 2. Promoting the views of the enemies of direct democracy and placing these enemies on a pedestal. 3. Suppressing democratic views and

aspirations. 4. Controlling the past. 5. Usurping the word democracy. 6. Other semantic snares. Familiarity with these booby traps might mitigate their influence and help us to open-mindedly consider arguments for direct democracy.

* * *

Chapter 3 (the next chapter) shows that direct democracy ruled the world for most of human existence, and that it can therefore be viewed as the naturally-occurring condition of human societies. Chapter 4 shows that the most accomplished country in recorded history was the fractional direct democracy of Athens and that its achievements can be probably traced to its political system. Chapter 5 shows that, for its male citizens, the Athenian system of governance far outshone that of the USA and, by extrapolation, any system of governance now in existence. Chapter 6 shows that one of the handful of the freest and most livable countries in the world today is also the one that enjoys the most direct democracy features. Chapter 7 highlights a few contemporary achievements at the sub-state level, in those rare organizations or occasions where direct democracy has been the guiding principle of governance.

Such facts in turn raise many questions: Why, despite its remarkable and incontestable achievements, has direct democracy been largely dormant for millennia? Why doesn't the majority of at least one country rise up and demand self-rule? Why, when the subject comes up, do most people reject direct democracy out of hand, ignoring evidence for its overwhelming superiority?

The answer to such questions is simple: Direct democracy poses a threat to the rulers of humankind, and so they used any conceivable weapon to make sure that it will never rise again.

Here is just one example of this millennial-long struggle. Before World War I,

Democracy was indeed something for which both the haute bourgeoisie and the nobility, from the most powerful monarch to the lowliest village squire, had nothing but contempt. The reason for this should be obvious: democracy, power exercised by and for the people, spelled the end of a system in which power was exercised by, and indeed for, a small part of the people, namely the tiny demographic minority that the combination of nobility and upper-middle class happened to be. Genuine democracy, that is, not only the political but also the social-economic emancipation of the lower orders, was not in the interest of the elite. Emperor Wilhelm II publicly denounced democracy, equating it with anarchy. But at the time democracy was also a dirty word in Great Britain, because it stood for the power of the popular masses and not the supposedly normal, natural, or "God-given" power of the "better" classes, that is the propertied classes — or, as they used to say in French, the power of the *gens de rien*, the "people of nothing," instead of the *gens de bien*, the "people of substance."¹³¹

The rest of this chapter depicts the oligarchs' ideological warfare against direct democracy.

Ignoring or Undervaluing the Direct Democracy of Hunter-Gatherers

One aspect of the campaign against real democracy arose from encounters between members of hierarchical societies such as Britain and France in the 17th century, and such free tribes as the Hurons. Instead of admiring the freedom and equality of such tribespeople, the typical recorded reactions of “civilized” explorers were disapproval and subversion. “In many cases, the lack of permanent, immobile communities sustained by agriculture led missionaries to categorize Amerindians as living a sub-human, animalistic existence.” One comparatively open-minded missionary wrote:

I do not claim here to put Indians [Hurons] on the same level as the Chinese, Japanese, and other perfectly civilized nations, but only to distinguish them from the condition of beasts (to which the opinion of some has reduced them) and to rank them among men, and to show that among them there is even some sort of political and civic life.¹³² (See Chapter 3.)

Promoting the Views of the Enemies of Direct Democracy

Some people are genuinely scandalized by the notions that everyone should be accorded the same dignity as anyone else, that no human being should lord it over another, and that no one should be drowning in luxury and debauchery while their fellows are standing hours in line for a slice of bread.

These people might have been born to wealth or nobility, and were likely inculcated with the false idea of their inherent superiority from day one: “The views of philosophers, with few exceptions, have coincided with the pecuniary interests of their class.”¹³³ Others might have joined the privileged class later in life, enjoy being there, and choose to forget that they ought to be involved in all humankind, not just in their new class. Others might hope to join that class, benefit from serving it, or feel compelled to serve it. (Already in 1906 David Graham Phillips predicted that the Invisible Government will “turn the educated into sycophants.”¹³⁴) Others fall under the spell of the lovers of tyranny and uncritically adopt their anti-democratic teachings. In still some other cases, the disdain for direct democracy might perhaps be linked to psychology: Some people prefer being answerable to authority figures to being condemned to be free.

A few examples: In most Western countries today, the philosophy curriculum gives much space to the political sophistry of such authoritarian intellectuals as Aristotle, Hobbes, or Hegel, while it only mentions in passing such friends of the open society as Democritus. The history curriculum likewise gives much credence and space to such champions of oligarchy as Plutarch and Polybius, and short shrift to such of its opponents as George Grote. We teach our children to admire autocratic Machiavellians like David of Judea and Alexander of Macedonia — to the point that many people today bear those names and that a statue of that very city-burning Alexander tarnishes my own university. Indeed, most people today seem enchanted with tyrants rather than

with tyrannicides and almost no one, except historians of ancient Greece, has ever heard of the incredible exploits and sacrifices of such great champions of democracy as Pelopidas, Thrasybulus, or Timoleon.

The anti-democratic intellectual tradition flourished in democratic Athens itself:

It is ironic that Periclean Athens, revered by its citizenry and still widely admired today, was condemned by its own historians, ridiculed by its poets and dramatists, and rejected by its philosophers.¹³⁵

Beginning in class bias and developing into an intellectual construct with a life of its own, the anti-Athenian tradition has become a crucial building block of Western political thought. . . . “It could almost be said that political theorizing was invented to show that democracy, the rule of men by themselves, necessarily turns into rule by the mob.”¹³⁶

Two brilliant and highly-accomplished Athenians played a key role in inventing the mob rule myth: The philosopher Plato and the historian Thucydides. Both had a first-hand acquaintance with Athenian democracy. Both not only played a key role in founding their respective disciplines, but in setting a high standard of scholarship for all future practitioners. They both possessed compelling writing styles. Given such credentials, it is perhaps not surprising that they were able to cast a spell on their successors, down to the present day.

One thing that their followers chose to ignore was Plato’s and Thucydides’ class and past experiences. Both were wealthy aristocrats whose writings can be seen as settling the score with a political system that let them retain their wealth but that had the temerity of treating them more or less like it did every other citizen. Also, Plato could not forgive the perfectly legal execution of his mentor, Socrates (see Chapter 4). Thucydides probably could not forgive his fellow citizens for exiling him for twenty years (after serving as a general and losing an important outpost under peculiar circumstances).

Beyond Plato’s unrealistic notion of the philosopher-king (which lacks insight about the corrupting influence of power), beyond the twisted sophistry of his dialogues, where Plato’s Socrates can “prove,” if it suits him, that the moon is made of yellow figs,¹³⁷ there is a boot on the human face and a loathing of equality and freedom. In his writings, Plato

elaborates coolly and carefully the theory of inquisition. Free thought, criticism of political institutions, teaching new ideas to the young, attempts to introduce new religious practices or even opinions, are all pronounced capital crimes.¹³⁸

Elsewhere Plato complains that, under a democracy, “the city is full of liberty and free speech and everyone in it is allowed to do what he likes. . . . Each man in it could plan his own life as he pleases . . . and foreigners and even women and slaves are as free as the citizens.”¹³⁹ Which leaves one wondering: Do contemporary defenders of Plato’s political views want someone else to plan their lives? Do they want women, foreigners, and slaves to be even more powerless than they were in Athens? Do they really want their own freedom of speech to be taken away? (Assuming that they don’t live in countries which already resemble a Platonic dystopia.)

It seems that Plato's writings bewitched readers to drop their guard and uncritically accept his views.¹⁴⁰ Bertrand Russell, for instance, believes that Plato's inimical writing style plays a role in lulling our critical faculties:

Plato possessed the art to dress up illiberal suggestions in such a way that they deceived future ages, which admired the Republic without ever becoming aware of what was involved in its proposals. It has always been correct to praise Plato, but not to understand him.¹⁴¹

Thucydides' history, likewise, is biased against the democracy of his native city. We need not rely on inferences, however, but on his own words. His favorite government, he says, was not the democracy where every male citizen was free to run his affairs and write anti-democratic books — but the interim oligarchy of 5,000, between the reign of terror of 411 B.C.¹⁴² and the full restoration of democracy a few months later. It was then, Thucydides says — when most citizens were disenfranchised — “that the Athenians appear to have enjoyed the best government that they ever did.”

Anyway, that is how the smear campaign against direct democracy started: By the privileged citizens of Athens whose arrogance, self-interest, upbringing, and personal experiences led them to despise equality. Some permanent residents of Athens belong to that camp too, notably Aristotle. It is not however entirely clear why he chose to live in democratic Athens, only fleeing it, close to the end of his life, to escape trial.

We can skip the surviving texts of oligarchic writers of the intervening five centuries, and move on to another famous Greek authoritarian:

Like Plato, whom he cites over six hundred times, Plutarch saw humanity as divided into rulers and ruled. Only the former held interest for him, and despite his wide reading in Athenian history and politics, the notion of a society in which this dichotomy was not operative was beyond his grasp. . . . Like Cicero before him and countless others who came later, however, he distinguished the city's cultural achievements [which he greatly admired] from its regrettable form of government, and where politics was concerned he preferred Sparta. . . . Such was the message of the man who served as the most common source for Greek history until the nineteenth century. A repository of cautionary tales of all kinds, Plutarch's voluminous writings did incalculable damage to the reputation of a democracy their author did not begin to understand. . . . In eighteenth-century America the only volume in more homes than Plutarch was the Bible.¹⁴³

We may get a better glimpse of the anti-humanitarian mindset of Plato, Thucydides, Plutarch (and countless others down the millennia whose writings survived) from their preference of Sparta over Athens. Thucydides, for instance, writes that more than any other city in Greece, the Spartans “knew how to be wise in prosperity, and . . . ordered their city the more securely the greater it grew.”¹⁴⁴

This raises the question: Apart from producing first-class warriors, what kind of place was Sparta, the country so beloved by oligarchic historians and philosophers?

According to Bertrand Russell, Sparta was a “model, in miniature, of the state that the Nazis would establish if victorious.”¹⁴⁵

Unlike the versatile and cultured Athenians, most Spartans were illiterate warriors.¹⁴⁶ Sparta bequeathed nothing of value to posterity, except perhaps showing that a soulless bivouac can terrorize its citizens and neighbors for centuries. It was a city-state that lived by the sword, established vicious oligarchies in the cities it controlled, and betrayed fellow Greeks to Persian tyranny. In one telling incident that would replay itself in the Roman and American empires, the hereditary King Agis — who tried to save his country from its suicidal path of concentration of power and riches in a few hands and the consequent gradual disenfranchisement of most citizens — was sentenced to death.

Here is another example of Spartan exceptionalism, as told by Thucydides himself, without voicing the slightest disapproval (which he freely dishes out to democracies):

The Helots [fellow Greeks who had the misfortune of having been conquered and enslaved by the Spartans] were invited by a proclamation to pick out those of their number who claimed to have most distinguished themselves against the enemy, in order that they might receive their freedom; the object being to test them, as it was thought that the first to claim their freedom would be the most high-spirited and the most apt to rebel. As many as two thousand were selected accordingly, who crowned themselves and went round the temples, rejoicing in their new freedom. The Spartans, however, soon afterwards did away with them, and no one ever knew how each of them perished.¹⁴⁷

George Grote provides the missing condemnation of this horror, so tragically overlooked by thousands of authoritarian or compromised intellectuals and statesmen ever since:

A stratagem at once so perfidious in the contrivance, so murderous in the purpose, and so complete in the execution, stands without parallel in Grecian history — we might almost say, without a parallel in any history.¹⁴⁸

The unsurpassingly militaristic, ruthless, competitive, and cruel Spartan government¹⁴⁹ also had, once a year, an open season against those unfortunate Greeks (many of them were later liberated by democratic Thebes), hunting them down like animals and killing them. This is as close as it gets to Richard Connell’s chilling short story “The Most Dangerous Game.”¹⁵⁰

Here is another example of Sparta’s excellence:

Since martial valor offered the sole path to the honor and respect of one’s peers, life was wretched for boys who were unable to cope with the rigors of military life. When cowards were identified, they were stigmatized and called “tremblers.” Their ridiculous appearance announced their disgrace: They were obliged to wear cloaks with colored patches and to only partially shave their beards. Humiliated in public, they were despised even by their own kinsmen, whom they were believed to have dishonored. They could not hold public office, nor was it likely that anyone would marry them or

their sisters, with the consequence that their family would die out and the eugenic goals of the state be well served.¹⁵¹

Such — and worse — was the state so admired by Thucydides and Plato, and while these witnesses to direct democracy failed to topple it in their own day, they founded the dominant ideology of all subsequent generations:

It has been the conventional wisdom of Western liberal democratic thought . . . that many of the more invidious pathologies of our grim era have derived from democratic excess: from the revolt of the masses (Ortega y Gasset), or the tyranny of the majority (Walter Lippmann), or the rule of mediocrity and the leveling effects of egalitarianism (Mill, Nietzsche, and de Tocqueville), or the serfdom of the planned society (Fredrick Hayek), or the despotism of the Idea enacted as the General Will (J. L. Talmon and B. Henri-Levy), or the specter of Big Government (Milton Friedman). In each case, the charge is that democracy untempered by liberalism becomes distempered democracy.¹⁵²

All this boils down to a simple formula: Rich people have a divine right to their inherited, ill-gotten, or shrewdly-gotten, wealth. They are moreover the only ones wise and good enough to rule. Humanity is fundamentally divided into two castes: Rich and poor. Any system that preaches equality, any system that threatens obscene wealth or power in few hands, any system that recognizes the kinship of all living things, is, by definition, a nightmare.

Suppression of Democratic Views and Aspirations

Thucydides tells us that many historians wrote about the Peloponnesian War. And yet only his account and the accounts of fellow anti-democrats survived. Why? The answer seems obvious: The authoritarian regimes that ruled the world ever since decided which books should and should not be read by their subjects and all posterity. This, in turn, left the wrong impression that all Greek intellectuals despised direct democracy:

The books of the Ionian scientists are entirely lost. We will never know the extent of their true wisdom. Their views were suppressed, ridiculed and forgotten by the Platonists and by the Christians who adopted much of the philosophy of Plato.¹⁵³

It is curious that in the abundant literature produced in the greatest democracy of Greece there survives no statement of democratic political theory. All the Athenian political philosophers and publicists whose works we possess were in various degrees oligarchic in sympathy.¹⁵⁴

No surviving text treats the dynamics of democracy in a positive way.¹⁵⁵

The opinions of Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle have naturally carried great weight . . . In the absence of any coherent statement of the democratic case, most modern historians have rather uncritically accepted the oligarchic view of Athens, and condemned what Aristotle calls the “extreme democracy.”¹⁵⁶

The ancient sources largely passed by Thrasybulus (the leader of the restoration of democracy movement in Athens, 403), “possibly because of their anti-democratic bias . . . The anti-democratic

tradition of ancient historiography has been the predominant one, unwilling to recognize any merit in most democrats and willing to ascribe any great deeds to less democratic leaders.”¹⁵⁷

Perhaps the most striking example of censorship involves Democritus of Abdera, born into great wealth and yet a committed democrat.

“Equality is everywhere noble,” he wrote. “Poverty in a democracy is better than prosperity under tyrants, for the same reason one is to prefer liberty over slavery.” Democritus also felt that those in power should “take it upon themselves to lend to the poor and to aid them and to favor them, then is there pity and no isolation but companionship and mutual defense and concord among the citizens and other good things too many to catalog.”

The little we know of Democritus suggests that he was one of the greatest scholars of antiquity. One holistic thinker calls Democritus “superior to all earlier and contemporary philosophers in wealth of knowledge, and to most in acuteness and logical correctness of thinking.”¹⁵⁸ And, unlike Plato, we have reason to believe that Democritus was also one of the greatest scientists and mathematicians of all time. He uncannily anticipated modern atomic theory, with a point of view that “was remarkably like that of modern science, and avoided most of the faults to which Greek speculation was prone. . . . The atomists asked the mechanistic question, and gave a mechanistic answer. Their successors, until the Renaissance, were more interested in the teleological question, and thus led science up a blind alley. . . . To the Greek, attempting to give a scientific account of motion, the purely mechanical view hardly suggested itself, except in the case of a few men of genius such as Democritus and Archimedes.”¹⁵⁹ Democritus also rediscovered one key idea of Buddhism: Contrary to popular thought, he says, what makes one’s life really worthwhile is not one’s possessions or any externals, but one’s state of mind.¹⁶⁰ Democritus’ prescience also extended to: (i) Astronomy: “There are many worlds, some growing, some decaying; some may have no sun or moon, some several. Every world has a beginning and an end. A world may be destroyed by collision with a larger world.” (ii) Evolutionary biology: “Life developed out of the primeval slime.” (iii) The modern biological notion that our bodies metabolize and that the brain is particularly active: “There is some fire everywhere in a living body, but most in the brain or in the breast.”¹⁶¹ He was a materialist, and too self-actualized to believe in the religious dogmas of his day.

The disappearance of Democritus’ works (and the works of many other scholars down the centuries) is, almost certainly, no accident. According to Diogenes Laertius, Plato — the man so admired by copycat intellectuals — wanted to condemn all Democritus’ books to the flames.¹⁶² Plato’s wish might have been someone else’s command, for we have nothing left but a few second-hand fragments. To the oligarchic mindset, Democritus posed a serious threat: A rich man who used his wealth to travel, learn, and help his poor neighbors (e.g., he lifted the great Protagoras out of poverty and ignorance), a man who thought for himself, ran foul of contemporary and future dogmas, and — the nerve of it — championed direct democracy.

Suppression of views favorable to direct democracy often goes beyond book burning, hiring, firing, silent treatment, and refusal to publish:

In the Germany of Goethe and Schiller . . . Greece was preferred to Rome and Athens attracted more interest than Sparta. . . . German neo-humanism spanned half a century from Winckelmann in the mid 18th century to Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early 19th century. . . . But the German liberal humanism was quenched by the Prussian reactionaries in the 1820s and, after a short revival in the wake of the 1848 revolution, it was quenched once again by Bismarck and the conservatives. . . . the classical tradition in 19th-century Germany turned from Athens to Sparta; and the praise of the Dorian race, exemplified by Spartan law and order, eclipsed the earlier admiration of Athenian liberty and equality.¹⁶³

One more example: Victor Duruy was a Parisian professor and the minister of public instruction under Napoleon III from 1863 to 1869. In an 1851 book, Duruy preferred Athens to Sparta. This earned him “a severe chastisement from the administration of his university.”¹⁶⁴

We shall have much to say about the failure of the direct democracy movement in the USA in Chapter 5. At the moment, we need only note one reason for its failure:

The press has not been kind to direct democracy. . . . One does not have to look far to find media accounts condemning initiative and referendum voting.¹⁶⁵

In passing, all this raises a curious question: What hope is there for defenses of direct democracy (such as this one), given the history of the last 2,345 years? The almost-certain answer is: None.

Controlling the Past

This propaganda switchblade consists of:

Claiming that certain historical episodes utterly discredit direct democracies. When it comes to Athenian democracy, the favorite indictments involve the 406 B.C. execution of admirals that abandoned hundreds of sailors after a naval victory over Sparta and, a few years later, the execution of Socrates (see Chapter 4). In both episodes, the surviving accounts were written by the enemies of democracy and are decidedly slanted. And, even if these two occurrences were unjustified, the telling point in such indictments is that the enemies of direct democracy must rely on just a few episodes in almost 200 years of Athenian democracy.

The Athenians, without a doubt, committed crimes that could not be as persuasively defended as the above two. Here are two example: 1. Not wishing to confront Sparta, they put to death some of their own fellow citizens who supported Pelopidas’ democratic uprising in Thebes.¹⁶⁶ 2. The Athenians “once executed nine treasurers for embezzlement over what turned out to be an unfortunate accounting error.”¹⁶⁷

However, it is certainly going beyond the evidence to suggest that such episodes are the defining essence of a horrible system of governance, rather than the inevitable errors of an excellent one.

Throwing out the baby with the bath water. This strategy correctly points out that Athenian democracy condoned slavery, discrimination of women and resident foreigners, infanticide, a mild version of selfish imperialism, and a multitude of other sins. Likewise, it highlights the negative aspects of some or all hunter-gatherer societies, e.g., scalping, torture, perennial warfare, and tradition-bound worldviews. A system that contains such grave flaws, this tactic suggests, is worthless.

This tactic involves a logical fallacy. Should a person who shudders at the cruelty of the Aztecs shun avocados and corn? Can't we learn something important from the Athenians, despite the fact that women in their society were third-class citizens? Can't we learn something important from the Iroquois, even though they viciously tortured some of their enemies? Shouldn't this book cite the brilliant Thomas Jefferson, even though he condoned slavery? Should the heroic Martin Luther King be expunged from the historical record because he had extra-marital affairs?

Either ignoring the achievements of direct democracies or attributing these achievements to anything but direct democracy. For instance, average Americans have no idea that, had their country been blessed with the Swiss system of governance (an oligarchy which is however constrained by a few features of direct democracy), they might have enjoyed greater prosperity, freedom, environmental health, 7.7 years longer life expectancy, and more Nobel prizes per capita than any other nation on Earth (except Sweden, the country that awards most of the prizes). And, on the rare occasions that the subject is mentioned, winning more Nobel prizes in Switzerland, for instance, is brushed off as having nothing to do with direct democracy and everything to do with such things as high chocolate consumption.¹⁶⁸

Claiming that Athens lost the war to Sparta, and trace this loss to Athenian direct democracy.

The history of the Peloponnesian war and the fall of Athens is still often told, under the influence of Thucydides' authority, in such a way that the defeat of Athens appears as the ultimate proof of the dangerous weaknesses of the democratic system. But this view is merely a tendentious distortion, and the well-known facts tell a very different story.¹⁶⁹

Karl Popper goes on to document this distortion and to point out that, after the defeat, "the democratic form of government had proved its superior strength under the most severe trials, and even its enemies began to think it invincible."¹⁷⁰ Chapter 4 revisits this subject and shows that it was, above all others, democratic Athens that saved Greece from Persian conquest and that almost saved Greece from the Macedonian dictatorship.¹⁷¹ Chapter 4 also shows that it was not totalitarian Sparta that temporarily defeated democratic Athens, but a constellation of other factors, including a plague, Persian money, treason, and Athens' crucial defeat by democratic Syracuse.

Usurping the Word "Democracy"

Another effective tactic against direct democracy involves the allegation that existing oligarchies are in fact democracies.

Etymologically, the word democracy is derived from Greek, and it means “rule of the people.” In ancient Greece, this was a fit description, for there the demos or people (meaning, unfortunately, only all male citizens) ruled. All political, legislative, and judicial decisions were made by a random sample of the citizens themselves. All male citizens had equal rights, most officials were chosen by lot, served limited terms, and were strictly accountable to the people they served. To distinguish this type of government from contemporary “democracies,” this book refers to it as direct democracy, but an even better terms would be democracy or perhaps real democracy. Throughout most of human history, hunter-gatherers likewise lived in systems that resembled direct democracy.

The second kind of “democracy,” now running roughshod over a good part of our planet, is invariably preceded in this book by a qualifying phrase or placed within quotation marks. These marks serve to distinguish it from the real thing and to underscore the fact that its democratic pretensions are baseless. In theory, in such “democracies” the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by their elected agents under a free electoral system. Sounds good, until you actually study the real workings of such systems (as Chapter 5 does for American “democracy.”) It turns out, in all such cases, that these political systems are oligarchies where a minority wields real power, where few or no term limits exist, and where officials serve at the pleasure of a few oligarchs, not of the public.

Using the same term for two antithetical systems is meant to deceive and disarm: Why rally with pitchforks and torches to restore democracy, one might ask, if we already have one? Or the converse: Why strive for a democracy, if it produces the contemporary horrors of environmental destruction, perennial wars, genocides, a broken justice system, crass materialism, unaccountable officials, and the vast income inequalities we see all around us?

This sleight of hand — calling an oligarchy a democracy — has considerably weakened the direct democracy movement. It not only confuses the general public, but also first-class thinkers. For instance, Karl Popper’s brilliant *The Open Society and its Enemies* treats Athenian democracy and British oligarchy as if they were, essentially, variations on the same theme.

Other Semantic Tricks

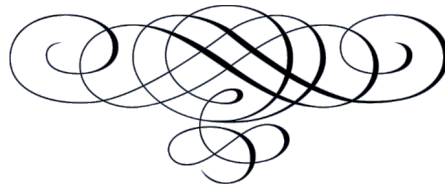
More generally, it did not escape the notice of our oligarchic masters that, by controlling language, they can influence our beliefs. Here are two examples of this Orwellian methodology. For Athenian democrats, the words sophist and demagogue had perfectly reputable connotations, meaning, respectively, an accomplished teacher and a leader of the people. Such words only acquired their derogatory meanings under the influence of such anti-democrats as Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle. Ever since, an original thinker and teacher who loved democracy but who was not as rich as Plato and, like modern teachers, charged his students a fee, could be dismissed on the grounds that he was a mere sophist. It somehow doesn’t seem to have occurred to university professors today and yesterday that, according to this logic, they themselves are despised sophists

too! Likewise, on Thucydides and company's say-so, subsequent generations would unthinkingly dismiss such capable democratic leaders as Cleon as mere working-class clowns and demagogues. The overall insinuation: Athenian democracy was mob rule plagued by unscrupulous charlatans.

Parting Words for Chapter 2

We have arrayed against our minds a formidable arsenal of lies, half-truths, and distortions. The goal of this arsenal is simple: Making us believe from an early age that we are not capable of ruling ourselves, that direct democracy is for the birds. Such counterfactual indoctrination hinges on our tendencies to conform, obey authority figures, close our minds to ideas that run counter to the ones that were imparted to us at an earlier age, and cling to our convictions even when we ourselves generate conclusive evidence against them.¹⁷² Both the search for truth and humanity's future depend on our ability to overcome such built-in weaknesses.

This chapter's documentation of a millennia-old propaganda campaign against direct democracy will hopefully help readers overcome past indoctrination and weigh for themselves the central thesis of this book: Justice, freedom, dignity, and human survival depend on our ability to overthrow the oligarchies that rule us now and replace them with vastly improved versions of Athenian democracy.



Chapter 3: Direct Democracy is the Naturally Occurring Condition in Human Societies

Early democracy was so common in all regions of the globe that we should see it as a naturally occurring condition in human societies. — David Stasavage¹⁷³

Chapter Summary. Throughout most of their existence, human beings lived in small hunting-and-gathering bands or tribes. They were often on the move, nourishing themselves on foods obtained through such enjoyable activities as hunting, fishing, and foraging. Although these hunter-gatherers respected courage, talent, accomplishments, and the experience of elders, they lived in a libertarian, classless society, with minimal wealth disparities and with no chiefs, masters, or kings. They were overall happier and more cooperative than we are. They enjoyed more leisure time than most of us do. Their lives were simpler than ours and their system was more stable and sustainable. Liberty, equality, fraternity, stability, cooperation, and happiness can therefore be viewed as the default, naturally-occurring, conditions of human societies. The hunter-gatherers' freedom, egalitarianism, and happiness might be traced to their system's ability to discourage freeloading and selfishness, place limits on anyone's power, and prevent the ascent of crooks and psychopaths. Their egalitarianism and happiness could also be traced to their political (but not intellectual) freedom, their active participation in the social and political life of their small communities, and a system that allowed them to live unselfishly under a system which rewarded unselfishness. On the other hand, the lives of these hunter-gatherers were encumbered by a short lifespan, xenophobia, at times a second-class status for women, frequent warfare, illiteracy, superstition, and a tradition-bound view of the world. In the end, they were powerless to resist the incursions of their more numerous neighbors who had earlier adopted farming or pastoralism, more advanced technology, and social, political, and economic hierarchies.

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Introduction: Methodological Uncertainties and Approaches

The study of past and present hunter-gatherer societies is mired in controversies. Were they overall warlike? Were many of them cannibals? Nevertheless, a general picture can be distilled from the literature, especially when reviewing the scholarly near-consensus about their system of governance (direct democracy).

For the most part, reconstructions of hunter-gatherer societies are based on archaeology, on records of early contacts between hunter-gatherers and literate explorers and missionaries, and, especially, on anthropological studies of hunter-gatherer societies that were still extant in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Throughout Most of their Existence, Human Beings Lived in Nomadic Bands and Tribes

For about 98 percent of our existence as a species (and for four million years before then), our ancestors lived in small, largely nomadic hunting-and-gathering bands.¹⁷⁴

The hunter-gatherer lifestyle worked at least tolerably well for the nearly 100,000-year history of behaviorally modern humans. Everybody in the world was a hunter-gatherer until the local origins of agriculture around 11,000 years ago, and nobody in the world lived under a state government until 5,400 years ago.¹⁷⁵

The Natural Political System is Direct Democracy, Freedom, Equal Rights, Economic Egalitarianism, Sharing, and Absence of Autocrats

Equality – or inequality – is a cultural choice. – Deborah Rogers¹⁷⁶

[In a hunter-gatherer society, no-one is] substantially richer or more powerful than anyone else. – James Suzman¹⁷⁷

The following quotes, taken from the anthropological literature, show that for most of their existence, human beings almost everywhere practiced direct democracy and economic egalitarianism. Almost all male members of the community, and, at times, most adult members, enjoyed equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal access to the decision-making process.¹⁷⁸

Some individuals were more accomplished than others and were recognized as such, but the social hierarchies that plague contemporary societies and workplaces were absent. Wealth too was distributed fairly equally — nothing like the vast wealth inequalities that characterized the Persian, Roman, British, or American Empires. Likewise, hunter-gatherer societies were boss-free, and members typically produced their own food and did “not need to work for anyone else by selling their labour for money.”¹⁷⁹ Compared to modern societies, our male ancestors lived in a libertarian paradise.

Hunter-gatherers “rigorously enforced norms that prevented any individual or group from acquiring more status, authority or resources than others. Decision-making was decentralized and leadership ad hoc; there weren’t any chiefs.”

One anthropologist after another has been amazed by the degree of equality, individual autonomy, indulgent treatment of children, cooperation, and sharing in the hunter-gatherer culture that he or she studied. . . . The dominant cultural ethos was one that emphasized individual autonomy, non-directive childrearing methods, nonviolence, sharing, cooperation, and consensual decision-making. Their core value, which underlay all of the rest, was that of the equality of individuals. . . . The hunter-gatherer version of equality meant that each person was equally entitled to food, regardless of his or her ability to find or capture it; so food was shared. It meant that nobody had more wealth than anyone else; so all material goods were shared. It meant that nobody had the right to tell others what to do; so each person made his or her own decisions. It meant that

even parents didn't have the right to order their children around. It meant that group decisions had to be made by consensus; hence no boss, "big man," or chief.¹⁸⁰

Indeed, Marvin Harris argues that the current economic/political system — a system characterized by haves and have-nots, rulers and ruled — is a historical aberration:

Once we are clear about the roots of human nature, for example, we can refute, once and for all, the notion that it is a biological imperative for our kind to form hierarchical groups. An observer viewing human life shortly after cultural takeoff would easily have concluded that our species was destined to be irredeemably egalitarian except for distinctions of sex and age. That someday the world would be divided into aristocrats and commoners, masters and slaves, billionaires and homeless beggars would have seemed wholly contrary to human nature as evidenced in the affairs of every human society then on Earth.¹⁸¹

People living in bands and tribes are consistently egalitarian, vehemently insisting on political equality:

Our direct evolutionary precursor was a human physically just like ourselves, who lived in the Late Paleolithic and possessed an egalitarian ethos and an egalitarian political order similar to those of present-day hunting bands who have remained nomadic. . . . Before twelve thousand years ago, humans basically were egalitarian. They lived in what might be called societies of equals, with minimal political centralization and no social classes. Everyone participated in group decisions, and outside the family there were no dominators. . . . Humans were egalitarian for thousands of generations before hierarchical societies began to appear. . . . Within the family, egalitarian principles are likely to operate more weakly, and sometimes very weakly indeed. What is consistent about egalitarian societies is that in the larger unit — the band or the tribe — the adult males always treat one another as equals. . . . Hunter-gatherers and tribesmen "are guided by a love of personal freedom. For that reason they manage to make egalitarianism happen, and do so in spite of human competitiveness — and in spite of innate human tendencies to dominance and submission that easily lead to the formation of social dominance hierarchies."¹⁸²

The hunter-gatherers' fierce commitment to equality extends even to children, who are typically not told to do anything.¹⁸³

Freedom and equality prevailed:

Leaders do exist, but their influence is subtle and indirect. They never order or make demands of others, and their accumulation of material goods is never more, and often much less, than the average accumulation of the other households in their camp.¹⁸⁴

To the extent that political leadership exists at all among band-and-village societies, it is exercised by individuals called headmen. These headmen, however, lack the power to compel others to obey their orders. . . . Among the !Kung, each band has its recognized leaders, most of whom are males. These men speak out more than others and are listened to with a bit more deference. But they have no formal authority and can only persuade, never command. When Lee asked the !Kung whether they had headmen — meaning powerful chiefs — they told him, "Of course we have headmen! In fact, we are all headmen. Each one of us is headman over himself."¹⁸⁵

We shall see in Chapter 4 that a similar situation prevailed in democratic Athens, where the headman equivalent was called a rhetor.

Native Americans enjoyed similar freedoms. For instance, the Iroquois held

such absolute notions of liberty that they allow of no kind of superiority of one over another, and banish all servitude from their territories.¹⁸⁶

Compared to the despotic societies that were the norm in Europe and Asia, Haudenosaunee [the Iroquois League] was a libertarian dream.¹⁸⁷

The most consistent theme in the descriptions penned about the New World was amazement at the Indians' personal liberty, in particular their freedom from rulers and from social classes based on ownership of property. For the first time the French and the British became aware of the possibility of living in social harmony and prosperity without the rule of a king.¹⁸⁸

"The Savage does not know what it is to obey," complained the French explorer Nicolas Perrot in the 1670s. Indians "think every one ought to be left to his own Opinion, without being thwarted," the Jesuit Louis Hennepin wrote twenty years later. The Indians, he grumbled, "believe what they please and no more" — a practice dangerous, in Hennepin's view, to a well-ordered society. "There is nothing so difficult to control as the tribes of America," another Jesuit unhappily observed. "All these barbarians have the law of wild asses — they are born, live, and die in a liberty without restraint; they do not know what is meant by bridle and bit."

Indian insistence on personal liberty was accompanied by an equal insistence on social equality. Northeastern Indians were appalled by the European propensity to divide themselves into social classes, with those on the lower rungs of the hierarchy compelled to defer to those on the upper.¹⁸⁹

The Huron could not understand why

one Man should have more than another, and that the Rich should have more Respect than the Poor. . . . They brand us [Europeans] for Slaves, and call us miserable Souls, whose Life is not worth having, alleging, That we degrade ourselves in subjecting our selves to one Man [a king] who possesses the whole Power, and is bound by no Law but his own Will. . . . [Individual Indians] value themselves above anything that you can imagine, and this is the reason they always give for't, That one's as much Master as another, and since Men are all made of the same Clay there should be no Distinction or Superiority among them.¹⁹⁰

The natives of North America who visited France, the essayist Montaigne wrote,

noticed among us some men gorged to the full with things of every sort while their other halves were beggars at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty. They found it strange that these poverty-stricken halves should suffer [that is, tolerate] such injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throat or set fire to their houses.¹⁹¹

Likewise:

Among the Eskimos of northern Canada there was no law except public opinion. Although no one had authority, each person had influence according to the respect won from a community which had intimate knowledge of everybody.¹⁹²

The absence of private possession in land and other vital resources means that a form of communism probably existed among prehistoric hunting and collecting bands and small villages.¹⁹³

The system [of Inuit society in the first decade of the 20th century] which I watched breaking down under the combined influence of Christianity and the fur trade was on its economic side communism. Natural resources and raw materials were owned in common, but made articles were privately owned.¹⁹⁴

Most, though by no means all, primitive societies are provided with intuitive limits on how much property may be accumulated by one person, and the variety of ways in which primitive society compels people to rid themselves of accumulated property is almost beyond belief. Distributing it to relatives, burning it at funerals, using it to finance ceremonies, making it impossible to collect debts in any systematic way — veritable terror of property accumulation, to get rid of it. Rarely does primitive society permit the permanent accumulation of vast quantities of wealth.¹⁹⁵

Politically egalitarian foragers are also, to a significant degree, materially egalitarian: those who have more are expected to share when scarcity exists.¹⁹⁶

Both anthropological and archaeological observations imply that the first human social groups were egalitarian hunter-gatherers. Anthropological studies of modern hunter-gatherer groups show that decisions are invariably reached by a group consensus being formed, with each individual being allowed to voice its opinion in a group-wide discussion. . . . While such groups do have leaders, the role of leaders is not to coerce others or monopolize the discussion, but rather to facilitate turn-taking and help the group reach a consensus. Archeological evidence of burial sites similarly reveals little status differentiation when individuals were buried.¹⁹⁷

The Kapauku [of New Guinea] big man again exemplifies a generalization about leadership in tribal societies: If someone achieves wealth and widespread respect and support, he or she must be generous. The big man worked hard not to hoard wealth but to be able to give away the fruits of his labor, to convert wealth into prestige and gratitude. A stingy big man would lose his support. Selfish and greedy big men sometimes were murdered by their fellows.¹⁹⁸

Limits to Power

Direct democracy sets limits on the power of any single individual and forestalls the ascent of freeloaders, villains, and psychopaths to positions of power.

One of the chief characteristics of most complex societies, ancient and modern, and one reason for their dismal condition, is that they tend to confer disproportionate power on psychopaths, sociopaths, and other sorts of villains who are willing to commit any crime on their road to wealth and power. Martha Stout (2006) describes the Sociopath Next Door:

Imagine — if you can — not having a conscience, none at all, no feelings of guilt or remorse no matter what you do, no limiting sense of concern for the well-being of strangers, friends, or even family members. Imagine no struggles with shame, not a

single one in your whole life, no matter what kind of selfish, lazy, harmful, or immoral action you had taken. And pretend that the concept of responsibility is unknown to you, except as a burden others seem to accept without question, like gullible fools. Now add to this strange fantasy the ability to conceal from other people that your psychological makeup is radically different from theirs. Since everyone simply assumes that conscience is universal among human beings, hiding the fact that you are conscience-free is nearly effortless. You are not held back from any of your desires by guilt or shame, and you are never confronted by others for your cold-bloodedness. The ice water in your veins is so bizarre, so completely outside of their personal experience, that they seldom even guess at your condition.

In other words, you are completely free of internal restraints, and your unhampered liberty to do just as you please, with no pangs of conscience, is conveniently invisible to the world. You can do anything at all, and still your strange advantage over the majority of people, who are kept in line by their consciences will most likely remain undiscovered.

How will you live your life? What will you do with your huge and secret advantage, and with the corresponding handicap of other people (conscience)? The answer will depend largely on just what your desires happen to be, because people are not all the same. Even the profoundly unscrupulous are not all the same. Some people – whether they have a conscience or not – favor the ease of inertia, while others are filled with dreams and wild ambitions. Some human beings are brilliant and talented, some are dull-witted, and most, conscience or not, are somewhere in between. There are violent people and nonviolent ones, individuals who are motivated by blood lust and those who have no such appetites. . . .

Provided you are not forcibly stopped, you can do anything at all.

If you are born at the right time, with some access to family fortune, and you have a special talent for whipping up other people's hatred and sense of deprivation, you can arrange to kill large numbers of unsuspecting people. With enough money, you can accomplish this from far away, and you can sit back safely and watch in satisfaction. . . .

Crazy and frightening – and real, in about 4 percent of the population.¹⁹⁹

Absent direct democracy, in most complex societies such congenital or environmentally-caused misfits, especially when they are exceptionally shrewd, enjoy a tremendous advantage — and not only because most people cannot imagine the existence of pure evil. In such societies, an individual like Alexander of Macedonia — who was willing to kill innocent relatives on his road to power and to deploy any means whatever to remain in power — is more likely to become king than his kinder, and dead, relatives. In the corporate world, a man like John D. Rockefeller who was willing to slander, smear, physically intimidate, frame, or murder any troublesome competitor, striker, or journalist, enjoys a decisive advantage over his more scrupulous challengers. In the American Congress or Presidency, likewise, a person who refuses to accept bribes (aka campaign financing) is unlikely to be elected. The ascent of such villains explains, in part, the sad history of our species. This ascent will probably bring the human experiment to an untimely end, unless we take to heart the wisdom of the Athenians or of our hunter-gatherer ancestors.

Additionally, there is substantial psychological evidence showing that, besides the fact that power-hungry people are drawn to positions of authority, power itself tends to corrupt its holders.²⁰⁰ So

the task confronting any society is not only to minimize the ascent of villains to positions of power, but to limit the power of any single individual or group.

Freeloaders — people who refuse to contribute their fair share — pose a similar challenge.

Throughout most of human existence, our tribal ancestors effectively sidelined crooks, psychopaths, and leeches:

For the most part, the mere threat of sanctions (including ostracism and execution) keeps such power seekers in their place. When upstartism does become active, so does the moral community: it unites against those who would usurp the egalitarian order, and usually does so preemptively and assertively. This domination by the rank and file is so strong that useful leadership roles can develop without subverting the system. The rank and file, watching leaders with special care, keep them from developing any serious degree of authority. . . . From the moral community's perspective, it pays to engage in social control. From the deviant's perspective, the very predictability of sanctioning tends to modify the antisocial behavior. Hunter-gatherers prone to upstartism know what to expect from their peers, who in most instances will quickly and assertively make it clear that they do not like being bullied, or even bossed for their own good. . . . If an upstart becomes dangerous to the life or liberty of others and is not susceptible to lesser sanctions, we also shall see that fearful or morally outraged foragers go for the ultimate form of social distancing: execution.²⁰¹

In pre-contact times, lethal sanctions were applied to recidivist murderers in Eskimo bands. Carefully selected individuals seem to have actually dispatched the offenders, usually male kinsmen of the target, but it was the entire group that conspired to eliminate them. The same is reported of others, like the Comanche, and the Copper Eskimo. In Arnhem Land, Australian Aborigines traditionally eliminated aggressive men who tried to dominate them. A !Kung community may execute "extremely aggressive men" by agreement of the entire band. Any execution of an overaggressive individual that is agreed on by the local moral community fits the category of antiauthoritarian sanctioning and qualifies informally as legitimized capital punishment.²⁰²

Inevitably there were freeloaders, individuals who consistently took more than they gave and lay back in their hammocks while others did the work. Despite the absence of a criminal justice system, such behavior eventually was punished. . . . Quarrelsome, stingy people who do not give as well as take had better watch out.²⁰³

It is nearly impossible, when you know how primitive society works under communistic anarchy, to conceive of anyone with the combination of indolence and strength of character which would make it possible for a healthy man to remain long a burden on the community. Those who were useful to the community, who fitted well into the community pattern, were leaders. It was these men who were so often wrongly identified by the careless early-civilized traveler and the usual trader as chiefs. They were not chiefs, for they had no authority; they had nothing but influence. People followed their advice because they believed it to be sound. If you tried to keep more than your share you became unpopular. If you were persistently selfish, acquisitive, and careless of the general good you gradually became too unpopular. Realizing this, very likely you would try moving to another community and starting life there over again. If you persisted in your ways and stayed where you were there would come a period of unanimous disapproval. You might survive for a year or even a few years as an unwanted

hanger-on; but the patience of the community might at any time find its limit, and there would be one more execution of a troublemaker.²⁰⁴

Thus, there is a universal, or at least widespread, overall pattern among nomadic hunter-gatherers. “Specific antiauthoritarian sanctions follow . . . a continuum from moderate (criticism, ridicule, or disobedience) to strong (ostracism or expulsion, deposition or desertion) to ultimate (execution).”²⁰⁵

Resisting bullies has been part of our nature for a long time. As an anthropologist, I study human hunter-gatherers. For tens of thousands of years, these egalitarian people would band together to kill tyrants. Some 90 per cent of human history was spent in such groups. Those instincts are with us still.²⁰⁶

Civility and Hospitality

Canassetego, a Mohawk, captures two frequent characteristics of tribal societies:

You know our Practice. If a white Man in travelling thro’ our Country, enters one of our Cabins, we all treat him as I treat you; we dry him if he is wet, we warm him if he is cold, we give him Meat & Drinks that he may allay his Thirst and Hunger, and spread soft Furs for him to rest & sleep on: We demand nothing in return. But if I go into a white Man’s House at Albany, and ask for Victuals & Drink, they say, where is your Money? And if I have none; they say, Get out you Indian Dog.²⁰⁷

Environmental Sustainability

Contemporary societies like ours are on a collision course with nature, leading some holistic thinkers to suspect that our centuries, or even decades, are numbered (see Chapter 1). This instability is traceable in part to inequality: “Rather than imparting advantages to the group, unequal access to resources is inherently destabilising and greatly raises the chance of group extinction.”²⁰⁸

By contrast,

Available evidence indicates that many hunter-gatherer societies conserved renewable resources in the sense that they avoided their extinction or transformed their physical environment at a much lower pace than agricultural or industrial societies have. Furthermore, it appears that many hunter-gatherer economies followed a time path of slow but steady expansion in population and output over a long time horizon rather than a “feast and famine” pattern.²⁰⁹

One older example of collapse is provided by the Norse settlers of Greenland, who survived for 450 years and then perished. As in other cases, one possible reason for their collapse was the hierarchical nature of their society:

The Norse starved in the presence of abundant unutilized food resources. Power in Norse Greenland was concentrated at the top, in the hands of the chiefs and clergy. . . . Norse society’s structure created a conflict between the short-term interests of those in power, and the long-term interests of the society as a whole. Much of what the chiefs

and clergy valued proved eventually harmful to the society. . . . [It] was a tightly controlled society, in which the few chiefs of the richest farms could prevent anyone else from doing something that seemed to threaten their interests. . . . Ultimately though, the chiefs found themselves without followers. The last right they obtained for themselves was the privilege of being the last to starve.²¹⁰

By contrast, the Inuits — the spurned egalitarian and democratic neighbors of the top-down Scandinavians — survive to the present day. Likewise, the democrats of New Guinea have been farming sustainably for 7,000 years!²¹¹ So, if left alone, bottom-up societies are more sustainable, perhaps because, unlike us, they are not cursed with selfish and short-sighted rulers — or any rulers at all.

Hunter-Gatherers were Happier and more Cooperative than we are

A few representative quotes:

When Western missionaries who have lived in New Guinea with their young children return to Australia or the United States, or when they send their children back to Australia or the U.S. to attend boarding school, the children tell me that their biggest adjustment problem is to deal with and adopt the West's selfish individualistic ways, and to shed the emphasis on cooperation and sharing that they have learned among New Guinea children. They describe feeling ashamed of themselves if they play competitive games in order to win, or if they try to excel in school, or if they seek an advantage or opportunity that their comrades don't achieve.²¹²

A recurring theme is that the other Westerners and I are struck by the emotional security, self-confidence, curiosity, and autonomy of members of small-scale societies, not only as adults but already as children. We see that people in small-scale societies spend far more time talking to each other than we do, and they spend no time at all on passive entertainment supplied by outsiders, such as television, video games, and books. We are struck by the precocious development of social skills in their children.²¹³

[The Copper Eskimos were] to all appearances so much happier than any other people whom I have ever known. On the basis of my years with the Stone Age Eskimos I feel that the chief factor in their happiness was that they were living according to the Golden Rule. It is easier to feel that you can understand than to prove that you do understand why it is man gets more happiness out of living unselfishly under a system which rewards unselfishness than from living selfishly where selfishness is rewarded. Man is more fundamentally a co-operative animal than a competitive animal. His survival as a species has been perhaps through mutual aid rather than through rugged individualism. And somehow it has been ground into us by the forces of evolution to be "instinctively" happiest over those things which in the long run yield the greatest good to the greatest number.²¹⁴

In 1931, Paul Huxley depicted the pygmies of Central Africa:

I wondered if all the thousands of intervening years had brought the measure of happiness to some of us that these people enjoy, for they do enjoy life every day, dancing and chanting, visiting one another, hunting when necessary.²¹⁵

One telling sign of greater happiness of our free ancestors is related by Charles C. Mann:

I asked seven anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians if they would rather have been a typical citizen of Europe or the Haudenosaunee [the indigenous name for the six nations that made up what Europeans called the Iroquois League] in 1491. . . . Every one of the seven chose the Indians. Some early colonists gave the same answer. The leaders of Jamestown tried to persuade Indians to transform themselves into Europeans. Embarrassingly, almost all of the traffic was the other way — scores of English joined the locals despite promises of dire punishment. The same thing happened in New England. Puritan leaders were horrified when some members of a rival English settlement began living with the Massachusetts Indians. My ancestor's desire to join them led to trumped-up murder charges for which he was executed — or, anyway, that's what my grandfather told me.²¹⁶

Benjamin Franklin commented in 1753:

When an Indian Child has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our Customs, yet if he goes to see his relations and makes one Indian Ramble with them, there is no perswading him ever to return. [But] when white persons of either sex have been taken prisoners young by the Indians, and lived a while among them, tho' ransomed by their Friends, and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English, yet in a Short time they become disgusted with our manner of life . . . and take the first good Opportunity of escaping again into the Woods, when there is no reclaiming them.²¹⁷

Another telling sign of greater happiness of our free ancestors and a reduced quality of life in the contemporary world is the prevalence of clinical depression. For instance, one in five Americans over the age of twelve has been taking antidepressants at some point in their lives, and one in 9 took them in 2016, despite their severe side effects. By contrast, a study of 2000 Papua New Guinea hunter-gatherers found only one marginal case of clinical depression.²¹⁸

The Keys to Happiness?

It's hard to pinpoint the reasons for our ancestors' greater enjoyment of life.

One possible explanation traces their comparative happiness to freedom, equality, leisure, and constant interactions with family, friends, and fellow tribesmen. Unlike modern societies, for hunter-gatherers, no man, woman, or child, was an island. They took orders from no one, did not have prisons and cops, and did not spend most of their waking hours in jobs they hated. They were not subject to the stresses of modern life, such things as fear of unemployment, homelessness, being unable to afford medical care, or being stopped for an alleged traffic violation. No one could repossess their (non-existent) homes, order them about, or deny them basic medical care. They didn't have to beg someone's permission to drive a car, own poisoned arrows, go fishing, or own a pet.

Emily Dickinson wrote: "The Brain, within its groove, runs evenly — and true." Similarly, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Every mind must make its choice between truth and repose. It cannot

have both.” Most tribesmen remained within conventional grooves, kept pace with their companions, and rarely questioned taboos, social conventions, or conventional morality. It is possible that such a closed system is more conducive to repose than ours.

Another guess, as we have seen, is a political system that made it possible to live by the Golden Rule.

The Dark Side of Hunter-Gatherer Societies

There were of course many drawbacks to living in bands and tribes, especially under harsh climate conditions. Their members endured a precarious existence, often suffering hunger, temperature extremes, and other deprivations. For instance, Dr. Hallpike, who studied the Konso of Ethiopia, says that the lives of these particular people were extremely hard:

Inside the Konso sleeping huts there were giant cockroaches, scorpions, poisonous centipedes, rats, and the occasional cobra. People generally slept on the ground on cow-skins, and the only wooden bedstead I encountered was infested with bed-bugs. To go to the lavatory they went to screened-off places on the edge of the towns, and when the faeces had dried they were mixed with animal manure to be spread on the terraces. Not surprisingly human manure also attracted the flies, which then settled on the children's eyes and gave them severe conjunctivitis. The mothers would bring them to me with their eyelids gummed together with pus, and when I had finally washed them sufficiently to get the eyes open they would usually run with blood, so severe was the infection. The children were also particularly troubled with head-lice and often had their heads shaved as a result. While the Konso had some traditional remedies for minor ailments, they were essentially defenceless against serious illness and had to trust to their natural resilience.²¹⁹

The very short lives of hunter-gatherers were full of hazards, and they often experienced the tragic loss of children at a young age. Infanticide was probably common. Marriages did not often involve romantic love. Women often had fewer rights and obliged to “marry in accordance with custom and the wishes of their kin.”²²⁰

Many tribes xenophobically referred to themselves as “the People,” a term that expressed their exclusive claim to full humanity.²²¹

The subject of wars is controversial. Some researchers believe that, with few notable exceptions, inter-tribal warfare was endemic and typically led to a three times higher death rate than the rate of such 20th-century war-torn countries as Russia and Iraq.²²² Others believe in the existence of “a continuum from hardly any physical aggression and a paucity of killing at one end to high levels of fighting and killing at the other, with numerous cases spread out across the middle ground.”²²³ In either case, although the fighters might not have enjoyed the bloodshed, they were unable to escape the cycle of ever-present violence.

Cannibalism and torture, in one form or another, were common in some groups (but not in others). Hunter-gatherers had many other customs that we would find appalling: Some Tauade

women of New Guinea, for example, “cut off one of their finger-joints in mourning for husband or child.”²²⁴

Hunter-gatherers were relatively free from oppression by others, but they were for the most part illiterate, superstitious, closed-minded, and tradition-bound. Lacking writing, their knowledge of their past was limited to oral traditions. Their understanding of causality, numbers, astronomy, or human psychology was meager. They had nothing like the intellectual freedom, the ability to reject authority and to genuinely think for oneself and question everything, that a small percentage of the human race has enjoyed, off and on, for some 2,500 years, starting probably in ancient Greece. Like us, many hunter-gatherers were guilty of mass murders and environmental degradation.²²⁵ They were unable to resist more numerous, unstable, and technologically advanced opponents, and were therefore, for the most part, exterminated, enslaved, propagandized, or discriminated against. The survivors, if they were lucky, were assimilated into less free and equal but more powerful political systems.

How Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity Were Lost

Population pressure probably played a role in the transition to agriculture and storage of food.²²⁶ Besides providing more food, agriculture might have had its own attractions; for example, allowing farmers to remain in the same favored location year round and to enjoy the advantages of living in larger groups.²²⁷ Agriculture, in turn, might have led to social stratification. Gradually, real chiefs and inequality arose, leading to our present hierarchical system: “Chiefdoms would eventually evolve into states, states into empires.”²²⁸ Thus, stratified and unstable agricultural and industrial societies, when they arose, surpassed their stable hunter-gatherer neighbors in numbers, technological prowess, and callousness, gradually leading to the cultural or physical extinction of egalitarian societies.²²⁹

Agriculture also involved, for most people, more work, less food, less varied diet, and greater vulnerability to disease and to catastrophic disruptions in the food supply.

This transition to agriculture was, however, gradual and incomplete. A few remote tribes and bands living in marginal or inaccessible areas survived and retained some of their customs and ways of life. Also, even after the transition, some societies remained democratic, e.g., the Hurons of North America or some places in Mesopotamia and ancient India.²³⁰

The transition from hunter-gatherer tribes and bands to agriculture that commenced about 11,000 years ago brought many benefits to a small minority (e.g., luxuries, thinking for oneself for a few, writing books), but it probably came with a terrible price:

Scattered throughout the world, several dozen groups of so-called primitive people, like the Kalahari bushmen, continue to support themselves that way. It turns out that these people have plenty of leisure time, sleep a good deal, and work less hard than their farming neighbors. . . . Skeletons from Greece and Turkey show that the average height of hunter-gatherers toward the end of the ice ages was a generous 5' 9" [1.75m] for

men, 5' 5" [1.65m] for women. With the adoption of agriculture, height crashed, and by 3000 B.C. had reached a low of only 5' 3" [1.60m] for men, 5' [1.52m] for women. . . . Compared to the hunter-gatherers who preceded them, the farmers had a nearly 50 percent increase in enamel defects indicative of malnutrition, a fourfold increase in iron-deficiency anemia (evidenced by a bone condition called porotic hyperostosis), a threefold rise in bone lesions reflecting infectious disease in general, and an increase in degenerative conditions of the spine, probably reflecting a lot of hard physical labor. "Life expectancy at birth in the preagricultural community was about twenty-six years," says [George] Armelagos, "but in the post-agricultural community it was nineteen years. So these episodes of nutritional stress and infectious disease were seriously affecting their ability to survive." The evidence suggests that the Indians at Dickson Mounds, like many other primitive peoples, took up farming not by choice but from necessity in order to feed their constantly growing numbers. . . . Besides malnutrition, starvation, and epidemic diseases, farming helped bring another curse upon humanity: deep class divisions. . . . Farming may have encouraged inequality between the sexes, as well. . . . Forced to choose between limiting population or trying to increase food production, we chose the latter and ended up with starvation, warfare, and tyranny.²³¹

Ever since that transition, the price paid by a sizable fraction of the human race for political and economic inequalities has been repeatedly documented, e.g., in some of Charles Dickens' and Victor Hugo's novels, in George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, or in Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram*. Likewise, a region of Northwest Brazil, in the 1960s and 1970s, was a concentration camp for 30 million people:

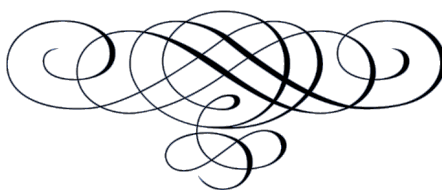
Decades of nutritional studies of sugarcane cutters and their families in Pernambuco showed hard evidence of slow starvation and stunting. These nutritional dwarfs were surviving on a daily caloric intake similar to that of the inmates of the Buchenwald concentration camp. Life on the Alto resembled prison-camp culture, with a moral ethic based on triage and survival.²³²

Another consequence of the transition to agriculture was overpopulation, a problem that continues to the present day and that is partially responsible for catastrophic environmental decline and perhaps also for the growth of political authoritarianism.

Afterword

One must ask: Can the direct democracy of our tribal ancestors work among literate people? Can we combine the obvious advantages of a complex, literate, society with the political structure that characterized human societies throughout most of their existence? Can we have refrigerators, electricity, books, antibiotics, and computers and, at the same time, enjoy the fruits of freedom, equality, and self-governance? Can we make sure that no single person or cabal ever attains too much power? Can we too prevent the concentration of power in few hands and control freeloaders and psychopaths? Can real democracy function in a complex society?

The next chapter will show that the answer to all these questions is a resounding YES.



Chapter 4: Athenian Democracy

No people have made a greater mark on history than the Greeks. . . . Our modern notions of politics, medicine, art, drama, history, and science date back to the Greeks. [Culturally,] the city of Athens . . . in some ways is worth more than all the rest of Greece put together. — Isaac Asimov²³³

Chapter Summary. After briefly reviewing the geography, history, and exceptional vitality of ancient Athens, this chapter highlights the unique achievements of that nation in the cultural, scholarly, social, economic, military, and constitutional fields. These achievements, unparalleled in world history, took place for the most part while (and almost certainly because) Athens was a vibrant direct democracy. A review of Athenian governance follows, paying special attention to branches of government, underlying principles, and modes of operation. The darker side of Athenian democracy is discussed, specifically the exclusion of the majority from the political franchise, class conflicts, imperial misbehavior, and never-ending wars. This chapter supports the key argument of this book: We can immeasurably improve the quality of our lives and humanity's chances of survival by merging the Athenian model of direct democracy with the modern ideals of universal franchise, sanctity of all human lives, peace, and religious freedom.

* * *

Geography and Early History

In the 5th and 4th centuries B.C., when Athenian democracy was flourishing, the nation of Athens comprised the Attica peninsula and the nearby island of Salamis. The two largest urban centers in Attica were the city of Athens itself and the port city of Piraeus some six kilometers away.

In size and total population, Athens was roughly comparable to small countries today. With some 2,500 square kilometers, Athens was slightly smaller than the country of Luxembourg or the American state of Rhode Island. Its total population of some 300,000 was somewhat lower than the population of Iceland in the year 2023, and about half that of Luxembourg.

The mountainous topography and available transportation “rendered travel challenging and time-consuming — and communication problematic — multiplying beyond modern comparisons the extensiveness of Attika’s territory as perceived and experienced by its inhabitants.”²³⁴

An important development that occurred a few centuries before the establishment of democracy, entailed the union of Attica and the granting of citizenship to all free residents. This secured expansive territory for Athens, a large number of citizens, and a measure of internal peace.²³⁵ By contrast, in the bordering region of Boeotia, some 10-25 cities maintained their individual identity, a situation that led to endless and costly conflicts between the principal city of Thebes and its neighbors. Sparta’s solution was even more consequential than Thebes’. Sparta enslaved or lorded over the inhabitants of its outlying regions — fellow Greeks who bitterly resented their servile

conditions. To deal with the ever-present danger of revolt, Sparta, as we have seen, became a “model, in miniature, of the state that the Nazis would establish if victorious,”²³⁶ including a secret police and deadly hunts of the subject population.

Around 594 B.C., a major step towards Athenian democracy was implemented by Solon. He was chosen to resolve conflicts between the rich minority and the poor majority. These conflicts threatened to engulf the country in a violent class war²³⁷ in the short term and to condemn it to a mediocre existence in the long term. Solon fended off the temptation of making himself a despot, struck a compromise, and curbed the power of the oligarchy. In particular, he canceled all debt slavery contracts and set free citizens so enslaved.²³⁸ He also freed small landholders from the obligation to pay one-sixth of their produce to a landlord.

Solon reformed the administration of justice, creating a jury court of the people, a feature which would play a key role in the Athenian democracy of the 5th and 4th centuries. Another lasting innovation had to do with the right of prosecution. From that time, every citizen had the right to sue “either on behalf of the injured person or simply in the public interest.”²³⁹ Yet another contribution to the subsequent evolution of democracy was a change — from birth to wealth — in the qualification for holding political office, thus undercutting “the traditional authority associated with birth.”²⁴⁰ In later generations, Athenian democrats rightly revered Solon’s reforms and considered him the founding father of their democracy.

Shortly after Solon’s reforms, Peisistratos, an enlightened tyrant, assumed power with the support of the poor majority. Apart from two periods of exile, he ruled Athens from 561 to 527. He further limited the power of his fellow aristocrats and launched agrarian reforms, public works, and festivals.

Upon his death, his two sons acceded to power. One of them was assassinated by Harmodius and Aristogeiton, in an abuse-of-power dispute involving a love triangle. These two were in turn caught and killed by the surviving brother, Hippias. (In the next two centuries, the two tyrant-slayers were celebrated and worshiped as martyrs of democracy.) A harsher tyranny followed for four years, and was only overthrown by the brilliant Kleisthenes, a man sufficiently rich to bribe the oracle of Delphi. The corrupt clerics kept telling the Spartans that they must set Athens free from tyranny, which the Spartans proceeded to do — either because they were superstitious or, as appears more likely, because they wished to turn Athens into a client state.

Sparta now followed its usual script: Replacing Hippias with a few rich Athenians who would undermine the national independence of Athens, run roughshod over the vast majority, and serve Spartan interests and their own. In this case, the agenda involved installing Kleisthenes’ oligarchic rival and banishing Kleisthenes and 700 families of his supporters. Now, according to Josiah Ober, a key event in the history of Athenian democracy took place: In a three-day violent uprising in 507 B.C, the Athenian people themselves, acting on their own initiative, rose against the oligarchic faction and its Spartan protectors, expelled the Spartan garrison and king, executed some of the

Athenian oligarchic plotters, and recalled the exiled Kleisthenes and his supporters. The outraged Spartan king counter-attacked, but failed. Ober feels that in this case, democracy “was not a gift from a benevolent elite to a passive demos [people], but was the product of collective decision, action, and self-definition on the part of the demos itself.”²⁴¹ Kleisthenes, whether at heart a committed democrat or an opportunistic friend of the people, followed through with genuine democratic reforms. Thus, following that three-day uprising, a full-fledged Athenian democracy was hatched.

The word democracy itself derives from *demos*, which refers to the entire citizen body, and *kratos*, meaning rule. In a genuine democracy then, all citizens rule. In sharp contrast, most citizens had little say and few rights in Greek oligarchies and aristocracies, where few people ruled, and in tyrannies and monarchies, where a single person lorded over the entire population.

Throughout this long evolution towards democracy, most oligarchs ceded power because they had to, not because they wanted to. They accepted the bitter pill of Solon’s reforms because the alternative appeared to them even worse. Likewise, Peisistratos depended on the poor majority to remain in power, and acted accordingly. Athenian history thus corroborates Martin Luther King’s observation that “privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.”

In the course of its two centuries of existence, Athenian democracy underwent significant changes. Following Mogens Hansen, this book will, for the most part, focus on the later stages of Athenian democracy, coinciding roughly with the lives of Aristotle and Demosthenes.

One of the chief characteristics of Athenian democracy was its internal stability. It lasted almost two centuries. During that time, there were two brief oppressive oligarchic interludes, in 411-410 and 404-403 B.C. However, both were forced upon the Athenians by their long war with Sparta (431–404 B.C.), and both were successfully overthrown. The democracy ended in 322 B.C., after the country was decisively defeated by Philip, the dictator of Macedonia. There were several attempts to revive it, but they failed. And, whatever was left of intellectual freedom came to an end in 529 A.D., when the Byzantine Emperor Justinian closed the philosophy schools of Athens because they posed a threat to the official state religion.

As we shall see below, in some ways Athens was far more democratic than any contemporary “democracy;” in fact, the Greeks would consider any contemporary “democracy” a sad joke, a grotesque distortion of the meaning of the word democracy. On the other hand, to most people now, Athens rightly appears contemptibly undemocratic because it limited the franchise to male citizens. The majority of the adult population — women, permanent residents, Athenian-born descendants of permanent residents, slaves, freed slaves, children born to a citizen and non-citizen, illegitimate children of citizens, male prostitutes, people who squandered their inheritance, citizens who maltreated their elderly parents — far outnumbered the citizens and had fewer rights and little say in running the country.

The Greek city-states, including Athens, were often engaged in deadly wars; it doesn't seem to have occurred to most Greeks that their differences could be resolved by peaceful means. The Athenian Isocrates did propose a Greek Commonwealth, but with the intention of . . . going to war against Persia.

This book argues that we can immeasurably improve the quality of our lives and humanity's chances of survival by superimposing the modern ideals of universal franchise, peace, sanctity of life, and religious freedom, on the Athenian practices of real (or direct) democracy and decentralization.

Other Greek Democracies Besides Athens

Democracy in a complex society (as opposed to the democracies of hunter-gatherer tribes and bands — see Chapter 3) was widespread among the 1,050 or so Greek city-states of the classical period. In particular, now and then, majorities ruled some of the powerful states of classical Greece, including Syracuse, Thebes, Miletus, and Rhodes.

In some cases, democracy arose under Athenian influence, but often it was probably traceable to the growing conviction that no Greek was inherently superior to another, to internal developments in those city-states themselves, to the inspiration provided by a great number of successful democracies in the Greek world, and to the involvement of other external powers besides Athens.²⁴²

This chapter and the next focus on Athens in part because we know more about it than we know about all other Greek democracies combined. Also, Athenian democracy was more stable than the others and played a more decisive role in the political, military, and cultural history of the world.

We have every reason to suspect, however, that many characteristics of Athenian democracy highlighted in this book applied to other Greek democracies.

The Spirit of Athens

Apart from its government and achievements, which will be taken up later, Athenian democracy seems to have possessed a vitality, a unique temperament, rarely equaled in world history. This intangible quality can be best captured through a series of quotations.

But not only did the political life continue [in Athens during its 27-year war for survival]: the intellectual and artistic life continued too. To those who remember the breakdown of our [U.K.] cultural life in the First World War – the nervous anxiety of authorities to shut down everything possible (except Business, which was to be 'as usual'), the popular frenzy which made it unpatriotic to listen to Beethoven and Wagner, the follies of censors, the degradation of the theatre – it is humiliating to contemplate Athens at war. With no less at stake, with the enemy still nearer – even camped in Attica, with no smaller a proportion of citizens killed and families bereaved, the Athenians continued their festivals, not as self-indulgence but as a part of the life which they were fighting for.

In the drama produced for them, and in their name, Sophocles, without a word about the war, continued to brood on the ultimate problems of human life and human character, Euripides to expose the hollowness of victory and the ugliness of revenge, and, most astonishing of all, Aristophanes to ridicule popular leaders, generals and the sovereign people itself, to express his loathing of the war and the delights of peace in comedies compounded of wit, fantasy, buffoonery, lyrical beauty, uproarious indecency and highbrow parody.²⁴³

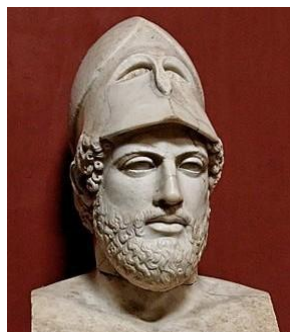
Every citizen was, in turn, a soldier (or sailor), a legislator, a judge, an administrator. . . . To the Athenian at least, self-rule by discussion, self-discipline, personal responsibility, direct participation in the life of the polis at all points – these things were the breath of life. . . . the responsibility of taking his own decisions, carrying them out, and accepting the consequences, was a necessary part of the life of a free man. This is one reason why the popular art of Athens was the tragedy of Aeschylus and Sophocles and the comedy of Aristophanes, while ours is the cinema. The Athenian was accustomed to deal with things of importance: an art therefore which did not handle themes of importance would have seemed to him to be childish.²⁴⁴

If we could ask an ancient Greek what distinguished him from the barbarian, he would not, I fancy, put these triumphs of the Greek mind first, even though he was conscious that he set about most things in a more intelligent way. Nor would he think first of the temples, statues and plays which we so justly admire. He would say, and in fact did say, “The barbarians are slaves; we Hellenes are free men” . . . The Oriental custom of obeisance struck the Greek as . . . an affront to human dignity.²⁴⁵

Here is what one of Athens’ oligarchic enemies, paraphrased by yet another enemy, had to say about Athenian democracy:

The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution . . . they are adventurous beyond their power, and daring beyond their judgment, and in danger they are sanguine . . . Their bodies they spend ungrudgingly in their country's cause; their intellect they jealously husband to be employed in her service. A scheme unexecuted is with them a positive loss, a successful enterprise a comparative failure. The deficiency created by the miscarriage of an undertaking is soon filled up by fresh hopes; for they alone are enabled to call a thing hoped for a thing got, by the speed with which they act upon their resolutions.²⁴⁶

Pericles, an influential Athenian before and during the early part of the Peloponnesian War, mourned the recently fallen in the long war against Sparta:



Pericles of Athens, 495(?)–429 B.C.

Our political system does not compete with institutions which are elsewhere in force. We do not copy our neighbors, but try to be an example. Our administration favors the many instead of the few: this is why it is called a democracy. The laws afford equal justice to all alike in their private disputes, but we do not ignore the claims of excellence. When a citizen distinguishes himself, then he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege, but as a reward of merit; and poverty is no bar. . . . The freedom we enjoy extends also to ordinary life; we are not suspicious of one another, and do not feel called upon to nag our neighbor if he chooses to go his own way. . . . But this freedom does not make us lawless. We are taught to respect the magistrates and the laws, and never to forget that we must protect the injured. And we are also taught to observe those unwritten laws whose sanction lies only in the universal feeling of what is right. . . . Our city is thrown open to the world; we never expel a foreigner. . . . We are free to live exactly as we please, and yet are always ready to face any danger. . . . We love beauty without becoming extravagant, and we cultivate the intellect without lessening our resolution. . . . To admit one's poverty is no disgrace with us; but we consider it disgraceful not to make an effort to avoid it. An Athenian citizen does not neglect public affairs when attending to his private business. . . . We consider a man who takes no interest in the state not as harmless, but as useless; and although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it. We do not look upon discussion as a stumbling block in the way of political action, but as an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all. . . . We believe that happiness is the fruit of freedom and freedom of valor, and we do not shrink from the danger of war. . . . To sum up, I claim that Athens is the School of Hellas, and that the individual Athenian grows up to a happy versatility and to a readiness for varied emergencies.²⁴⁷

In another funeral oration (probably given by Lysias, around 392 B.C.), the ideals of the Athenian way of life were summed up again. Our ancestors, he says,

were the first and only men of that time who cast out arbitrary power and established democracy, holding that the freedom of all was the greatest concord, and sharing with one another their hopes and perils they governed themselves with free hearts, honoring the good and chastising the bad by law. They held it bestial to constrain one another by force, and the part of men to define justice by law, and to persuade by reason, and serve both by action, having law as their king and reason as their teacher.²⁴⁸

Citizens were proud of their democracy and of their active role in running it. One example of this pride is provided by the celebrated tragedian Aeschylus. He won many dramatic competitions, yet his tombstone mentions that he fought at Marathon, not his success as a playwright. Likewise, “numerous ships of the Athenian navy bore the name *Demokratia*.”²⁴⁹ Another telling example of this pride is the archaeological finding that, before the democracy, the most common items in Athenian graves were personal weapons. During the democracy, however, the most common item was the plaque a man received while serving in the jury courts and legislative councils.²⁵⁰

Before 411–410 [the first chilling oligarchic takeover during the war with Sparta,] Athens had simply been a democracy. Now, and especially after [the “monstrous” oligarchy of] 403, Athenians knew that their democracy was something precious and special, something necessary for the Athenian character and the city of Athens, something to be protected at all costs.²⁵¹

The Athenians thought democracy was fun:

The Athenians derived actual enjoyment from the formal play with complicated procedures like sortition, voting and debates in political assemblies. Accordingly the citizens' participation in the running of the political institutions was astonishing and unmatched in world history.²⁵²

Athenian Non-Military Achievements

The civilized life of Greece, during the centuries when she was accomplishing the most, was peculiarly centered at Athens. Without Athens, Greek history would lose three quarters of its significance, and modern life and thought would become infinitely the poorer. — William Stearns Davis.²⁵³

In all history, nothing is so surprising or so difficult to account for as the sudden rise of civilization in Greece. . . . What they achieved in art and literature is familiar to everybody, but what they did in the purely intellectual realm is even more exceptional. They invented mathematics and science and philosophy; they first wrote history as opposed to mere annals; they speculated freely about the nature of the world and the ends of life, without being bound in the fetters of any inherited orthodoxy. What occurred was so astonishing that, until very recent times, men were content to gape and talk mystically about the Greek genius. . . . The achievements of Athens in the time of Pericles are perhaps the most astonishing thing in all history. . . . architects, sculptors, and dramatists, who remain unsurpassed to the present day, produced works which dominated the future down to modern times. This is the more surprising when we consider the smallness of the population involved. Never before or since has anything approaching the same proportion of the inhabitants of any area shown itself capable of work of the highest excellence. — Bertrand Russell²⁵⁴

Athens produced more brilliant minds . . . than any other place the world has seen before or since. — Eric Weiner²⁵⁵

Athens was the most distinguished outpost of Greek culture, but certainly not the only one. So some of the achievements described below are of Greeks living in other city-states, some of foreign-born residents of Athens, and some of the Athenians themselves.

During the classical period, some Greeks brought about the most impressive intellectual and artistic leap in human history: Rejecting unquestioning acceptance of traditional fairy tales, seeing that most customs are arbitrary conventions, and having enough confidence in themselves to think that they could figure out or create something that no one had before — and that they could do so by relying on their minds, sense of beauty, critical thinking, logic, and observations, not on authority.

This attitude of thinking for oneself, critical thinking, and bowing to no one — physically and figuratively — finds one expression in the Greeks' aversion to prostrating themselves in front of a fellow human being, and the length to which many of them went to avoid prostration when dealing with Persian despots. They detested this Persian custom, perhaps because it stems from the twin beliefs that one man can be inherently inferior to another and that absolute power is legitimate.

I shall argue later that the Greek intellectual and artistic leap is intimately connected to an even greater leap forward which took place, roughly, at the same time: the leap towards freedom and democracy. At this point, we need only note the coincidence: Athens was “an outstandingly successful polis [city state] during the period of the democracy, and not before.”²⁵⁶

Similarly, there were booksellers and private book collections in Athens. Unlike the typically illiterate and innumerate Spartans, most Athenians could read and write partially because “Athens was a democracy.”²⁵⁷

During that period, Athens was a “magnet for voluntary immigration”²⁵⁸ and a Mecca for visiting scholars, artists, craftsmen, and tourists.

The achievements recounted below are all the more remarkable since they constitute a mere fragment of the entire Greek output. Of the Greeks’ paintings, melodies, and dances, we know little. We only possess a fraction of their writings. Even the tragedies and comedies in our possession cannot be produced in their original grandeur, in the open clean air of ancient Athens, accompanied by poetry, music, and dance. The marble sculptures we see today in museums around the world are often mutilated, white, Roman copies of the brilliantly painted originals.

The same goes for all other Greek contributions. We have the works of some Greek philosophers who were acceptable to the authoritarians who have ruled most of the world ever since, and almost nothing of Democritus — a democrat and one of the greatest minds of antiquity. The same holds for Aristarchus of Samos, who proposed a theory so radical that, even when it was revived 18 centuries later, had to be published posthumously. Additionally, some works were simply lost due to the ravages of time. So, when talking about Greek accomplishments, we should always bear in mind that what we see is only the tip of the Greekberg. If we could miraculously get hold of the entire Greek output, many textbooks, encyclopedias, and mindsets, would have to undergo radical revisions.

Philosophy (in the Athenian Greek dialect, love of wisdom), requires throwing overboard handed-down traditions and trying to think through things on one’s own. Greek philosophy was probably developed independently of the impressive Asian philosophies of the same period. Furthermore, Greek philosophy was probably more versatile and less tradition-bound than its Asian counterparts. Greeks studied logic and carried it to incredible heights. They likewise dealt with metaphysics, ethics, and political philosophy. They tried to answer anew such fundamental questions as “What is everything made of?”, “What is justice?”, and “What is the best system of government?” During and after its two centuries of freedom, Athens produced its fair share of philosophers, of which some of the best known are Socrates and Plato. Permanent residents of foreign extraction included Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Aristotle, Diogenes, Zeno of Citium, and others.

The Greeks were not the first to discover mathematics, but they were the first to develop it as an intellectual edifice in a form that it is still celebrated today, involving definitions, axioms,

theorems, proofs, and deductive reasoning. “The art of mathematical demonstration was,” says the great mathematician and holistic thinker Bertrand Russell, “almost wholly, Greek in origin.”²⁵⁹ Euclid’s *Elements*, says Russell, is “one of the greatest books ever written.” As in the case of philosophy, some great mathematicians from the Greek world flocked to Athens, including Eudoxus, while others, like Theaetetus, were Athenians.

Unlike their predecessors, Greek intellectuals loved mathematics because it is beautiful; they searched for beauty and truth, and not merely for practical applications. The same can be said about most of their other intellectual endeavors: Greek intellectuals were curious, pursuing and creating knowledge for its own sake. An anecdote of a later age captures that disinterested curiosity. A pupil asked Euclid of Alexandria what is to be gained by studying geometry. Euclid then told his slave to give the pupil “*threepence since he must make gain out of what he learns.*”²⁶⁰

In astronomy (Athenian Greek dialect: arrangement or law of stars), “Greek achievements were as remarkable as in geometry.”²⁶¹ Anaxagoras for example, who resided in Athens for decades, understood that moonlight is reflected sunlight, and was the first to propose the modern theory of eclipses. Heraclides, another long-time resident of Athens and a student of Plato, was, as far as we know, the first to realize that the orderly movement of the stars and planets was an illusion produced by Earth’s rotation on its axis.

The Greeks invented the first known analogue computers, e.g., the antikythera mechanism and the astrolabe. Other examples of the Greek mechanical genius include the Athenian randomization devices (kleroterion), accurate clocks, piston steam engines, screw-cutting lathes, catapults, air pumps, robots, and vending machines.²⁶²

The rational study of history (Athenian Greek: inquiry) began with the Greeks. My own favorite historian of all time is Herodotus, a long-time resident of Athens, who, while remaining as close to the truth as his meticulous investigations allowed, captured more than anyone before the human condition, the thoughts, feelings, and deeds of his protagonists. Most scholars would however say that “the most impressive of all historians”²⁶³ or the “greatest historian, perhaps, who ever lived”²⁶⁴ was the Athenian oligarch Thucydides. Athens and Greece as a whole produced many other rational histories, of which comparatively few survived.

The gap between Athenian sculpture and its predecessors is just as striking as the corresponding gaps in philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, mechanics, and history. A casual visit to any classical museum would convince most observers that even the extant, unadorned, often mutilated, Roman copies of Greek sculptures surpass anything known to us that had taken place before. Indeed, some of these Athenian creations are not inferior to anything that has been sculptured since. The casual visitor likewise cannot help noticing that many of the greatest sculptures of the last 500 years have been inspired by the Athenians.

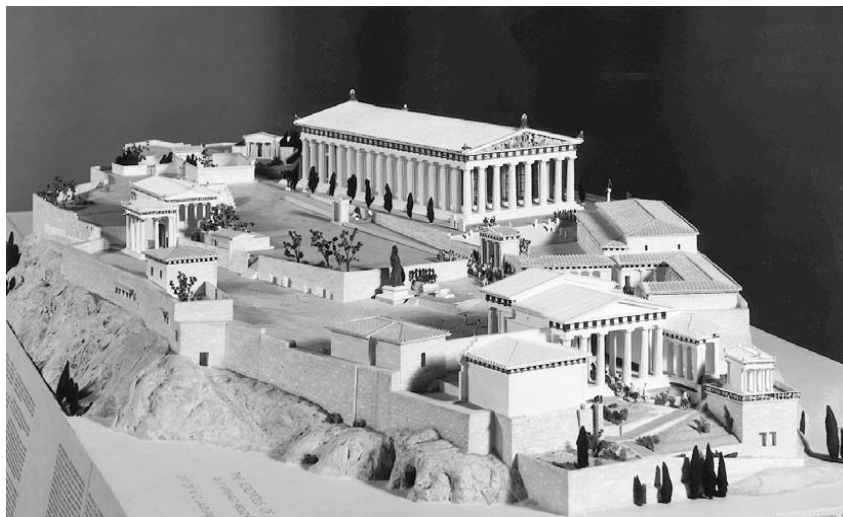
George Grote eulogizes one of the seven must-see sights of the ancient world, a creation of the Athenian Phidias (or Pheidias):

With all the great additions which Pheidias made to the grandeur of Athens, his last and greatest achievement was out of Athens — the colossal statue of Zeus, in the great temple of Olympia, executed in the years immediately preceding the Peloponnesian war. The effect produced by this stupendous work, sixty feet high, in ivory and gold, embodying in visible majesty some of the grandest conceptions of Grecian poetry and religion, upon the minds of all beholders for many centuries successively — was such as never has been; and probably never will be, equalled in the annals of art, sacred or profane.²⁶⁵

The Greeks excelled in city planning:

The invention of formal city planning is often attributed to Hippodamus of Miletus (c. 498 - c. 408 B.C.). Hippodamus helped to design [his native city and] the new harbor town of Piraeus, which served as a commercial port for Athens.²⁶⁶

Greek architecture (Athenian Greek: architect, director of masons or chief builder) was likewise remarkable. In Athens, and probably elsewhere in Greek democracies, public works were often managed through collaboration of numerous private contractors paid by the state. Perhaps the most famous example of Athenian architecture is Phidias' Parthenon, a temple dedicated to the country's patron Goddess and serving as the public treasury. This temple has been praised as "the most thrilling building there is,"²⁶⁷ "the most remarkable building in the world,"²⁶⁸ or "perhaps the most perfect structure ever."²⁶⁹



*A model of the Athenian Acropolis*²⁷⁰

Drama (derived from Athenian Greek, to act) was an Athenian specialty. If performed well and imaginatively, especially in the original Athenian style, the tragedies (Athenian Greek: goat songs) and comedies (Athenian Greek: revel singing) of such writers as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes can still be watched with pleasure today and are almost as impressive as the best theatrical and literary works of the last few centuries. As far as we know, Athenian drama made a clean break from past plays and storytelling, and exerted a profound impact on the development of Western drama, movies, and literature.

In Greece, oratory was highly developed and accomplished public speaking instructors were in great demand. The surviving speeches in our possession must have been spellbinding when delivered live. Even in written form, they are often masterpieces of reasoning and persuasion. Athens also boasted the largest economy among the Greek city-states “and was the center of eastern Mediterranean trade.”²⁷¹

The Athenian silver Owl, containing about 17.2 grams, was widely used in Athens, other Greek cities, and neighboring regions. As in the case of subsequent reserve currencies, Athens profited handsomely from its Owls. The Owl gained this prominent position owing to Athenian commercial and naval strength, productive silver mines in Athenian territory, and the meticulous steps taken by Athenian democrats to ensure the purity and quality of their coins. Unlike the Romans and many subsequent civilizations, the Athenians did not debase their currency. Hence, Athens was “the most important minting center in the Aegean; everyone trusted the quality of the silver.”²⁷²



*Left: the owl, the mascot of Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, as it appears on the reverse of the coin. Center: Athena on the obverse. Right: The living inspiration for the owl on the left.*²⁷³

Athens was also the pottery capital of the then-known world: “For more than two hundred years Attica has been supplying the world pottery which is in some respects superior to any that has gone before, and also (all things considered) to any that will follow.”²⁷⁴

The Greeks can also be credited for being the first, or among the first, to apply a rational approach to medicine.²⁷⁵ For example, Alcmaeon of Croton probably discovered that the eyes (sense of vision), nose (smell) and ears (hearing) were linked to the brain, leading him to suggest that the brain (and not the heart) must be the seat of intelligence. Among other achievements, Hippocrates of Kos carried out successful surgeries. Likewise, the Athenian historian Thucydides meticulously described the symptoms and infectiousness of the Athenian epidemic of 430-426 B.C. He noted that survivors acquired immunity to it — a crucial insight for the subsequent development of genuine vaccines.

Athens and Greece influenced the modern world in other ways too. We still hold international Olympics, still indirectly celebrate Athens’ fantastic victory at Marathon, still have our doctors recite the Hippocratic Oath. The Greek language of the Macedonian and eastern Roman empires, the language into which the Old and New Testaments were translated, and what is commonly

called now “ancient Greek,” is, for the most part, the Athenian Ionian dialect. The Romans, to their great credit, recognized the greatness of the Greeks, and for the most part assimilated and promoted Greek culture. And of course, Athens is the capital of modern Greece.

Military Achievements

Even if the democratic city-states of classical antiquity were but tiny islands in the vast sea of human experience, they nonetheless demonstrated that human capacities far exceed the sorry standards displayed in dismal performance of most political systems. — Robert A. Dahl²⁷⁶

We now turn our attention to the war record of Athens and sister democracies. In Athens, military competence was apparently linked to the democratic form of government. The historian Herodotus, himself not an Athenian, noticed and explained the causal connection between freedom and military excellence:

Thus did the Athenians increase in strength. And it is plain enough, not from this instance only, but from many everywhere, that freedom is an excellent thing since even the Athenians, who, while they continued under the rule of tyrants, were not a whit more valiant than any of their neighbors, no sooner shook off the yoke than they became decidedly the first of all. These things show that, while undergoing oppression, they let themselves be beaten, since then they worked for a master; but so soon as they got their freedom, each man was eager to do the best he could for himself. So fared it now with the Athenians.²⁷⁷

Herodotus’ views are echoed and amplified by Prof. Hansen:

In classical Hellas [Greece], about half of the city-states were monarchies or oligarchies, and half were democracies, most of them direct democracies of the Athenian type. If it were true that a direct democracy is an unwise and inefficient form of government compared with oligarchies ruled by an elite, or monarchies ruled by a strong leader, it follows that the many hundreds of democracies would soon have succumbed to the oligarchies and monarchies. . . . On the contrary, if we judge Athenian democracy by the consistency and efficacy of its policy, we have to note that democratic Athens was much more efficient and much stronger than its oligarchic neighbors, though these neighbors were as populous as Athens. Like Athens, Thebes was strongest, in fact the strongest city-state in Hellas, in the fourth century when the polis was democratically governed.²⁷⁸

These generalizations are unequivocally supported by the historical record. Here we shall only review the most remarkable military exploits of Athens and other Greek democracies, beginning with the expulsion of the Persian despots from Greece.

When the story begins, Athens was already a stable democracy. At that time, the Greek cities of what is now eastern Turkey, along with some Greek islands, revolted against the tyrant of Persia. Refused help by Sparta, they requested and received help from the Athenians. During the course of the uprising, Athenians, along with the neighboring Eretrians and the revolting Ionians, took part in burning the Lydian capital of Sardis, which was now part of the Persian Empire. Through this act of defiance, they earned the lasting enmity of Darius, the absolute ruler of Persia:

Darius had been thrown into violent indignation by the attack and burning of Sardis . . . “The Athenians (exclaimed Darius) — who are they?” On receiving the answer, . . . [he] desired an attendant to remind him thrice every day at dinner — “Master, remember the Athenians.”²⁷⁹

It is almost certain that, regardless of what the Athenians did or did not do, the Persians would have tried to expand their empire by invading Greece and other regions of Europe.

Some time after the brutal suppression of the Ionian revolt, the Persians took the island of Naxos without a fight, laid siege to the island city-state of Eretria, and with the usual help of the oligarchic party of that city (who probably thought resistance was hopeless) won, and proceeded to enslave the entire population.²⁸⁰ They then landed at the bay of Marathon, in Attica, certain that they would prevail against the Athenians. At that moment, given the immense size of the Persian land and naval expedition, and given its uninterrupted series of victories, the overall sentiment in Greece was that resistance was suicidal. Just before the Battle of Marathon, a Greek gambler would have probably refused to accept a 1 in 100 odds of Athenian victory.

Besides numbers and an impressive winning record, the Persians had many other advantages. They were aided by the deposed Athenian tyrant Hippias (see above), who knew the terrain and Athenian psychology, and who still had anti-democratic loyalists in the city itself. Persia had enormous financial resources. Some Athenians were ready to surrender either because they thought the situation was past hope, were bribed, or preferred an oligarchy under Persian control to democracy. Many Greek cities had already surrendered, and their soldiers too were (unwillingly) arrayed against the Athenians. No other Greek city, except the small grateful city of Platea, dared help the Athenians. And yet, says Herodotus:

When the Persians saw the Athenians running towards them, they got ready to receive them, but they thought the Athenians must be mad — mad enough to bring about their utter destruction — because they could see how few of them there were, and that their charge was unsupported by either cavalry or archers. That was the invaders’ assessment of the situation, but when the Athenians came to grips with them all along the line, they fought remarkably well. They were the first Greeks known to charge enemy forces at a run, and the first to endure the sight of Persian dress and the men wearing it. Up until then even the word “Persian” had been a source of fear in Greece.²⁸¹

The Persians lost about 6,400 men in this battle, and ended up sailing back to Asia, defeated. The Athenians lost 192. Thus, a country with a total population of less than 300,000, only aided by 1,000 soldiers from Platea (almost the entire military force of that statelet), defeated the mighty, seemingly invincible, Persian Empire — “the largest, wealthiest, and most aggressive state in the world, with a population of perhaps forty million souls, and capable of drawing on troops and revenue from Thrace to Afghanistan and from Georgia to Egypt.”²⁸²

It was the Athenians, almost alone, who, against odds, defeated the mighty Persian army at Marathon (490 BC), showing the Greeks that victory against Persian tyrants was possible. Everyone else, except the little city of Platea, either surrendered to the Persians or sat on the sidelines, believing that victory against Persia was not possible.²⁸³

Ten years after Marathon, the Persians tried again and were defeated in a series of land and naval battles. The Spartans, at the time the strongest land power in Greece, played the most decisive role in the key land battle, a battle in which the Athenians comprised the second most important force. But in the ensuing crucial sea battles, in 490 B.C., again, by far the key players in the expulsion of Persian despots from Europe were the Athenians:

The defeat of Persia was essentially a democratic victory. It was common men of Athens who led the way in removing the threat of slavery from all Greece. Among the other Greek states there were a few which considered resistance against such a formidable enemy as the Persian Empire to be hopeless, and were ready to accept the best terms they could get; and even the oracle at Delphi advised the Athenians not to resist. In Athens itself some of the wealthier people, fearing democratic control by their fellow citizens more than foreign domination, were pro-Persian. But men who had come to realize the obligations as well as the privileges of liberty, led by a democrat whose courage was matched by his intelligence, refused to yield to despair; when their country was invaded and devastated by the Persians they fought all the harder; and the victory which they won justified their faith in themselves and guaranteed for their children the opportunity to build a greater commonwealth.²⁸⁴

“Against all odds, a democratic fighting community had defeated a colossal monarchic military machine.”²⁸⁵

The Spartan-provoked 27-year-long Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.) between Athens, Sparta, and their respective allies, is often cited as proof of democratic incompetence. Nothing could be farther from the truth. To begin with, the Athenians fought bravely, tenaciously, and well throughout that war. Besides, they were not defeated by totalitarian Sparta, as we shall now see.

Money in those days was just as important as military adroitness, and the Spartans had the financial backing of the Persian Empire. Unlike the Athenians, the Spartans often betrayed their fellow Greeks to secure that support, during and after their war with Athens. To see how important that support was, we only need to recall that, in 411 B.C., the Athenians briefly abandoned their beloved democracy in the vain hope of receiving Persian funds.

Next, enclosed within their walls during the early years of the war (430-426 B.C.), the Athenians were visited by a deadly plague which killed about 1 in 3 people, leaving many of the survivors disfigured, crippled, or demoralized. This cataclysm played a key role in weakening Athens and in its eventual defeat.

A major turning point during that long war was the Athenian expedition to Sicily (415-413 B.C.), intending to help a Sicilian ally and subdue the island (especially its principal city, Syracuse, an ally of Sparta). The Athenians came close to winning,²⁸⁶ but eventually their large force was wiped out. At the time, Syracuse was a democracy. There is, in fact, “evidence to support the view that Syracusan democracy was actually quite close to the Athenian version, and possibly even modeled on it.”²⁸⁷ So, when everything is said and done, the Athenians were vanquished, in large measure, by fellow democrats. Thucydides sums it up:

The total number of prisoners taken it would be difficult to state exactly, but it could not have been less than seven thousand [more than 20% of Athenians of fighting age]. This was the greatest Hellenic achievement of any in this war, or, in my opinion, in Hellenic history; at once most glorious to the victors, and most calamitous to the conquered. They were beaten at all points and altogether; all that they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army, everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned home.²⁸⁸

Despite all these truly catastrophic setbacks, towards the end, the Athenians were still fighting, still winning, still celebrating their festivals. They were eventually defeated in the Debacle (it was not a battle) of Aegospotami (405 B.C.). There is every reason to believe that in this catastrophe, as in many others before and after, the Athenians were betrayed by one of their own fifth columnists:

There was no battle, no resistance. Twenty ships, which were in a condition to fight, escaped; the remaining 160 were captured at once. It was generally believed that there was treachery among the generals, and it is possible that Adeimantus, who was taken prisoner and spared, had been bribed by Lysander. All the Athenians who were taken, to the number of three or four thousand, were put to death.²⁸⁹

After that catastrophe, besieged, their navy gone, Athenians could no longer secure grain shipments to their city. "It was folly to resist,"²⁹⁰ yet they only ceased fighting when the choice was surrender or death from starvation.

Thus, the remarkable thing is not that the Athenians lost to Sparta at the end (403 B.C.), but that they were able, despite so many setbacks and betrayals, to persevere for so long.

Another notable occurrence, in the aftermath of the defeat, was the restoration of democracy (403 B.C.). At war's end, the Spartans, as usual, installed bloodthirsty lackeys. Athenian democrats fought back against overwhelming odds, and within eight months (and with the still-unexplained acquiescence of Sparta), were able to restore their democracy — and not to lose it again until 80 years later.

For some time after this war, Sparta was the most powerful state in Greece. It exerted this power in a manner so dictatorial, haughty, and rapacious as to even outrage and alienate its erstwhile oligarchic allies and dependencies. Sparta also handed over the Asian Greeks — whose freedom was safeguarded by Athens until she lost to Sparta — to the Persians. Later, the until-then invincible land army of Sparta was defeated by the city of Thebes (371 B.C.). "Sparta was finished as a major player on the international scene, any hopes of its revival dashed by the loss of most of the massive underclass that had for so long undergirded its economy."²⁹¹ At the time of the crucial battle between Sparta and Thebes, Sparta was as dictatorial and militaristic as ever, but Thebes was a full-fledged direct democracy.

The ascent of the Macedonian macro-state, under the brilliant but utterly unscrupulous leadership of Philip and then his son Alexander, spelled the end of autonomous city-states and real

democracies in Greece. And yet, the Greeks, under Athenian leadership, came close to defeating the Macedonians too. At critical moments in that long confrontation with the Macedonian tyrants, the Athenians delayed action or hesitated and, hence, lost at the end. It is hard to tell whether this failure was due to Philip's genius, energy, hunger for power, bribery skills, vast land army, or possession of gold mines. Other contributing factors might include the inability of democracy to act as swiftly and secretly as a single, shrewd, dictator, the oligarchic fifth column, or the Athenians, after centuries of military conflicts, having had enough. The important point though is that it was democratic Athens and its competent and highly-disciplined navy that posed the greatest obstacle on the road to the Macedonian subjugation of Greece and the vast Persian empire:

The odds were all against Philip in his early years; they shifted and became more and more in his favour, only because his game was played well, and that of his opponents badly. The superiority of force was at first so much on the side of Athens, that if she had been willing to employ it, she might have made sure of keeping Philip at least within the limits of Macedonia.²⁹²

Under the influence of ancient and modern anti-democratic writers whose texts survived (the vast majority), the historical facts are often distorted, so it may be worth recapping our findings. Mighty Persia was primarily defeated by democratic Athens, with Sparta playing a key role in just one decisive land battle; and even there Athens, of all the Greek states present, made the second most important contribution. It was not unimaginative Sparta that defeated Athens in their long war, but Persian money, the plague, democratic Syracuse, and Athenian quislings. Despite the odds, after the defeat, Athenian democrats regained their city by force. It was democratic Thebes that finally broke Sparta's hard-hearted hegemony over Greece. And, at the end, it was democratic Athens that posed the greatest obstacle to the Macedonian conquest of Greece.

It is not hard to figure out the secrets of Athenian war successes. The Athenians, as Herodotus noted, were fighting out of conviction, not fear. For them the choice was freedom or slavery, not one or another kind of slavery. Athenian democracy nurtured innovation and brilliance in all fields, including the military one. Also, oligarchies often kept the discontented majority without heavy arms, for fear of an uprising in the middle of a war against an external foe. The Athenians, by contrast, wanted the majority to be armed; this was the best way to protect the democracy from its internal and external enemies. So, besides being one of the most populous countries in Greece, the majority of Athenians were armed in times of war.

On the other hand, Athens suffered from several overlapping military weaknesses.

First, a powerful faction of disgruntled oligarchs was ever ready to betray their country.

Another weakness of democracies entails conflicts with such totalitarian entities as Sparta, a country that, more than any other in history, lived by the sword. The oppressed, chillingly indoctrinated, professional soldiers of Sparta lived to fight, not fought to live. According to one observer, "it was no great thing for the Spartans to seek death in the wars in order to escape so

many hardships and such a wretched life as theirs.”²⁹³ Their lives, their social standing, depended almost exclusively on their courage and prowess in the battlefield. As a result, the unhappy Spartans were first-class warriors.

A related weakness of democratic armed forces involves war with brilliant and unscrupulous dictators ruling over a much larger and richer state. Such were the tyrants of Macedonia, Philip and Alexander.

War fatigue is another apparent weakness of a free and enlightened people. Consequently, towards the end, the Athenians hired mercenaries to do some of the fighting for them. Also, when faced with military emergencies, they often failed to act as incisively and courageously as their ancestors.

We may note in passing that, early in its imperial expansion, Persia had talented and courageous rulers too. Fortunately for the Greeks and the rest of us, from the rout of Marathon to the destruction of Persepolis 160 years later, most of Persia’s hereditary rulers were incompetent.

The take-home lesson from the foregoing discussion of Athenian overall achievements is straightforward: No other country in history, large or small, has ever reached such heights. And yet, we haven’t yet dealt with Athens’ greatest and most complex creation: its “most beautiful political system.”²⁹⁴

The Most Beautiful Political System

All states before the polis [city-state] had served, for the most part, as vehicles for ruling classes to pocket the proceeds of surplus production, the fruits of the labor of the most vulnerable members of their societies. The poor barely survived, while their working lives supported small elites who spent much of their time wallowing in luxury. Not so at Athens. These citizens had broken the mold of exploitation, so much so that they would have been perplexed to see the modern state used regularly as a force of oppression against the demos. In Athens, citizens were the state in a way without equivalent in any class-divided polity since 323 B.C. The happy marriage they achieved between “people” and “state” placed severe constraints on the actions of leading politicians and military officers, while over time solidifying political rights for a broad group of citizens. . . . The key ingredient in this political revolution was relative economic parity between rich, middling, and poor, built upon the broad ownership of land Solon’s reforms brought to Athens. . . . They openly challenged the Socratic-Platonic idea that only a few had the knowledge and moral character required to govern. This fraud, perpetuated by monarchs and political philosophers alike, quickly dissolved, as everyday people soon realized that, with support from their fellows and a slight boost to their self-confidence, they too were capable of competently running most of the affairs of state. In doing so, they ensured that all could speak if they so chose, that all were required to listen, and that all had one vote and one vote only — a trio of principles that surely grated on aristocrats’ nerves. — Larry Patriquin²⁹⁵

Branches of Government

People's Assembly

The Assembly was the supreme authority of the land. Every male citizen could take part, address his fellows, and vote. The Assembly convened some forty times a year and was regularly attended by a quorum of at least 6,000 citizens. It was the Assembly that made the most crucial decisions, e.g., declaring war, approving treaties with other states, electing military leaders, and granting citizenship.²⁹⁶

Council of 500

The 500 councilmen were annually chosen by lot “from all the demes (wards or parishes) of Athens and Attica in proportion to their size, and thus forming a fair sample of the people as a whole.”²⁹⁷

Over a lifetime, a man could only serve twice in the Council. The Council met every working day. Of the 500 Councilmen, in each given $\frac{1}{10}$ of a year, 50 members of one of the 10 tribes formed the executive committee. The 50 met every day, and $\frac{1}{3}$ of them and the chairman of that day had to be physically present, day and night, at the special Council house at the city center, where they ate at public expense.²⁹⁸

The Council of 500 was the executive body of the state, overseeing its daily operations. It broadly supervised and coordinated the activities of all other officials. Subject to the Assembly's final approval, the Council was in charge of setting and publicizing the Assembly's agenda a few days before the Assembly convened and of implementing the Assembly's decisions after it dispersed.

The Council also set the agenda for the Legislative Courts, arrested suspected traitors, and distributed funds to disabled and indigent citizens. The Council was in charge of sanctuaries, festivals, city defenses, shipyards, ship construction, and cavalry. In collaboration with other boards, it administered city finances.

Arbitrators

Athens was a highly litigious society. To avoid encumbering the courts with too many cases, and to avoid the risks to both parties from formal litigation, an official system of arbitration in private cases was established. Arbitrators were chosen from among the cohort of 59-year-old citizens (thus serving at age 60), and, unlike most other official positions, were required to serve. If either litigant disagreed with the arbitrator's decision, the case was transferred to the regular law courts.²⁹⁹

Law Courts

Steven Johnstone summarizes the basic features of the Athenian judicial system:

Athenians performed democracy daily in their law courts. Without lawyers or judges, private citizens, acting as accusers and defendants, argued their own cases directly to juries composed typically of 201 to 501 jurors, who voted on a verdict without deliberation. This legal system strengthened and perpetuated democracy as Athenians understood it, for it emphasized the ideological equality of all (male) citizens. . . . Laws against bribery, panels of several hundred jurors, and random assignment to the courts, effectively curtailed the direct influence of wealth on trials.³⁰⁰

Courts convened at dawn for about 200 days every year.³⁰¹ There was no official prosecutor. Anyone could sue anyone else, either because the would-be defendant personally injured him in some way (e.g., stole his mare or murdered his wife), or because he harmed the state (e.g., through treason, embezzlement, or official misconduct).³⁰²

There was no presiding judge, only an ordinary citizen chosen by lot chairing the proceedings on just that particular trial. There were no lawyers either. Both sides had to present their case in person and, unlike American litigants, could do so in any way they wished (including ad hominem attacks, citing their service to their country, etc.). Both sides could, if they so chose, pay an expert to write their speech for them.

Both parties to a legal dispute were given equal time (measured with a water clock). Summoned witnesses were required to appear. After listening to speeches, rebuttals, and cross-examinations, the jury voted, without deliberating, by secret ballot, thus freeing jurors from external pressure and allowing them to follow their conscience, common sense, and their understanding of the law. A simple majority determined guilt or innocence. "To avoid fraud, the votes were counted in the presence of both sides to the litigation. In some instances, the punishment of a guilty man was mandated by law; in other cases, the jury voted again on rival punishments advocated in a second set of speeches by the prosecutor and defendant."³⁰³ At the end, five previously selected (by lot) jurors paid themselves and everyone else. No trial lasted more than one day.

The system was far from perfect. It had its fair share of sycophants (Greek: fig-shakers), who blackmailed innocent and guilty people with the threat of taking them to court, and who at times served a rich man's bidding in the Assembly. Also, since there were no prosecutors and only private accusers, sometimes guilty persons went Scot-free. And, at times, the Athenians applied capital punishment to minor offenses. Worst of all, they sometimes executed innocents.

Overall though, this system worked:

These numerous [jury-courts] afforded the only organ which Grecian politics could devise, for getting redress against powerful criminals, public as well as private, and for obtaining a sincere and uncorrupt verdict. . . . They were free, self-judging persons — unassisted by the schooling, but at the same time untrammelled by the awe-striking ascendancy of a professional judge — obeying the spontaneous inspirations of their own consciences, and recognising no authority except the laws of the city, with which they were familiar.³⁰⁴

Legislative Courts

Athenian laws underwent constant revisions. In the 4th century, legislation followed the format of jury trials discussed above. The process ordinarily started when the entire corpus of Athenian laws, “section by section, was reviewed at the first Assembly meeting of each year.”³⁰⁵ The process could also be initiated at other sessions of the Assembly, at the initiative of any citizen or official. If the majority in the Assembly voted to subject an existing law to a “trial,” the details of the “accusation” against the law would be published in the main marketplace.

The next Assembly then authorized the creation of a Legislative Court and, depending on the importance of the case, determined the number of lawmakers. The “accused” law was later brought to “trial” in the newly constituted Court. The legislators “judging” a law were chosen by lot from the same pool of 6,000 potential jurors who themselves were chosen by lot from the larger body of all those who expressed interest in serving and who passed minimal integrity and competency requirements. Each lawmaking panel usually comprised 501 to 1,501 members. The citizen who initially proposed the change of the law to the Assembly was given three hours to “prosecute” the existing law, which would then be defended by five men chosen by the Assembly. After listening to both sides, panel members voted by a show of hands, without deliberations. If the majority voted in favor, the new law was immediately adopted. If the majority voted against the new law, the older law remained in force. At most, the entire “trial” would last a single day.

Once passed, any citizen could appeal the validity of the new law in a people’s law court, either on the grounds that it conflicted with some other existing laws or on the grounds that it was harmful to the democracy or the people.³⁰⁶

Nothing like Athenian law existed in any contemporaneous society outside Greece or in most societies down to the twentieth century. It was enacted not by self-interested members of the wealthiest class, but by common, average men, most of whom were farmers and most of whom, as far as we can tell, cherished their political system.³⁰⁷

Boards of Officials

Boards of officials were in charge of administering the day-to-day affairs of the nation and of implementing decisions of the Assembly, Council, and Law Courts.³⁰⁸ Every year about 100 officials were elected, and about 600 were chosen by lot, all serving one-year terms. If enough candidates stepped forward, the typical board comprised of 10 members of equal power and authority, but some unpopular boards attracted fewer members. The underlying logic of a ten-member board was to share responsibilities and tasks, increase citizen participation, and provide an internal check on overweening or corruptible board members.

Characteristics of Athenian Democracy

Pay for Service

In the 4th century B.C. and earlier, citizens were reimbursed for public service and for taking part in cultural events. Such payments encouraged participation and made it possible for poor citizens to take time off from their work, attend the assembly, run the city in any official capacity, and partake in the festivals of their country.

The Polling Principle

The majority of citizens could not be involved in the hundreds of day-to-day operations of the nation, nor even in making crucial decisions. Hence, apart from the relatively few elected positions, Greek democrats relied on the polling principle — the conviction that the vote of a large enough random sample of the population closely reflects the views of the population as a whole. Thus, a typical assembly was attended by fewer than 20% of all male citizens.³⁰⁹ The vote of these 20% was still considered the vote of the people. Only 500 served in the Council and only 50 in its executive committee, some 201-501 in any typical judicial or legislative session, and 10 or less in each board.

Modern statisticians endorse the underlying logic of polling. With a small margin of error depending on sample size, decisions and actions taken by any of these randomly-chosen citizen panels approximated the decisions and actions that would have been taken by the people as a whole.

We shall see later that the polling principle, along with a peaceful but powerful defensive posture, universal franchise, and decentralization, can serve as the foundation of direct democracies in contemporary nations.

The Voluntary Principle

Public service in most capacities, elected or chosen by lot, was strictly voluntary.

The Random Principle (Sortition)

Any citizen could attend any of the 40 or so Assembly meetings. By contrast, a few positions which required professional expertise were elective. All other official positions were chosen by lot from among those who stood forward and who successfully passed minimal integrity and competence screenings, making sure that all administrative divisions of the country were proportionately represented. The lottery itself relied on a sophisticated randomizing machine and was carried out in full view of those in attendance.

The random principle was applied on multiple levels. Take for instance the law courts and the legislative panels. The 6,000 citizens selected at random (from the larger number of volunteers over 30 years of age) took an oath and henceforth comprised the juror and legislator pool of that

particular year. On days when the courts or a legislative panel were in session, many of those 6,000 would appear. Again, the decision as to who among them would serve on that particular day was made by lot. And this was not the end of the Athenians' love affair with randomization: Of the several courts in sessions that day, assignment to a particular court was again randomized. And, finally, within each court, there took place "a final selection by lot, choosing one juror to control the water-clock, 4 to count votes, and 5 to pay jurors at the end."³¹⁰

By 410-409 B.C., lots were drawn for the seating positions in the Assembly and Council, apparently to forestall the formation of factions.³¹¹ Similarly, seating positions of the jurors/judges were allocated by lot, "so that friends or like-minded people did not sit together and comment on the proceedings to each other, or orchestrate particular responses."³¹²

Another example is provided by the daily selection of the titular head of the country — the man chosen by lot as that day's president of the Council (and Assembly, if there was one on that day).



*A fragment of a kleroterion, the contraption which was used for the random selection of willing citizens to most official positions.*³¹³

Term Limits

One-year term limits were imposed on all official positions, whether randomly-chosen or elected. If chosen at random, an official could not, in most cases, serve in that position again. If elected, an official could be re-elected.

Minimum Age Requirements

The Assembly was open to all persons over 20 years of age. Council members, jurors, legislators, and most officials had to be at least 30. Arbitrators in private cases typically served at age 60.³¹⁴

Scrutiny and Accountability of Officials

Before assuming office, a candidate was screened, making sure that he met minimum qualifications. Likewise, at any given point throughout his service, an official could be hauled to court by other officials or by any citizen who felt that the official was corrupt or abusive. If found

guilty, an official could be sacked, fined, or executed. The Assembly could also impeach an official through a motion.

After leaving office, the conduct of an official would be audited. If any irregularities were uncovered, the ex-official was punished. “Only when the whole process was complete and his conduct was declared legally impeccable was he free to sell any of his property and/or leave the city if he so wished.”³¹⁵

Participation Rates and Personal Commitment

This entire process — pay for service, randomization, term limits, and ongoing scrutiny — ensured wide participation of the citizenry. “It has been estimated that on any given day one citizen out of every four or five was engaged in some form of public service. As a result there was an extremely well-informed and experienced citizenry. Such public activity was itself a liberal education.”³¹⁶

This participation rate was “astonishing and unmatched in world history.”³¹⁷ Most citizens also took part in their country’s wars and, when the occasion arose, defended or restored the democracy. Citizens also took part in festivals, parades, athletic competitions, and dramatic contests, actively as performers, producers, writers, competitors, directors, or support personnel, and/or as viewers and voters. It was, for example, these voters who gave first place to some of the plays of Euripides and Aristophanes.

Minimizing the Impact of Fraudsters, Freeloaders, and Crooks

Randomization, term limits, and a thorough vetting process minimized entrenchment, embezzlement, abuse of power, fraud, and bribery, and thus served as a wonderful antidote to Robert Michels’ Iron Law of Oligarchy.³¹⁸ (This law states that, over time, democratic countries and organizations invariably turn into oligarchies; see Chapter 8). To put it somewhat differently, in Athens, this much-vaunted “law” did not apply. Strikingly then, in most political systems entrenched bureaucrats end up serving their interests and the interests of their organization — instead of serving the public interest — but not so in direct democracies.

A related and even more serious problem, a problem which casts a dark shadow on all contemporary societies, is that most political systems, corporations, and organizations, favor the ascent of crooks to positions of power. “In order to get power and retain it,” says Lev Tolstoy, “it is necessary to love power; but love of power is not connected with goodness but with qualities that are the opposite of goodness, such as pride, cunning and cruelty.”³¹⁹ Selection by lot, term-limits, screening before assuming office, the option of recall while in office, and audit after leaving, minimized (but did not entirely solve: see the Dilemma of Elected Officials section below) that problem in Greek democracies.

Thus, history shows, Athenian-style democracy is the only system of government in a complex society that can effectively deal with entrenched bureaucrats, the ascent of freeloaders and psychopaths, and the tendency of power itself to corrupt its holders.

The Dilemma of Elected Officials

Unlike the majority of officials who were chosen by lot, a few were elected by the Assembly. This group included commanders of the army and navy, military trainers of young conscripts, ambassadors, treasurers, religious functionaries, and a few others, e.g., the Superintendent of the Water Supply. Like other officials, most of them served one year and were subject to ongoing scrutiny, but they, by contrast, could be re-elected.

They typically served in boards of ten formally equal officials, who provided an internal check on corruption and abuse of power.³²⁰ In the Battle of Marathon, for instance, all final decisions rested with ten elected generals and one official chosen by lot. It was that group that resolved to attack the Persians and not to retreat, by a vote of 6 to 5. It was that group that chose Miltiades as the master strategist and leader of the attack.

Along with wealth disparities, election of generals/admirals constituted the Achilles' heel of Athenian democracy. Some were closet oligarchs, others incompetent, while others could not refuse a bribe. Many Athenian defeats, including the defeats in the wars against Sparta and Macedonia, were traceable at least in part to the treason of elected military commanders. Athenians were aware of the gravity of the risk: "Out of 10 generals serving on any Board of ten, at least two, on average, would sooner or later in the course of their careers be indicted . . . and usually sentenced to death (often in absencia)."³²¹

Welfare and Public Ownership of Resources

"The city assumed many of the social services which we associate today with progressive government: ownership of such utilities as forests and mines; a program of public works and financial assistance to the distressed; the direction of religious, athletic, musical and dramatic festivals,"³²² and financial support for the disabled and for orphans whose citizen fathers died in battle.³²³

Decentralization

In complex societies, local autonomy provides a check on the central government and affords ordinary citizens a chance to have a meaningful say in the running of their community. Hence, direct (or real) democracy is frequently accompanied by decentralization.

Athens was divided roughly into 139 self-governing localities. These "demes" consisted for the most part of 200 or so citizens living in a country village and its surrounding fields, or in "a stretch of coast centered on a harbor, a valley at the foot of a mountain, [or] a quarter of Athens itself, which was the only large conurbation."³²⁴ Each locality had its own regular assembly and governing

body, a meeting place, and a treasurer.³²⁵ These localities played a key role in settling citizenship questions.

Leaders and Decision-Makers

Chapter 2 argued that the greatest obstacle to fully appreciating the marvels of direct democracy is the 2,500-year-old propaganda against it. As well, despite the unparalleled achievements of direct democracies, oligarchs and their bought or spellbound followers often confuse direct democracy with representative “democracy,” even though these two systems have little in common — apart from the fact that the latter stole the word democracy from the former.

American-style “democracy,” says H. L. Mencken, “is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance. . . . the worship of jackals by jackasses.” Socrates and Plato and a million other intellectuals would concur. When I want to fix my shoes, I don’t go to any Thersites, Kritias, or Charmides, these philosophers preached. I go, rather, to a specialist — a shoemaker. Likewise, the decisions whether to go to war, abolish debt slavery, transfer money from the poor to the rich, or starve the orphans of dead soldiers, belong to experts, not to you and me.

On the face of it, this argument makes sense — until you recall the unparalleled achievements of real democracies, discussed throughout this book. Also, these intellectuals — but neither the Athenians nor hunter-gatherers — overlook the most formidable challenges faced by any society: conferring disproportionate power on anyone, the corrupting influence of power, and the ascent of jackals to positions of power. People, as we have seen, and especially the jackals who ruthlessly make it to the top of the pecking order, often serve their self-interest, not the public’s. Real democracy — incorporating sortition, term limits, and strict accountability — provides the only safeguard against this cancer (see above and Chapter 9).

This criticism of democracy also relies on an often-misconstrued aspect of Athenian democracy — the claim that expertise was ignored. Such was not the case. Pericles, as we have seen, already noted that “although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it.” Indeed, in Athens there was a separation of initiative and decision, where initiative and preparation were left to experts:

Although the Athenians supposed that every citizen would take an active part in the running of the democratic institutions, they also insisted that no citizen should be forced to engage in political activity at the top level. Political activity was divided into passive participation, that is listening and voting, and active participation, which included preparing proposals and taking an active part in political argument by speaking in the assembly and council and being an advocate in the popular courts. What the Athenians expected of the ordinary citizen was passive participation only, which demanded enough common sense to choose wisely between the proposals on offer, whereas active participation was left to those who might feel called to it. Democracy consisted in every citizen having the right to speak, *isegoria*, the genuine possibility to stand up and advise his fellow citizens; but the Athenians did not require or expect everyone to do so. Indeed, if every citizen had insisted on making use of his right to address his fellow

citizens, Assembly-democracy would have broken down there and then. The Athenians presupposed a fundamental divide between leaders and followers, in this respect there is no distinction between ancient Athenian and modern representative democracy. And this divide is connected with the distinction between those who possess expert knowledge, that is the leaders, and those who possess enough common sense to listen to a debate and choose between the proposals submitted by the leaders. The difference between the Athenians and us is that in direct democracy the choice is between the proposals, and has to be made every other day, whereas, in a representative democracy, the only choice left to ordinary citizens is between the leaders, and the choice is offered the citizens only once every third or fourth or fifth year.³²⁶

Note again the striking parallelism between leadership in Athenian and hunter-gatherer democracies (see Chapter 3).

Taming the Oligarchs

Some Athenians were far richer than their fellows, and some claimed genetic superiority. Rich people were often better educated and fed than the rest, and had enough leisure to study, write plays, and train for athletic competitions, thus reinforcing their superiority complex. Some powerful people in Athens came from a small farming or craftsmanship background, but they too joined the leisure class, often by taking bribes. So, class divisions were alive and well.

But in Athens, power rested with the majority, so the rich and the powerful had to play it safe and fair, for they always had the people breathing down their neck. The threat of execution, exile, and cold-shouldering of overweening individuals is sufficiently well-known, so here is another lesser known but subtle illustration of people power.

Dictatorships and plutocracies employ a divide-and-rule strategy to secure their power. The Athenians used a conceptually similar strategy against their wealthy citizens:

Some legal processes seem designed to encourage inter-elite competition and litigation, notably the antidosis (exchange) procedure: Rich citizen A, who found himself saddled with a non-voluntary liturgy [tax] and who thought rich man B's estate had paid less than its share of liturgies, could formally challenge B to assume the liturgy. If B refused, A could then sue B in court for a mandatory exchange of property so that A could pay off the liturgy from B's (former) estate. The antidosis procedure encouraged rich Athenians to spy out one another's hidden financial resources and pitted fellow members of the wealthy elite against one another in courtroom contests for the sympathy of the masses.³²⁷

Freedom

According to Aristotle, a long-time resident of Athens, the basis of a democratic state is liberty. Liberty has many components, but certainly one principle of liberty is for all to rule and be ruled in turn.³²⁸ Athenian citizens indeed ruled. Their democracy was not only direct "in the sense that decisions were made by the assembled people, but the 'directest' imaginable in the sense that the people through assembly, council, and law courts controlled the entire political process and that a fantastically large proportion of citizens was involved constantly in public business."³²⁹

Another component of liberty, according to Aristotle, is that a man should live as he likes.³³⁰ Indeed, in Athens, citizens were protected from the overreach of the state. For the most part, the state intruded on citizens (or rather, the citizens intruded on themselves) only when there was no other choice. A citizen had to serve in the army, cavalry, or navy, outwardly conform to the state religion, obey the laws, and refrain from harming others. If he was well-off, he had to pay direct and indirect taxes. A citizen had to treat his elderly parents well, and refrain from killing his slaves or prostituting himself. Apart from that and a few other minor exceptions, his private life was his own affair. A citizen could not be tortured, and no official could enter a private home without a warrant.³³¹ A citizen could sleep in a barrel if he wanted to, refrain from taking part in the political affairs of his country (the voluntary principle discussed earlier), educate his children in the manner that appeared best to him,³³² travel abroad, honestly sell whatever he wanted in the marketplace, renovate his house, own a dog, bury and commemorate a beloved pet by a roadside, practice medicine, drive a chariot, collect rain water, own arms, consume drugs — all this, without asking anyone's permission or begging the state to issue him such things as a passport or a driving license.

Apart from religion, Athenians enjoyed another critical component of freedom: freedom of speech ("the most excellent thing among men," according to Diogenes the Cynic).³³³ An Athenian could, for example, write plays ridiculing leading citizens of the country or condemning war (even during a bitter war for survival), have his plays performed — and be awarded (by the people) a prize in the annual drama competitions.

Athens was par excellence the state that celebrated freedom of speech as part of its ideals. . . . the criticism of democracy to be heard in Athenian sources is the strongest possible evidence that the Athenians' pride in their freedom of speech was not unfounded.³³⁴

Another aspect of liberty is access to information: "Democratic institutions can be made to work only if all concerned do their best to impart knowledge."³³⁵ As might be expected, "one of the distinguishing features of liberal Athenian democracy was freedom of information."

If decisions are ultimately to be made by the people, then the people must be informed. . . . If the state monopolizes information, keeps it from its citizenry, the people will be effectively removed from taking any meaningful part in the decision-making process. . . . There is no practice so characteristic of the ancient Athenian democracy as writing. The Athenians . . . documented their political habits, activities, and accomplishments almost obsessively. . . . most notably, certain texts were erected in the public space of the city, where all could see them. The number of fifth- and fourth-century Athenian inscriptions which have been preserved to modern times is unparalleled by any other classical Greek state.³³⁶

Still another component of freedom is national self-determination, or autonomy of the State from foreign rule or excessive meddling. Apart from a few brief periods of foreign domination, Athenians enjoyed this freedom for several centuries, up to the Macedonian conquest.

Another component of freedom is to have enough of the basic necessities of life: the right to live as one wishes means little to a starving person whose fellows wallow in luxuries. The Athenian welfare state provided for the basic physical and spiritual needs of its citizens.

Most people feel that economic freedom is also a component of freedom — starting your own business of whatever kind, founding a university, loafing in the marketplace — as long as you do no harm to others or the environment. In this sense of freedom too, Athens was a libertarian paradise.

Freedom also means, to many people, the security of their own property and the ability to pass that property to their descendants. Rich Athenians had to pay taxes, and during wars for survival their burden could be heavy. But everyone's property was protected by law.³³⁷

Finally, real freedom requires the rule of law. The Athenian Aischines put it thus:

Tyrannies and oligarchies are governed at the whim of the rulers, but democratic states are governed by established laws. And as you are well aware, Athenians, in a democracy it is the laws that protect the individual and the constitution, whereas the tyrant and the oligarch are protected by mistrust and armed bodyguards.³³⁸

Personal Safety and Crime

Athens was remarkably non-violent and crime-free when compared to such past European societies as Rome or Florence,³³⁹ or when compared to such contemporary European countries as France or the United Kingdom.³⁴⁰ Thanks in part to

an effective political and judicial system, wholeheartedly devoted to preventing escalation of conflicts and promoting stability . . . [and to] having taken extraordinary steps to minimize what we call political violence, the Athenians proceeded with remarkable success to reduce what we call criminal violence to a minimum.³⁴¹

Stability, Moderation, and Compassion

As far as we can tell from surviving documents, the two most stable polities in classical Greece were totalitarian Sparta and democratic Athens. In almost two centuries, there were only two short-lived serious disruptions of Athenian democracy, and both were caused by “extraordinary wartime circumstances.”³⁴²

The remarkable political maturity, compassion, and tolerance of a free people can perhaps be captured through three specific historical examples.

I. Amnesty (Greek: forgetfulness of wrongs) and Postwar Reconciliation

In 404 B.C.E., the Peloponnesian War finally came to an end when the Athenians, starved into submission, were forced to accept Sparta's terms of surrender. Shortly afterward, a group of thirty conspirators with Spartan backing overthrew the democracy and established a narrow oligarchy. Within the course of thirteen months, the oligarchs killed more than 5 percent of the citizen population and proceeded to terrorize the rest by

confiscating properties of some and by banishing others. After regaining control of Athens through a brilliant military campaign and Spartan acquiescence, the ruling democrats agreed to an amnesty that protected the collaborators from prosecution for all but the most flagrant crimes. The Athenians, however, could not simply forget the past. Evident in speeches delivered in public at civic settings shortly after the reconciliation of 403, a residue of anger, fear, and distrust remained in the community. Yet Athens did not sink into a cycle of bloodshed such as occurred elsewhere in Greece. In fact the city remained remarkably stable until Macedon dissolved the democracy nearly a century later.³⁴³

And yet, even after Athenian democrats no longer had to fear reprisals from Sparta, they kept their word, a decision that wisely “built a foundation for lasting civic peace.”³⁴⁴

The Athenian oligarch Xenophon, a traitor to his country and no friend of the democracy, agrees:

Pledged as they were under oath, that in very truth they would not remember past grievances, the two parties even to this day live together as fellow-citizens and the commons abide by their oaths.³⁴⁵

And a British classicist:

When one reads . . . the doings of the Thirty, one cannot but be amazed at the steadfast forbearance of the Athenian people.³⁴⁶

Thrasylbulus, the man most responsible for the 403 restoration of democracy, summed up for the Athenian assembly the respective records of democracy and oligarchy:

You city-men [oligarchs], I advise you to take just measure of yourselves for the future; and to calculate fairly, what ground of superiority you have, so as to pretend to rule over us. Are you juster than we? Why, the Demos, though poorer than you, never at any time wronged you for purposes of plunder; while you, the wealthiest of all, have done many base deeds for the sake of gain. Since then you have no justice to boast of, are you superior to us on the score of courage? There cannot be a better trial, than the war which has just ended. Again — can you pretend to be superior in policy? you, who — having a fortified city, an armed force, plenty of money, and the Peloponnesians for your allies — have been overcome by men who had nothing of the kind to aid them? . . . But you have no cause to be uneasy for the future. I adjure you, my friends from Peireus [the democrats who overthrew the bloodthirsty oligarchy], in no point to violate the oaths which we have just sworn. Show, in addition to your other glorious exploits, that you are honest and true to your engagements.³⁴⁷

The above fragment, voiced by a hero of the democratic revolution, sums up the incontestable record of courage, forgiveness, and comparative merits of real democracies. In my view, it, by itself, deserves to be as widely cited as the combined anti-democratic components of such writers as Thucydides, Xenophon, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Diodorus, Plutarch, Polybius, Hegel, Michels, Nietzsche, Pareto, and their thousands of deferential followers throughout the ages.

II. Partial Reprieve of Mytilene

Another touching example of shocking brutality and callousness, tempered however by compassion, is related by Thucydides. It is centered around Mytilene, the largest city-state on the island of Lesbos. Mytilene earlier willingly joined the Athenian confederacy in order to obtain protection from the Persians. The Mytileneans “had no reason whatever to complain of the conduct of Athens towards themselves: she had respected alike their dignity, their public force, and their private security.”³⁴⁸ But the oligarchs controlling that city preferred an alliance with totalitarian Sparta, probably because such an alliance would have minimized the chances of a successful democratic revolt. When it seemed to these oligarchs that Athens was losing ground to Sparta, they decided to bring the independent city-states of Lesbos under their control, revolt, and join Sparta in its war against Athens.³⁴⁹ An Athenian siege followed. Later, running out of provisions, the oligarchs refused to share food with the majority, keeping the people in check by depriving them of heavy armor. When the situation became hopeless, they gave back the armor so that the majority could join the struggle against the Athenians. Once armed, however, the majority demanded that the food be shared equally or else they would make peace with Athens on their own. In desperation, the oligarchs preempted the majority and sued for peace themselves, with the terms to be decided at the discretion of the Athenian Assembly:

Immediately after the invasion of the Peloponnesians all Lesbos, except Methymna, revolted from the Athenians. . . . However, the Athenians, distressed by the plague, and by the war that had recently broken out and was now raging, thought it a serious matter to add Lesbos with its fleet and untouched resources to the list of their enemies; and at first would not believe the charge, giving too much weight to their wish that it might not be true. But when an embassy which they sent had failed to persuade the Mytileneans to give up the union and preparations complained of, they became alarmed, and resolved to strike the first blow. After a prolonged siege, the Athenians prevailed, and, at first, the assembly sent a trireme with the order to execute all the men of the rebellious island, and to enslave the women and children. The following day the assembly reconvened, and narrowly voted to overturn the first vote, and spare the lives of most Lesbians: Another galley was at once sent off in haste, for fear that the first might reach Lesbos in the interval, and the city be found destroyed; the first ship having about a day and a night’s start. Wine and barley-cakes were provided for the vessel by the Mytilenian ambassadors, and great promises made if they arrived in time; which caused the men to use such diligence upon the voyage that they took their meals of barley-cakes kneaded with oil and wine as they rowed, and only slept by turns while the others were at the oar. Luckily they met with no contrary wind, and the first ship making no haste upon so horrid an errand, while the second pressed on in the manner described, the first arrived so little before them, that Paches had only just had time to read the decree, and to prepare to execute the sentence, when the second put into port and prevented the massacre. The danger of Mytilene had indeed been great.³⁵⁰

Lamentably, the Athenians ended up executing “only” some 1,000 men (probably the oligarchs who instigated the revolt) and giving their land to Athenian settlers — instead of giving it to the Mytilenean democrats who helped Athens regain control of the island. Still, in a dictatorship or any other form of government, compassion and rescinding the initial decree would have been far less likely.

III. Compassion and Disinterested Respect for Excellence: The Story of Dorieus

George Grote writes:

But the violent displeasure of the Lacedæmonians [Spartans] against the revolted Rhodians was still better attested by another proceeding. Among all the great families at Rhodes, none were more distinguished than the Diagoridæ. Its members were not only generals and high political functionaries in their native island, but had attained even Pan-Hellenic celebrity by an unparalleled series of victories at the Olympic and other great solemnities. Dorieus, a member of this family, had gained the victory in the pankration [a fierce, dangerous, mixed martial art wrestling match] at Olympia on three successive solemnities. He had obtained seven prizes in the Nemean, and eight in the Isthmian games. He had carried off the prize at one Pythian solemnity without a contest,—no one daring to stand up against him in the fearful struggle of the pankration. As a Rhodian, while Rhodes was a subject ally of Athens during the Peloponnesian war, he had been so pronounced in his attachment to Sparta as to draw on himself a sentence of banishment; upon which he had retired to Thurii, and had been active in hostility to Athens after the Syracusan catastrophe. Serving against her in ships fitted out at his own cost, he had been captured in 407 B.C. by the Athenians, and brought in as prisoner to Athens. By the received practice of war in that day, his life was forfeited; and over and above such practice, the name of Dorieus was peculiarly odious to the Athenians. But when they saw before the public assembly a captive enemy, of heroic lineage, as well as of unrivalled athletic majesty and renown, their previous hatred was so overpowered by sympathy and admiration, that they liberated him by public vote, and dismissed him unconditionally.

This interesting anecdote, which has already been related in my eighth volume, is here again noticed as a contrast to the treatment which the same Dorieus now underwent from the Lacedæmonians. What he had been doing since, we do not know; but at the time when Rhodes now revolted from Sparta, he was not only absent from the island, but actually in or near Peloponnesus. Such, however, was the wrath of the Lacedæmonians against Rhodians generally, that Dorieus was seized by their order, brought to Sparta, and there condemned and executed. It seems hardly possible that he can have had any personal concern in the revolt. Had such been the fact, he would have been in the island,—or would at least have taken care not to be within the reach of the Lacedæmonians when the revolt happened. Perhaps, however, other members of the Diagoridæ, his family, once so much attached to Sparta, may have taken part in it; for we know, by the example of the Thirty at Athens, that the Lysandrian dekharchies and Spartan harmosts made themselves quite as formidable to oligarchical as to democratical politicians, and it is very conceivable that the Diagoridæ may have become less philo-Laconian in their politics.³⁵¹

Cultural Life

Athenians often socialized, exercised, and participated in city governance. They enjoyed numerous festivals, processions, parades, and athletic, musical, and dramatic competitions. Athens was

an intensely festive community. . . . Major Athenian rituals included cross-town . . . and cross-country . . . parades, ceremonies commemorating soldiers fallen in war . . . and dramatic festivals — as well as public sacrifices, communal feasts, dances, and political

rituals. . . . Rituals were performed at multiple scales — some by demes, by tribes, by the citizenry, by women, or by the polis as a whole.³⁵²

Those who find this [chorus in modern performances of Greek plays] dull should not blame the Greeks: they would not have endured it for five minutes. These choral odes were never spoken, but always sung: not only were they sung but they were also danced: and not only were they danced — as indeed they sometimes are in modern revivals — but they were danced in a circular dancing-floor nearly ninety feet in diameter. The dances were eloquent, varied, and, where necessary, tumultuous.³⁵³

Economy and Wealth Distribution

Athens' economy was the most advanced and diverse in the Greek world. It consisted of a genuine free enterprise system, with no oligopolies and with minimal state intervention: "To a large extent, the state involved itself in the economic life of the people only to collect taxes from them and ensure that a citizen could get his daily bread at a manageable price."³⁵⁴

As we have seen, Athenian democracy respected private property and, barring treason or criminal conduct, did not confiscate the property of the rich. The less rich majority could level the economic playing field, and yet chose not to.

Although Athens had rich and poor citizens, the disparity between the two was nowhere near that of Greek oligarchies, Persia, Egypt, Rome, or most contemporary societies. Most people moreover were self-sufficient and did not work for someone else:

A huge percentage of male citizens — perhaps seven out of ten — held enough land to remain relatively free from the clutches of a class of potentially predatory aristocrats, the most well-off members of the community. . . . After Solon's reforms Athenian peasants found themselves closer to the independent end of the social spectrum and further away from the dependent side than perhaps any non-elite class in history.³⁵⁵

To keep the gap between rich and poor stable, and in contradistinction to most other known complex societies, most taxes were paid by the rich. Specifically, the three major taxes — property taxes, equipping and commanding battleships, and the funding of religious, athletic, and cultural festivals — were levied almost exclusively on the richest citizens.³⁵⁶

In addition, the gap between rich and poor was kept constant, or perhaps was even diminished over time, through direct payments to people for serving in the army and navy, taking part in cultural events, attending the Assembly, serving in the Council, Law Courts, Legislative Courts, or in boards of officials. Public work projects, e.g., building temples or fortifications, provided job opportunities for citizens who could not otherwise make ends meet or were averse to being at the beck and call of a boss.

The state also provided direct support for the handicapped and for children whose citizen father died in war. Price gauging of food was illegal. To prevent hunger, in times of scarcity, people were given free or subsidized food. Wages for the landless 30% were sufficiently high to ensure that

even the poorest citizens did not hover “at a subsistence level perilously close to bare survival.” This “was very rare anywhere in the world, before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”³⁵⁷

In Athens, profits from the silver mines and the empire were not seized by the rich. These profits were distributed equally among all citizens, rich and poor, or used to finance the navy, beautify the city, or improve infrastructure.³⁵⁸

Most complex societies, ancient and modern, succumb to the temptation of debasing their currency, sacrificing long-term prosperity and stability for short-term gains. Not so the Athenians, whose currency was the most trusted in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean.

A Causal Connection between Direct Democracy and Overall Excellence?

Ever since Herodotus, some observers have been convinced that there is a causal link between Athenian democracy and Athenian accomplishments.

According to Winckelmann, it was the Athenian liberal, democratic constitution that was responsible for the unmatched quality of Athenian art.³⁵⁹

Brook Manville and Josiah Ober:

Democratic governance was the engine that drove Athenian performance, brought Athens to the heights of power and prosperity, and allowed Athens to recover from seemingly catastrophic reverses.³⁶⁰

Elsewhere, this book shows that real democratic governance is always accompanied by outstanding performance.

The Dark Side of Athenian Democracy

Fractional Democracy

For contemporary advocates of direct democracy, perhaps the most troubling aspect of Greek democracies was that full political and legal rights were the exclusive domain of a minority of the adult population. The rest could take part in the social, religious, and economic life of the community, but were often discriminated against.

Slavery was widespread, although it was fairly benign by world, and even 19th-century USA, standards. Slaves were protected by Athenian law from sexual insolence, rape, or physical assault. But slavery still involved subservience, loss of rights, and life at the whim of a master. Slaves had no right to property. And, like American slaves, although slaves were allowed to have a family, their family could be broken up at any time. More shocking still, thousands of slaves were condemned to “short lives of anguish” in the silver mines.³⁶¹

Athenian democrats took slavery for granted, apparently oblivious to the fact that, but for the grace of Athena, they too, as a result of military defeat or piracy, could one day become slaves. Likewise, most Greek intellectuals had no problem providing an ideological cover for that crime against humanity — including Plato (who himself was a slave for a short period) and Aristotle. The first Greek we know of who perhaps questioned the very institution of slavery was Euripides of Athens, who said: “The name alone brings shame upon the slave who can be excellent in every way and truly equal to the free born man.”³⁶²

Lamentably, slaves who were suspected of theft or treason were often tortured to obtain information or as punishment. Worse still, some sources claim that, when forced to serve as a witness in a private legal dispute between two citizens, an innocent slave had to be tortured first.³⁶³

Women often married much older men while still teenagers, sometimes probably against their will. Women stayed mostly at home, were excluded from the vibrant political life of the community, had a shorter lifespan, were not formally educated, could not attend the assembly or sue anyone, and could not inherit their parents’ property — even when the parents had no sons. Surprisingly, on this one score of women’s equality, Sparta was far less discriminatory than Athens.

Permanent foreign residents, Athens-born descendants of these residents, the children of an Athenian father and foreign mother, illegitimate children of an Athenian father, male prostitutes, and freed slaves, all had fewer rights than male Athenian citizens. Resident foreigners had to fight in Athens’ wars and to pay even more taxes than citizens, and yet suffered legal discrimination. For instance, if found guilty, a man who murdered a male citizen (or an Athenian woman or child) could be sentenced to death, but the maximum punishment for murdering a foreigner or a slave was exile.³⁶⁴

So when we talk about Athenian democracy, we must always bear in mind this exclusion: a minority happily enjoying the fruits of radical democracy was, seemingly without compunctions, lording it over a less fortunate majority.

Such exclusions persisted even though they defied present conceptions of a civilized community. For instance, after the violent restoration of real democracy in 403 B.C., Thrasybulus deservedly became the “hero of the people.” Before the restoration, he promised citizenship to all the foreigners, Athenian-born descendants of foreigners, and slaves who would join the uphill struggle for freedom. And yet he failed to convince the Athenians to honor that promise.³⁶⁵ Instead, the Athenians awarded some of his comrades honors, including equality of taxation. The Athenians likewise tightfistedly voted to support the legitimate children of Athenian citizens who died freeing their city from the oligarchs, but not the illegitimate children of citizen fighters, nor the children of foreigners and resident foreigners who sacrificed their lives so that the Athenians could be free.

One of the most striking cases involved Lysias, the famous orator. During their eight months in power, the greedy oligarchs killed his brother. They tried to murder Lysias at the same time, and

he barely escaped. They robbed him of a part of his considerable wealth, and he used most of what was left to help finance the successful rebellion of 403 B.C., a generosity which reduced this formerly wealthy man to comparative poverty.³⁶⁶ Yet he too remained a second-class citizen in democratic Athens.

Thus, although some Greeks, e.g., Democritus or Zeno, might have grasped that all human beings are fundamentally equal and deserve the same political power, the same respect, the same compassion, and the same opportunities as everyone else, the majority failed to do so. Both oligarchs and democrats selfishly drew a line between members of the group they identified with and everyone else. Democrats treated non-citizens far better than oligarchs, but they let the line remain.

All this raises the question: if Athens' fractional democracy could accomplish so much, what miracles could a peaceful, Athenian-style democracy for all, accomplish now?

Never-Ending Wars

Warfare between city-states sapped Greek energies and brought endless suffering. For instance, Athens was "at war at least two years out of three during the classical period."³⁶⁷ Greeks seemed somehow unable to cease killing each other, and this vicious cycle of killing eventually reduced them "to mere imperial vassals."³⁶⁸

Short-Sighted Imperialism

In an ideal world, the majority of citizens of any Greek city-state would have preferred a democracy answerable to no foreign power. In the real world, democrats of many maritime states had two options:

1. They could rule their own city, enter the Athenian alliance, and enjoy protection from Persia, Sparta, and other powers. In that case, they would have to cede some control of their city's foreign policy to the sister democracy of Athens.
2. They could be oppressed by their own oligarchs, who would in turn cede control of domestic and foreign policies to Persia or Sparta.

Naturally, the majority chose the former option. For example, during the Mytilenean debate in the Athenian Assembly, one of the speakers observes: "At present, the people [the majority] in all the cities is friendly to you."³⁶⁹

This friendliness in turn provided a fantastic opportunity of forming a genuine commonwealth of equal free states. Instead, the foreign policy of the alliance was dictated by Athens and served Athenian priorities. Similarly, some of the money which the allies contributed for the purpose of common defense was stolen by the Athenians to enrich themselves and beautify their country.

Worse still, allies could enter the alliance any time they chose, but any attempt to leave was often forcibly suppressed. We have seen already how the seceding Mytileneans narrowly escaped annihilation, and this reflected Athens' imperial mindset as a whole:

The Athenians committed the capital fault of taking the whole alliance into their own hands, and treating the allies purely as subjects, without seeking to attach them by any form of incorporation or collective meeting and discussion.³⁷⁰

In other cases, city-states were forced to enter the alliance against their will. Athens' worst international crime occurred in 416 B.C., after the neutral island state of Melos refused to join the Athenian alliance. A siege of several months followed. Running out of provisions, the Melians surrendered. Perhaps at the instigation of the charismatic psychopath Alcibiades, the once and future traitor, the Athenians murdered all Melian men of military age, enslaved the women and children, and settled the island with their own citizens. Thus ended "one of the grossest and most inexcusable pieces of cruelty combined with injustice which Grecian history presents to us."³⁷¹ It was also a serious strategic mistake:

While the gain was thus in every sense slender, the shock to Grecian feeling by the whole proceeding seems to have occasioned serious mischief to Athens. Far from tending to strengthen her entire empire, by sweeping in this small insular population who had hitherto been neutral and harmless, it raised nothing but odium against her, and was treasured up in after times as among the first of her misdeeds.³⁷²

A closely-related short-sighted policy involved the parsimonious granting of Athenian citizenship. Early in its history, Athens wisely extended citizenship to all the freemen of Attica. Imperial Athens failed to repeat this success story by offering Athenian citizenship to its allies.

There were a few notable exceptions, involving probably block grants of citizenship to war refugees from the devastated allied city-states of Plataea, Samos, and Olynthus, and to slaves who served in the 406 B.C. victorious battle of Arginusae. Apart from such few cases, citizenship was sparingly awarded by the Assembly on a case-by-case basis.

Thus, the Athenians could augment their dwindling numbers and consolidate their empire by offering citizenship to people of allied states, treating them as equals, making membership in the alliance optional, and permitting secession. Had they behaved thus, they might have become invincible. By contrast, their selfish conduct led to dissension, resentment, and wars, and contributed to the disintegration of the Athenian empire of the 5th century, and later to the similar break-up of the 4th-century Athenian League: Athens' "greatest mistake lay in not extending the principles of democratic self-government throughout her empire, transforming it into a Commonwealth of City-States."³⁷³

Perennial Class War

Plato observed that every city-state consisted of "two city-states that are at war with each other." Solon's laws, as we have seen, were enacted precisely to avoid bloodshed between the poor

majority and the rich minority. There were two overlapping levels of intensity in the recurring struggles for power:

The lower classes fought, often literally, for a share in government, and where they succeeded the upper classes sought to regain the political monopoly they had lost. . . . In city after city there was an oscillation between oligarchy and democracy, accompanied by civil war, wholesale killing, exile and confiscation. Sometimes tyrants intervened, adding another dimension to the cycle. The other level of conflict, the 'quiescent' one, was marked by changes within the existing constitutional framework, a process that never ceased and that sometimes involved more agitation and resistance than such a colourless word as 'adjustment' might suggest.³⁷⁴

Oligarchic clubs within democracies often operated on this principle: "I shall be ill-disposed to the poor majority, and plan whatever evil I can against it."³⁷⁵ Many rich men belonged to the oligarchic party and believed that, because they had been born to money and hence were, on average, better educated, better fed, and enjoyed other advantages, that they deserved to lord it over their fellows. Greek oligarchs residing in a democracy resented their city's progressive tax system and rule of law. They loathed the egalitarian spirit of Greek democracies. They felt entitled to rob, rape, enslave, and plunder not only their poorer neighbors but even rich men who defied them or whose money they coveted. Once in power, they often resorted to a chilling reign of terror.

According to the orator Lysias

The lawlessness of the Thirty included illegally putting citizens to death or confiscating their property . . . breaking into and ransacking citizens' houses, pulling gold earrings out of matrons' ears, ordering executions without proper trial, abusing legal process, and generally treating free men as if they were slaves.³⁷⁶

At times, the democrats in Athens and elsewhere reciprocated, but overall they were far less bloodthirsty and cruel than the oligarchs, and they were far less likely to initiate a killing rampage. They were fully aware of the enmity of oligarchs and took preemptive actions. Following a brief oligarchic interlude of "propaganda and terror,"³⁷⁷ in 410 B.C. the restored Athenian democracy passed a decree requiring all citizens to swear an oath "to kill by word, deed, and vote, and by my own hand in so far as I am able, whoever overthrows the democracy."³⁷⁸ That decree remained in force until the second restoration of democracy in 403 B.C. and the enactment of a general amnesty.³⁷⁹ A similar law was passed in 337/6 B.C. It must be noted too that, less frequently, democrats and men who were born poor were also guilty of treason, bribery, and massacres. Also, a considerable number of rich men supported democracy, and were often influential in advancing its cause, including such key historical figures as Kleisthenes and Pericles of Athens, Pelopidas of Thebes, Democritus of Abdera, and Timoleon of Corinth (and later of Syracuse). Such support might have been motivated, in some cases, by self-interest; in others, by idealism.

The Oligarchic Fifth Column

A small minority of rich people enjoyed tremendous advantages over their fellow citizens and often treated them with disdain. Most Athenian intellectuals came from money (poor people had to work for a living and couldn't afford first-class education) and could not rise above their class interests. Most oligarchs despised democracy and the common man, despised working for a living, and often conspired to overthrow the democracy, freedom, and the rule of law. When they couldn't, they vilified it in their writings. They often looked longingly at militaristic, soulless, cruel, Sparta, "a grim and joyless military camp."³⁸⁰ "Few sights are stranger" than the spectacle of some Athenian intellectuals and first-rate thinkers "turning their eyes from their own free country to regard with admiration the constitution of Sparta," where a free thinker "would not have been suffered so much as to open his mouth."³⁸¹ That outlandish admiration has plagued many intellectuals throughout the ages, up to the present.

Oligarchs were often disposed to betray their country to its enemies, preferring abjection to foreigners, even slavery to Persia's absolute ruler, provided only that such slavery was accompanied by ruling their own people. Such betrayals did not only mean loss of personal and national freedom, but were often accompanied by blood-curdling massacres. In some cases, oligarchic treason meant the destruction of a city, the massacre of the entire adult male population (but not the traitors, if they were lucky), and the sale into slavery of the women and children.

Thus, the biggest threat to Greek democracies was not posed by other states, but by their fifth columnists. Many of Athens' military defeats were, at least in part, traceable to such treason. For example, right after Athens' epochal victory in Marathon, someone in the city was trying to betray it to the Persians, and Athens was barely saved by a forced march of the exhausted victors.

Here is another example of the typical oligarchic mindset. To secure his rule over Asian Greek cities, Darius, Persia's absolute ruler, installed oligarchies which were hated by the majorities. Later, Darius attacked the Scythians (nomads of the Black Sea region and beyond), was soundly defeated, and could only save himself and his army by escaping. The retreat depended on a Pontoon bridge guarded by his Asian Greek subjects. The first instinctive reaction of those oligarchical vassals of the Persians was to destroy the bridge, thus bringing about a destruction of the Persian army and the consequent liberation of themselves and their people from slavery. The Persians were however saved. Upon reflection,

Histiaeus of Miletus . . . argued that every one of them owed his position as tyrant of his community to Darius, and that if Darius were to fall, he would not be able to rule Miletus and none of them would remain in power either, because there was not one of their communities which would not prefer democracy to tyranny. Histiaeus' argument immediately won everyone at the meeting over to his point of view. . . . This is how the Persians managed to escape.³⁸²

We need to note in passing that such betrayals seem to be inherent in the oligarchic mindset, and that they would repeat themselves over and over again throughout history. For example, in the spring of 1940:

A cabal of French generals and politicians with fascist sympathies . . . deliberately opted for defeat at the hands of an “external enemy,” Nazi Germany, to be able to defeat the “internal enemy,” in the case of France the socialists, communists, and other leftist forces who had earlier formed the “Popular Front” government. France’s defeat made it possible . . . to install a fascist regime . . . The existence and collaboration of such a “fifth column” helps to explain Nazi Germany’s unexpectedly easy victory over France and, conversely, what in France itself is referred to as the country’s “strange defeat” in 1940.³⁸³

This is a repeat of earlier episodes. For instance, in order to defeat the direct democracy of the 1871 Paris Commune and subsequently massacre perhaps as many as 35,000 democrats, French oligarchs collaborated with the conquering German army.³⁸⁴

An Inferiority Complex?

Most influential politicians and military leaders of Athens were members of the upper class who at times abused their privileges and betrayed their country. The prominence of these oligarchs is perhaps traceable in part to the fact that most commoners felt inferior to men of birth and wealth:

Even under the radical democracy political influence was confined to men of substance. Equally real was the trading of favours for rewards. Politicians could make substantial sums of money from grateful beneficiaries of their policies and influence. . . . All citizens ha[d] equal rights but not equal influence or benefit from the system.³⁸⁵

Many Athenians could cite Homer chapter and verse, and the arrogant and quarrelsome protagonists of the Iliad and Odyssey were rich men. In the rare cases when poor men were allowed to rear their “ugly” heads, they were considered inferior. It never occurred to Greek democrats to categorically outlaw bribe-taking, nor to inculcate their children with the convictions that excellence can surface in any household, no matter how humble, and that we are all fellow passengers to the grave. It likewise never occurred to them that, whatever differences did exist between the classes, were traceable to undernourishment of the poor and the superior education and opportunities of the rich, and not to any inherent genetic differences.

Under such circumstances, only a few exceptional people realized that any defense of a caste system, however mild that system might be, is nothing more than a self-interested or self-hating attempt to uphold a morally reprehensible and scientifically baseless status quo. Athenian commoners listened to and trusted incompetent or treasonous plutocrats like Thucydides, Xenophon, Nicias, Alcibiades, or Adeimantus, and ended up losing their city and freedom. All this despite the fact that the historical record — mostly written by the enemies of liberty, equality, and fraternity — shows that the democrats adopted wiser and more moral policies than their oligarchic enemies:

How false and impudent were the pretensions set up by the rich and great men of the various Grecian cities, to superior morality, superior intelligence, and greater fitness for using honourably and beneficially the powers of government, as compared with the mass of the citizens.³⁸⁶

The confident pretensions put forth by the wealthy and oligarchical Greeks to superior virtue, public as well as private — and the quiet repetition, by various writers modern and ancient, of the laudatory epithets implying such assumed virtue — are so far from being borne out by history, that these individuals were perpetually ready as statesmen to betray their countrymen, or as generals even to betray the interests of their soldiers, for the purpose of acquiring money.³⁸⁷

Capital Punishment

Executions were chillingly common, even for such minor crimes as theft. At times, innocent Athenians were executed in order to appease a foreign power or because of judicial errors.

Over-Competitiveness

To us — and even more so to the hunter-gatherers who constitute the bulk of human history — the Athenians appear as childishly competitive status seekers. Many events of their festivals involved competitions — in sports, tragedies, comedies, music, beauty. In one typical case, a rich man receives a golden crown from the city for being the first to outfit a battleship for war — only to be sued by other rich men who claim that they, not he, should get the crown. In another litigation, one leading citizen of Athens lodges a lawsuit because another leading citizen won a golden crown for his services to the city.³⁸⁸

Life Expectancy

Although some ancient Greeks lived to ripe old age (occasionally living longer than 100 years), the average age at death was probably 40.³⁸⁹

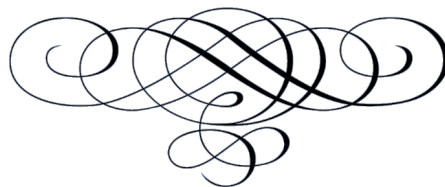
Infanticide

The Athenians had widespread recourse to infanticide of “surplus” or physically handicapped newborns, who could be legally exposed during the first five days of their lives.³⁹⁰ It was even more tragic for girls: about 20% were abandoned and either died or, if they were “lucky,” were collected by slave traders.³⁹¹

Religious Intolerance

The practice of free speech in Athens stopped at the temple’s edge. The great philosopher Protagoras of Abdera, a long-term resident of Athens, wrote that, “concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not, nor of what sort they may be, because of the obscurity of the subject, and the brevity of human life.” For this commonsense observation, he was banished and all his books got the Fahrenheit 451 treatment. His fellow great scholar, Anaxagoras, was likewise banished.

Perhaps the best-known incident of apparent religious bigotry involves Socrates, who was also charged with impiety, brought to trial, and ended up drinking hemlock. But in this case there were other charges and religion might have been a mere artifice to bypass the amnesty of 403 B.C. The real reason he was charged, in 399, besides thinking for himself in religious matters, might have been his proclaimed disdain for democracy and his close association with traitors and oligarchs — including the vile Kritias, uncle of Plato's mother and leader of the thirty tyrants, as well as Alcibiades, a notorious traitor and, apparently, a psychopath.³⁹² Also, according to Socrates' disciple Xenophon, Socrates at age 70 felt there was nothing awaiting him but physical and mental decline, and so, during his trial, he needlessly provoked and offended the jurors, leading them to grant him his death wish.³⁹³ He could also have left the country at any time before and after the trial, but chose not to. He did not join the democratic revolution and did not suffer at the hands of the tyrants. On one occasion during the reign of the thirty, when told to summon a man on the tyrants' hit list, Socrates refused and went home — but he did not bother to alert that unfortunate man to the danger he was facing.³⁹⁴ And finally, most of what we know about Socrates' life had been handed down to us by rich Athenians who loved Socrates and viscerally hated democracy. Unlike Socrates, at least one of his accusers was a hero of the democratic restoration of 403 B.C., and it would be instructive before judging — in this case and other often-cited Athenian "crimes" — to try to see things as they might have appeared to lovers of freedom.



Chapter 5: The USA versus Athens

Who among the moderns could step forth, man against man, and strive with an Athenian for the prize of higher humanity? — Friedrich von Schiller³⁹⁵

They tell us that we live in a great free republic; that our institutions are democratic; that we are a free and self-governing people. This is too much, even for a joke. — Eugene Debs³⁹⁶

Chapter Summary. This chapter underscores again the marvel of Athenian democracy by comparing it to the USA, a contemporary “democracy.” The USA is not a democracy, nor was it conceived as such by the wealthy framers of its constitution. Rather, the USA (like most other countries in the world) resembles the oligarchic form of government of ancient Rome. All efforts to democratize the USA from below, including uprisings and reform movements, ended in failure. In particular, direct democracy in the United States amounts to almost nothing, despite the valiant attempts and fervent hopes of its champions and practitioners. To begin with, direct democracy does not exist at the federal level — where most power in America resides. It only exists in about half the states, and only exists in a meaningful form in a handful of states. And even in those few states, unlike Athens or even Switzerland, it suffers from too many institutional handicaps. The only successful worthwhile reforms in the USA, e.g., greater gender and racial equality, were initiated or approved by oligarchs. This chapter goes on to argue that the remarkable stability of oligarchic power in America can be traced to sixteen or so pillars: sunshine bribery, misinformation, lack of transparency, broken electoral promises, the conspiracy theory bogeyman, the inculcated belief that meaningful reform can be achieved through non-violence, compartmentalization, strategic brilliance, deeply flawed elections, too much power in too few unprincipled hands, the banking scam, a variety of human failings, environmental and dietary poisons, and a cloak-and-dagger approach to the suppression of dissent. Apart from human failings, these pillars either did not exist in democratic Athens, or existed in a subdued form. The chapter then moves on to compare and contrast Athens and the USA in the following domains: universal franchise, cultural and military innovations and achievements, governmental structures and operations, stability, initiation of policy, accountability, rule of law, equality before the law, legislation, citizens’ attitudes towards the political system, freedom to live as one chooses, freedom of speech, religious freedom, national self-determination, welfare, economic freedom, plight of workers, right to bear arms, finance, income inequalities, privatization, personal safety, suicides, life expectancy, infanticide, compassion, luring people into war, bellicosity and imperialism, justice system, incidence of crime, treatment of the elderly, class war, crimes against the biosphere, and popular entertainment. These detailed comparisons reinforce the conclusion of the previous chapter: a rational and kind world would combine the universal franchise and a few other positive aspects of contemporary “democracies” with the Athenian political and judicial system.

Why Compare Athens to the USA?

The preceding chapter highlighted key features of Athenian democracy. This in turn led to the conclusion that, as a political system, Athenian democracy far outshines any contemporary so-called representative democracy. In a world that is rapidly approaching multiple catastrophes, real (or direct) democracy provides humanity's best hope for freedom, justice, peace, prosperity, happiness, meaningful life, and survival. To achieve real democracy, we need not reinvent the wheel. Despite its grave flaws, Athenian democracy renders the best blueprints for such a transformation — provided it is combined with an unswerving commitment to internal and external peace, equal rights of all permanent residents, and religious freedoms.

This somewhat abstract yet critical point — the inherent superiority of the Athenian political machinery — can perhaps be brought home by juxtaposing it with one contemporary country. This chapter elects the USA as that country because, in 2023, it is still the most influential country in the world. Also, the USA is a fair representation of representative “democracies” today — neither the best nor the worst. It should however be borne in mind that a similar comparison of Athens to any other country would yield similar results.

The reality of Athenian democracy and its achievements was far brighter than the picture that emerges from the surviving writings of most ancient scholars and their self-serving or spellbound followers ever since (see Chapters 2 and 4). For reasons that will become apparent later, the opposite is true about the USA: the picture that emerges from the collective information stream — internet, movies, novels, textbooks, television, radio, newspapers, encyclopedias, scholars, the Nobel Prize committee — is far brighter than the cold facts. So, before we juxtapose America and Athens, we must remove a few popular misconceptions about America's past and present, starting with the birth of that nation.

Also, it's important to remember that the world in which the USA finds itself in the year 2023 is radically different from the world that existed some 25 centuries ago. As well, the USA is tremendously larger than Athens in both area (almost 4,000 times larger), and population (roughly 1,700 times larger).

America was not Conceived as a Democracy: Its Rich Founders were Inspired by Oligarchic Rome, Not by Democratic Athens

We do not have a democracy . . . The framers of the Constitution . . . constructed a system meant to serve and protect the rich. — Richard Kreitner³⁹⁷

The American Constitution was carefully rigged by the noteholders, land speculators, rum runners, and slave holders who were the Founding Fathers, so that it would be next to impossible for upstart dirt farmers and indebted masses to challenge the various forms of private property held by these well read robber barons. — G. William Domhoff³⁹⁸

If you visit Washington D.C., you'll soon notice that its public buildings are modeled after Imperial Rome. This is no accident:

The classical example that inspired the American . . . revolutionaries . . . was Rome rather than Greece. Thus, the founding fathers who met in Philadelphia in 1787, did not set up a Council or Areopagos, but a Senate that, eventually, met on the Capitol.³⁹⁹

This raises the question: what kind of empire was Rome?

Rome was a society where private property provided immense wealth while land ownership was concentrated in a few hands. Unlike Athens, in Rome professional armies conquered foreign territories, both near and far, for the exclusive benefit of a small, staggeringly wealthy elite. The Roman state would prove to be “an exploitative instrument unique in antiquity in strength, brutality, and the scale and reach of the exploitation.”⁴⁰⁰

The truth is that electoral democracy as we know it is a long con . . . This stems from the very blueprint our societies chose to govern themselves by in the modern era, a blueprint that originated not in Athens . . . The political system of Republican Rome was copied by the Founding Fathers of the United States, down to the architecture, the eagle . . . Rome's entire political system was rigged in favour of the very people who held power. . . . By the time the Republic finally staggered to an end, corruption in Rome extended to all aspects of life. . . . Vote-buying in Rome's assemblies had become so commonplace that it was impossible to enforce the laws against it . . . Any political battle was likely to be won by whoever had the most wealth and the least scruples. . . . Economic inequality in the Republic was extreme. . . . Despite the considerable sweeteners offered to the rich and the obvious importance of [Tribune Tiberius Gracchus' land distribution] law for Rome's well-being, it was virulently opposed by the vast majority of wealthy citizens . . . the Senate ordered the consuls to kill Tiberius.⁴⁰¹

We shall soon see that the similarity between Rome and the USA goes much farther than corruption, architecture, and symbols: Rome likewise served the USA as a model for ruthless imperial conquests, routine assassinations of social reformers, bread and circuses for the plebes, indoctrination, social and economic inequality, sunshine bribery, and internal decay. Washington DC, then, is Rome on the Potomac. That is what the founders' choice — Rome over Athens — means to us now.

Rome on the Potomac was established by and for oligarchs. The winning faction of the founders made its goals absolutely clear. According to John Adams, second president of the USA, property

is surely a right of mankind as real as liberty, [and consequently majority rule had to be rejected as it would entail] the eight or nine millions who have no property . . . usurping over the rights of the one or two millions who have. . . . property is . . . as sacred as the laws of God.⁴⁰²



The heftiest con in American history? The 1787 Signing of the Constitution of the United States, Howard Chandler Christy, 1940

Drawn from the elite propertied segments in the new nation, most of the delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention shared their compatriot John Jay's view that "those who own the country ought to govern it." Protection of "property" (meaning the people who owned large amounts of it) was "the main object of government" for all but one of the U.S. Constitution's framers . . . The non-affluent, non-propertied and slightly propertied popular majority was for the framers . . . "a problem to be contained" . . . Here we are more than two-and-a-quarter centuries later, still dealing on numerous levels with the purposefully authoritarian consequences of the nation's founding charter. It's a little, well, pathetic.⁴⁰³

Madison, the creator of the American constitution and the country's fourth president

engineered in his writings a deliberate redefinition of terms whereby an aristocratic theory of politics was couched in sufficiently democratic language that the founders would soon be claimed as the authors of American democracy by men whose beliefs were very different.⁴⁰⁴

Perhaps the most important element of this attempt to scale back democracy was replacing the Articles of Confederation with a new federal Constitution in 1787, that would, in the words of Alexander Hamilton, contain "the amazing violence and turbulence of the democratic spirit" . . . the objective was a government that was less responsive to ordinary Americans and more compliant to the will of moneyed men. . . . In the more than two centuries that have followed the Revolution, the barriers against democracy put in place by the founding elite have frustrated countless movements intent on enacting changes opposed by the ruling elite. . . . As a result, the century and a half after the Revolution saw wealth and power concentrate to such an extent that it would make the revolutionaries of 1776 shudder.⁴⁰⁵

That is what the American Revolution was about for most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence: artfully hoodwinking their countrymen and transferring the corrupt and unjust power of English oligarchs to themselves. First, the English were temporarily (they would rise again in 1913) vanquished — mostly with the blood, sweat, and tears of "the eight or nine millions

who have no property”⁴⁰⁶ and with the decisive financial, military, and strategic help of the equally gullible French. Once this was achieved, the founding oligarchs, by and large, broke their promises to the eight or nine millions, in part through viciously suppressing social justice movements and in part by writing an oligarchic Constitution. Professor Bouton remarks:

Most ordinary white men (the only people who were supposed to benefit from the revolution) were disappointed by the version of democracy that emerged from the Revolution — even as it brought them new political rights and powers. These people did not think the Revolution ended with governments that made their ideals and interests the primary goal. To the contrary, they were convinced that the revolutionary elite had remade government to benefit themselves and to undermine the independence of ordinary folk. Moreover, much of the revolutionary generation was convinced that, during the post-war decade, the elite founding fathers had waged — and won — a counter-revolution against popular democratic ideals. During the 1780s and 1790s, ordinary folk across the new nation perceived democracy to be under assault from elite leaders determined to scale it back from the broad ideal that had been articulated in 1776. To many people, the biggest victory in this counter-revolution was the creation of the new federal Constitution. . . . An episodic approach also masks the stunning about-face made by the founding elite, many of whom championed popular ideals before 1776 and then attempted to suppress them after the war. The turnaround was so radical that the elite enacted post-war policies that were nearly identical to the ones Britain had put in place during the 1760s and 1770s, which at the time the gentry had decried as “tyranny” and “oppression.”

During the 1780s, ordinary Pennsylvanians launched an attack on the gospel of moneyed men and the hard times it created. These people demanded that state leaders save democracy by ending the policies that concentrated wealth among moneyed men. They called for new policies to make wealth more equal. And they demanded a return of a vigorous democracy.

When nothing availed the democrats in Pennsylvania [for example], in the end, the conflict was settled by two mass popular uprisings by thousands of ordinary Pennsylvanians, one in 1794 and another in 1799. Each of these showdowns ended with federal armies marching through Pennsylvania to uphold a far more limited democracy than the version that had existed in 1776.⁴⁰⁷

Like America’s leading founding oligarchs, the oligarchic quislings in Athens did everything they could to subvert democracy. But unlike America’s rich power brokers, for two wonderful centuries, Athenian oligarchs failed. Property rights were respected, but income inequalities were nowhere near as vast as they are in the USA now. Athens was run by all its male citizens for their benefit and the benefit of their country, not for the benefit of the ultra-rich.

In the USA, laws favoring the rich few are exceedingly hard to change, and they remain in place even when the majority is opposed to them. In Athens, although many laws were literally written in stone, they could be readily revised if the majority so wished. Thus, in the USA the Constitution and laws are the foe of progress; in Athens, its friends.

America's Founders Achieved their Goal: the USA has always been an Oligarchy

Former President Jimmy Carter says that the United States is

just an oligarchy, with unlimited political bribery being the essence of getting the nominations for president or to elect the president. And the same thing applies to governors and U.S. senators and congress members. So now we've just seen a complete subversion of our political system as a payoff to major contributors, who want and expect and sometimes get favors for themselves after the election's over. . . . The incumbents, Democrats and Republicans, look upon this unlimited money as a great benefit to themselves.⁴⁰⁸

Such views are rarely acknowledged on TV, radio, newspapers, movies, best-sellers, textbooks, Twitter, schools, compromised human rights organizations, or oligarch-run encyclopedias. Nonetheless, they have been voiced by countless observers. One recent example comes from a detailed statistical investigation that, once more, dared to prove the obvious: Like its Roman model, the USA is an oligarchy

Average citizens exert little or no influence on federal government policy. . . . Ordinary citizens simply do not have a significant voice in policy making. . . . both major parties tend to be corrupted . . . by their reliance on wealthy contributors.⁴⁰⁹

One telling characteristic of established oligarchies like the USA is that the rich get richer and the vast majority get poorer. For the most part, this is not traceable to the brilliance of the men of the Invisible Government, their business acumen, or chance. It is traceable, rather, to their near-total control of the country's political machinery, their ownership of the Federal Reserve, and their control of mainstream information sources. In 2020, a New York City restaurateur highlighted one aspect of obscene wealth disparities in America:

During every crisis, the big companies get bailed out and taken care of — banks, the airlines, the insurance companies, etc. During the Great Recession [2007-9], the banks and insurance providers played fast and loose with their money and brought the world economy to the brink of failure. They got bailed out with our tax dollars. Where is the reciprocity? Why do the small businesses always give and never get? It seems immeasurably unfair.⁴¹⁰

Apart from the paradox of growing income disparities in a so-called democracy, the following three examples point to another telling characteristic of oligarchies: the majority's wishes are ignored.

I. Americans, everyone now concedes, were lied to about the causes of the first and second Iraqi genocides. By 2020, the puppet government the USA set up in that ravaged land politely asked the Americans to stop the military occupation of their country. The USA refused, in accordance with its centuries-old ideology that might makes right. But the point here is that, despite cradle-to-grave propaganda, despite endless distractions, despite doing everything to prevent citizens from

putting two and two together, by 2020, 74% of Americans wanted their country's military out of Iraq. Sadly, their opinions counted just as much as the wishes of the puppet Iraqi government and the Iraqi people.⁴¹¹

II.

As the world faces environmental disaster on a biblical scale, it's important to remember exactly who brought us here. . . . Even today [2018], after literally decades of radical . . . billionaires fostering disbelief in climate . . . three out of five Americans believe climate change affects their local community. That number climbs to two-thirds on the coasts. . . . If popular support actually influenced public policy, there would have been more decisive action from the U.S. government years ago. But the fossil-fuel industry's interests are too well-insulated by the mountains of cash that have been converted into lobbyists, industry-shilling Republicans and Democrats, and misinformation. To them, the rest of the world is just kindling.⁴¹²

III. Although by 2019 two-thirds of Americans supported marijuana legalization,⁴¹³ and although recreational marijuana use is by now legal in many states, more people were still arrested for cannabis possession than for all violent crimes put together.⁴¹⁴ Arrest does not come close to capturing the on-ground reality: "SWAT ["Special Weapons And Tactics"] teams often using Gestapo-like maneuvers to carry out more than 80,000 no-knock raids every year."⁴¹⁵

One could come up with hundreds of additional examples, but let us instead conclude this section by citing Professors Page and Gilens:

Government policy . . . reflects the wishes of those with money, not the wishes of the millions of ordinary citizens who turn out every two years to choose among the pre-approved, money-vetted candidates for federal office.⁴¹⁶

Both the previous chapter and the present chapter present an unmistakable picture: for its male citizens, Athens was a real, vibrant, political democracy. Rich people exerted more influence in Athens too but, unlike the USA, they did not rule the country.

In 4th-century Athens, income inequalities did not grow. Athens expected its wealthy members to pay more taxes, and to contribute more than their fellow citizens to the expenses of war and cultural enrichment. In Athens:

Private economic interests, regardless of the status of the person concerned, were regarded and treated as subordinate to the general welfare. A striking instance of this attitude was a suit brought against members of the Corndalers' Guild who had bought up large quantities of grain in order to raise the price. Death was the penalty demanded by the prosecutor as "fitting for such public enemies." Business, far from controlling government, was to a large extent conducted by metics [foreign residents] who were not even allowed to vote.⁴¹⁷

Clearly, in Athens, the majority of citizens ruled — that is, after all, what democracy means. If, for instance, 3,001 of the adult male citizens attending a given assembly of 6,000 wanted to withdraw occupation forces from someplace, the forces were promptly withdrawn. How can you call

yourself a democracy, an Athenian time-traveler in America might wonder, when you routinely ignore the interests and wishes of the majority?

The Wonderful Intentions — and Precious Few Meaningful Achievements — of America’s Direct Democracy Movement

The struggle for real democracy in the USA is as old as the country itself. Democrats like Daniel Shay fought back shortly before and after the American Revolution. They however lacked the self-confidence, strategy, education, resources, and unscrupulousness of their rich oppressors, and lost.

A slightly more successful attempt was made on the state and city level during the Progressive Era, from roughly the 1890s to the 1920s. By the late 19th century, the oligarchic element became even stronger and far more openly corrupt than it was in 1787. “The surrender of state legislatures to special interests is the main reason direct democracy was brought to the United States.”⁴¹⁸ President Woodrow Wilson observed that politics in America was “carried out in secret, responding to the impulse of subsidized machines and carried through by men [like himself] whose unhappiness it is to realize that they are not their own masters, but puppets in a game.”⁴¹⁹

During the 1890s . . . the economic abuses of the era caused distressed farmers and laborers to appeal to the government for relief, but government was often unresponsive or even hostile. Many believed that the government had been captured by powerful economic interests and, worse, that the constitutional design prevented majorities from breaking the corrupt axis of economic and political power.⁴²⁰

Hence, during the Progressive Era, many states sought to embrace new forms of direct democracy, including (i) recalls of public officials, (ii) popular referendums over acts of the legislature, and (iii) initiatives, which “allowed citizens to propose laws, place them on the ballot, and enact them at the polls by simple majority vote.”⁴²¹

This idealistic attempt to limit the power of the oligarchs — like almost all reform efforts in American history — failed.

One telltale sign of this failure is that it was precisely during this era that the Titanic was sunk, an event that buoyed the creation of the private Federal Reserve — the most powerful and exploitative institution in the United States. Another corroborating sign is that in 1917, four years after the Federal Reserve was deviously created,⁴²² the USA needlessly joined a war which only benefited its bankers, corporations, and weapon manufacturers.⁴²³ Another sign is that, before the Federal Reserve was created, Americans did not have to report their income, nor pay taxes, to the federal government.

The efforts to fight oppression in the United States by introducing elements of real democracy failed for several reasons:

I. In the United States there is nothing that resembles real democracy at the Federal level, where most power resides. For instance, the United States has never held a national referendum.⁴²⁴ So by definition, whatever real democracy exists is of secondary importance and has a limited impact on foreign relations, peace, the environment, and other major issues.

II. Besides, whatever there is of real democracy is confined to about half the states and hundreds of municipalities.⁴²⁵

III. Even in that one-half, the high hopes failed to materialize. The fabulously wealthy in the USA control the mass media, educational system, “experts,”⁴²⁶ politicians, and most other sources of information, and can use that power to stifle and weaken real democracy and to effectively oppose referendums, initiatives, and recalls that hinder their interests:

The press has not been kind to direct democracy. From the beginning of this century, one does not have to look far to find media accounts condemning initiative and referendum voting.⁴²⁷

IV. The oligarchs also run out of office, smear, frame, incarcerate, or assassinate any real democracy activist, politician, judge, journalist, or billionaire who poses a significant challenge to the status quo (see below).

V. Ironically too, owing to their wealth, unscrupulousness, and information monopoly, oligarchs can now use the very tools of direct democracy to enhance their power. It costs money to obtain thousands of signatures. Consequently,

although the direct democracy devices of the initiative, referendum, and recall type are widely available, the evidence suggests it is generally the organized interests that can afford to put them to use . . . “the odds are with the big spenders.”⁴²⁸

VI. Moneyed interests likewise exert tremendous influence on the selection, promotion, survival, and conduct of judges at all levels of government. Most judges are well-paid and have a stake in the status quo. They are trained to obey an abstract law, not justice. And they too are aware that they are not “their own masters, but puppets in a game.” So courts can be often relied upon to prohibit a direct democracy measure such as an initiative from ever taking place,⁴²⁹ often basing their verdicts on their arbitrary interpretations of procedural and constitutional matters.

Then, in those cases where a referendum, initiative, or recall are allowed to proceed, judges can nullify the majority’s will on so-called constitutional (state or federal) grounds. The following five examples show once again that what the people want means little or nothing in American-style “democracy.” The examples also show that the movement to counterbalance corruption with real democracy is often torpedoed by the judicial branch — a branch that was specifically and ingeniously designed to stifle democracy.

Judicial Example 1 (Taxes).

Normally, a court exercising judicial review overturns the decisions of another branch of the government, but, when it strikes down an initiative, it overrides the people themselves. With the stroke of a pen, a few judges can thwart the will of thousands or even millions of voters. To cite one example, in the late 1990s, citizens in Washington State, tiring of high taxes, used the initiative process to impose limits on state taxes and fees. The measure won a decisive victory, with nearly one million citizens voting to enact it. But, shortly after the election, a Washington state judge struck down the initiative on state constitutional grounds. And, indeed, conflicts of this type raise the question: Who is sovereign in this system – the people or the judges?⁴³⁰

Judicial Example 2 (Police Brutality). In 2020, numerous incidents of police brutality across the USA and, in particular, a few glaring cases in Glynn County, Georgia, occurred. The state legislature, with the approval of the governor, decided to conduct a referendum on the question: should the corrupt Glynn County Police Department be dissolved and its responsibilities turned over to the sheriff of the county? In the State of Georgia, however, it turns out, according to a state superior court judge, it is against the law to let the majority vote on that question.⁴³¹

Judicial Example 3 (Sunshine Bribery). Money buys politicians and judges, smears opponents, confuses voters, and undermines the one-person one-vote principle.⁴³² In 1941, a U.S. Supreme Court judge agreed, stating the obvious: “We may have democracy in this country, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we cannot have both.”

The issue boils down to a simple question: should trillionaires,⁴³³ billionaires, and multimillionaires — a small minority — be permitted, legally, to buy politicians and judges?

The people over and over again answer “No, they shouldn’t,” correctly insisting that sunshine bribery is the enemy of free speech. And yet, as James Madison and his fellow oligarchs foresaw, “since the 1970s, courts have invoked the First Amendment to strike down numerous campaign finance reform initiatives.”⁴³⁴

Judicial Example 4 (Term Limits). Besides sortition and a ban on sunshine bribery, term limits are an indispensable feature of democracy. All three minimize corruption and empower citizens. The Athenians understood this of course — as did Benjamin Franklin and colleagues when they drafted the 1776 Pennsylvania Constitution. That Constitution “created a unicameral legislature consisting of numerous representatives who served one-year terms and were soon rotated out of office by mandatory term limits.”⁴³⁵

Likewise, the people of the USA do not want professional politicians to get entrenched in power. “In 1990, a national poll showed that citizens supported term limits for members of Congress by a 61-to-21 percent margin.”⁴³⁶ So, by 1995, twenty-one states had adopted term limits on state-elected officials and twenty-three states had imposed limits on their representatives in Congress, in almost every case through ballot initiatives.

But the people who buy the politicians and judges — and these politicians and judges themselves — profit from entrenched corruption. Can you imagine the nightmare of having to bribe a large

new cohort of officials every year? And how could a politician become a millionaire by serving just one year? So:

In May 1995 . . . the [Supreme] Court declared that state-imposed congressional term limits were unconstitutional . . . [overturning] laws adopted by 23 states – which in turn represented the votes of nearly 25 million citizens and a sizable majority in nearly every state where voters were allowed to determine the question. U.S. Term Limits v. Thornton was thus demonstrably one of the most counter-majoritarian decisions in the Court’s history.⁴³⁷

Judicial Example 5 (Workers’ Rights). In 1905, the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated an 1895 New York statute known as the “bakeshop law,” a statute which improved the lives of bakers by limiting their employment to sixty hours per week.⁴³⁸ In 1910, Teddy Roosevelt argued that the bakeshop law

perfectly reflected the will of the public. But, the Court had “declared the action of the State of New York unconstitutional, because, forsooth, men must not be deprived of their ‘liberty’ to work under unhealthy conditions.”⁴³⁹

VII. The seventh and final reason for the failure of the direct democracy movement in the USA, is this: “It is clear that government actors retain a great deal of discretion over what happens to initiatives after they pass.”⁴⁴⁰ If the state legislature is ordered by the money barons to stall, it can “steal the initiative;” that is, it is able to subvert the will of the majority or just fail to implement it.⁴⁴¹

In summary, there is no direct democracy in the USA on the federal level — where the most important decisions are made. Next, about half the states have no real democracy features. In the states that enjoy these features, it takes a tremendous amount of money and resources to launch a real democracy measure such as an initiative, a referendum, or a recall. Moreover, the entire process can be corrupted by oligarchs who can use their money to legally buy politicians and journalists, and smear, incarcerate, or murder their opponents. Also, as the self-seeking authors of the federal and state constitutions foresaw, the process is often nipped in the bud by appeals to the courts, which decree that it is illegal, in American “democracy,” to let the majority vote on that particular issue. And, if a measure survives this trail of tears and is approved by the majority — especially if it is a measure that undermines oligarchic power — why then, the judges again can arbitrarily strike it down, relying on their subjective and self-serving interpretation of state or federal constitution. And if a measure survives all this? The bought legislature often lets it languish.

Thus, the much-lauded direct democracy in America is a fool’s paradise. If you want to be generous, you’d probably say that the USA is 99% oligarchy and 1% real democracy. And then you’d have to sadly conclude that a 1% share is not enough for real democracy to accomplish its magic.

All this, it should be noted, is the downright opposite of real democracy. In tribal societies, the rule of the majority was final, which no legal trick and no scoundrel could overturn. Likewise in Athens, wealthy citizens were deprived of “institutional means to veto the decisions of the masses.”⁴⁴² No one in Athens could overturn the majority’s decisions.

An Eagle’s Eye View of American “Democracy”

Like its Greek and Roman predecessors, American oligarchy is shot through with militarism, corruption, oppression, and the seeds of self-destruction.

Together, the USA and its allies spend a great deal more on their militaries than all other countries combined. A good part of this stupendous sum doesn’t go to make these countries stronger, but to venality. The USA has at least ten times as many overseas military bases as all other countries combined. Such spending and overseas presence, alongside endless interventions in the affairs of other countries, suggest that the USA is an empire, not just a country.

The United States is the only country that detonated atomic bombs on civilian populations and that contemplated the additional use of these monstrous annihilators on numerous occasions. Moreover, it detonated two bombs three days apart — against a country that was already suing for peace and offering to surrender on the same terms that it surrendered after the incineration of two cities. The United States is especially adept in the environmental destruction of defiant countries, e.g., defoliation agents in Vietnam and depleted uranium in Serbia and Iraq. By 2023, the United States declines to sign new nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons treaties and is withdrawing from almost all existing treaties. Since 1945, the USA has been risking the future of humanity with its so far unsuccessful pursuit of a nuclear first strike — killing tens of millions in a surprise attack on Russia or China, and forcing these nations to choose between capitulation or a weakened retaliatory strike which would then be followed by total, absolute, no-holds-barred, annihilation.⁴⁴³ It is not clear at this point whether America’s Strangeloves fully realize that such a first strike — even if it doesn’t provoke a retaliatory nuclear response — might lead to nuclear winter and the possible demise of humanity.

The U.S. and U.K. are engaged in perpetual colonial wars and interventions in the political affairs of other nations. In countries like Germany, France, Japan, or South Korea the U.S./U.K. merely seek to install oligarchies similar to their own whose policies are subordinate to the interests of American and British oligarchs. In many other countries, however, the U.S./U.K. prop up fascist or theocratic regimes — and topple or assassinate leaders who spurn imperial orders and attempt to improve the lives and liberties of their own people.

To justify the takeover of insubordinate weak countries, the government falsely presents itself as the defender of freedom and democracy. To justify its permanent wars, the government relies on false flag operations. To keep Americans perennially afraid, the government invented and sustains “the war on terror.”

Professor John Mearsheimer sums it up:

You cannot underestimate how ruthless the United States is. This is all covered-up in the textbooks and the classes that we take growing up, because it's all part of nationalism. Nationalism is all about creating myths about how wonderful your country is. It's America right or wrong; we never do anything wrong. If you really look carefully how the United States has operated over time, it's really amazing how ruthless we've been. And the British, the same is true of them as well. But we cover it up.⁴⁴⁴

On the domestic front, the USA has, per capita, the largest prison population in the world. Many of these prisoners are either innocent or guilty of such “crimes” as smoking marijuana. The police kill three people a day (that is the official statistic), and manhandle countless others.⁴⁴⁵

Sunshine bribery of politicians (campaign contributions, revolving doors, speaking invitations, book deals) is institutionalized and taken for granted. Small farmers, bakeries, and other mom-and-pop businesses that genuinely represent free enterprise are powerless, while relatively few banks, monopolies, and oligopolies, get rich. They get rich, for the most part, not because they compete in a free market, but because they control the politicians and judges.

Income inequality is scandalous — and ever-growing; by 2020 reaching levels not seen for a hundred years.⁴⁴⁶ There are millions of vacant homes — and, according to official statistics, more than half a million homeless people⁴⁴⁷ (the real number is probably much higher).

Despite repeated warnings from its own scientists, the United States plays a key role in destroying the life support systems of the biosphere, developing new technologies that speed up that destruction — and refusing to do anything about it.

The most powerful institution of the country — the Federal Reserve — is owned by international bankers and serves their interests and not the interests of the people. The medical-pharmaceutical complex controls politicians at all levels and as a result, Americans spend twice as much on health care as countries whose bankers and drug manufacturers are not as powerful as their American counterparts, e.g., Japan or France. And what do Americans get as a result of such extra spending? Less than nothing — they are overall sicker than the Swiss, French, or the Japanese, and die younger (the Swiss enjoy 7.7 more years of life than Americans).

Most Americans are routinely poisoned by lead, mercury, aluminum, fluoride, junk food, prescription drugs, pesticides, herbicides, radionuclides and hundreds of other toxins in their food, vaccines, water, air, and soil. Schools for the most part are indoctrination centers, teaching children what to believe, not how to think. The mass media, schools, and publishing industry are controlled by the corporations and their allies in the CIA; so that the vast majority of the population lives and dies without having the slightest clue how politics in their country really works, or how much healthier, wealthier, wiser, and happier they could be if they cleaned up their political system. The country is allegedly at war with drug traffickers, but the government itself is the biggest purveyor of drugs, including such addictive drugs as heroin and opioids.

Truth is subordinated to the oligarchs' perennial pursuit of ever more power and riches. Such regulatory bodies as the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food and Drug Administration have long ago been co-opted by the corporations they are supposed to oversee.

People who posed a threat to the status quo, e.g., Chelsea Manning, Joe Hill, Huey Long, the Kennedys, Fred Thompson, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Walter Reuther, John Lennon, Phil Ochs, and thousands of other influential advocates of peace, justice, equality and sustainability, are routinely marginalized, smeared, incarcerated, or assassinated.⁴⁴⁸

Perhaps the most telling point about American "democracy" is wealth distribution:

If elections give citizens a way to effectively control their government, why are most people who live in what are acknowledged to be democracies becoming poorer? How can this be happening in societies that practise majority rule? Why would not just some, but most, people vote for policies that produce such direct catastrophic results for so many of them? And, even more strikingly, why would they keep voting for them after the consequences of those policies become obvious? Do they like the idea of becoming poorer and poorer?⁴⁴⁹

The reality is indeed shocking:

America's 400 richest people — the top 0.00025% of the population — "have tripled their share of the nation's wealth since the early 1980s" . . . Those 400 Americans own more of the country's riches than the 150 million adults in the bottom 60% of the wealth distribution, who saw their share of the nation's wealth fall from 5.7% in 1987 to 2.1% in 2014.⁴⁵⁰

Pillars of American "Democracy"

Why do we tolerate such a corrupt, undemocratic, exploitive, elite-dominated system? . . . Isn't it obvious that we need an alternative economic system that isn't controlled by corporations, the government and the central bank for the exclusive benefit of insiders and elites? — Charles Hogue Smith⁴⁵¹

The USA presents us with the Acquiescence Paradox. Unlike such weak aspiring "democracies" as Guatemala or Thailand, no external power forcibly stops the American people from curbing oligarchic excesses. How then did the oligarchs manage to steadily increase their share of power and wealth? How did they gradually rob the vast majority of the world's people of their possessions and liberties, submerging them in never-ending streams of lies, poisons, debts, and wars, while eroding the biological foundations of life itself? Why don't Americans vote for their principles and interests? Why do Americans fail to adopt a Swiss-style political system, and thereby save money and live almost eight more years? Why do Americans consent to policies that set their country and the world on a collision course with nature — even though nature bats last? Why do they permit their rulers to engage in a reckless policy of nuclear brinkmanship that might lead to the radioactive incineration of their country? Why do they parrot their government's outrageous lies about unemployment,⁴⁵² inflation,⁴⁵³ war spending,⁴⁵⁴ gold holdings⁴⁵⁵ — and everything else?

The following sections argue that oligarchic power in America can be traced to sixteen or so mutually-supporting pillars — pillars that were largely absent in Athenian democracy.

The First Pillar of American “Democracy:” Sunshine Bribery

It’s often cheaper to buy a legislator than a second-hand car. — Eric Margolis⁴⁵⁶

In the USA, bribery is palpably institutionalized. Oligarchs buy politicians, judges (directly or indirectly), intellectuals, medical experts, and officials, by financing elections and re-elections, selective hiring and firing, lavishing perks, and providing favorable media and scholarly coverage. Once out of office, retroactive bribery comes into play via lucrative speaking tours, book contracts, and job offers.

Money also serves to keep wavering politicians in line. If a congresswoman does not prostitute herself, a more compliant candidate can be found and, in the next elections, given at least five times more money. So, for instance, when any congresswoman casts a vote on any given issue, she must choose: go along with the bankers, oilmen, drug purveyors, genocide perpetrators, and the manufacturers of killing machines — or face the almost-certain prospects of being kicked out of congress (and if that fails to work, get the silent or smearing treatment in the media, get framed for a crime she did not commit, or get killed if none of the above works and she becomes influential). Such is the reality of representative “democracy.” Obviously, anyone decent enough to refuse to take bribes is unlikely to become a president, a congressperson, or a judge. And the few who manage to be elected without accepting bribes, or who switch allegiance from oligarchs to people, will be lucky to just have to pack their bags after the very next elections.



“I’d rather meet [Satan] and shake him by the tail,” said Mark Twain, “than any other statesman on the planet.” But Twain would have cheerfully hobnobbed with Wilbur Beast [shown above], the elected mayor of a small Kentucky community.⁴⁵⁷

By contrast, the Athenian constitution, as we have seen, limited the power of money in the political decision-making process. Moreover, all 535 congresspeople, all presidential candidates,

and many judges would be acting against the law in Athens, where sunshine bribery “was a capital offence both for the briber and the bribed.”⁴⁵⁸

Undoubtedly, many politically-active ancient Greeks were notoriously greedy. Wars in Greece were often fought on a double front: in the open field and in the hidden underbelly of city-states. “Hence the anecdote that when Philip wished to take a certain city with unusually strong fortifications and one of the inhabitants remarked that it was impregnable, [Philip] asked if even gold could not scale its walls”⁴⁵⁹

Athenian democrats took this weakness for granted and went out of their way to minimize its baleful impact. For instance, to prevent bribery, juries were selected by lot, numbered in the hundreds, and then, at the last moment, assigned by lot to specific trials. Most officials served only one year or less in any given capacity, were chosen by lot, and their qualifications and performance were reviewed before entering office, during their tenure, and after leaving office. Anyone suspecting foul play or abuse of authority could sue an official — with potentially dire consequences for that official. Delegations to foreign lands often consisted of several persons — a check on bribe-taking.

Whenever possible, state officials, e.g., generals or financial auditors, operated in groups of ten. This, combined with the principle of term limits, created greater transparency and accountability in the operation of every board, prevented the accumulation of excessive power in single hands, and made it harder to give and receive bribes.⁴⁶⁰

To avoid the thefts and bribery that plague the American public bidding process, in Athens, “when public works were put into auction, the auction took place in the presence of a panel of jurors, who confirmed and witnessed the contract, likewise, sale of confiscated property.”⁴⁶¹

As we have seen, the main obstacle to honest dealings involved precisely those cases where sortition could not be applied. Owing to their wealth, education, and rhetorical skills, a few assembly speakers often played years-long leadership roles in Athenian politics. Similarly, a successful general such as Pericles could be re-elected many times. Both Assembly leaders and generals were often bribed — at times with grave repercussions for their country.

We often hear of assembly speakers and generals making fortunes. The speaker Aischines rose from “penury to the upper echelons,” thanks to various “gifts” from foreign potentates. Likewise,

Demosthenes got vast sums for the decrees he proposed. . . . On one occasion Demosthenes is supposed to have made 5 talents [130 kg of silver] just by keeping his mouth shut in the assembly. He also received money on a huge scale from Persia.⁴⁶²

Bribery of generals was likewise common, sometimes with tragic consequences. Just as tragic were the indirect repercussions of bribe-taking on Athens’ military engagements, including in such decisive battles as the invasion of Sicily and the final tragic defeat to Macedonia. In both cases, the

rare honesty of leading citizens (Nicias and Phocion, respectively), led the Athenians to ignore their incompetence.

Assembly leaders served at the pleasure of their fellow citizens. They only made proposals to the people and were not decision-makers. They were often brought to account before the People's Court, and faced "the constant risk of being penalized if they made money off their political activity."⁴⁶³ For instance, near the end of his career, Demosthenes was "accused and condemned for having accepted 20 talents (520 kg) of silver from Harpalos, Alexander's runaway finance minister."⁴⁶⁴

It was even riskier to serve as a general in Athens. If lucky, a general suspected of accepting bribes or of treason might be exiled for a decade or two, e.g., the would-be historian Thucydides. If not so lucky, he might end up drinking a cupful of hemlock.

In sum, Athens' bribery plight, grave as it was, was not half as outrageous as America's — not because Athenians were less greedy — but because they enjoyed a less-flawed system. In particular, although bribery plagued both America and Athens, there were major differences. First, unlike Americans, Athenians took great pains to minimize opportunities for bribery whenever they could figure out how. Second, sunshine bribery in the USA is legal, and upheld by the highest courts in the land; in Athens, bribery was illegal and risky. Third, in Athens, bribery mainly affected occasional Assembly decisions and military conflicts, always involving an existential risk to the corrupt official, while in the USA bribery debases every aspect of political life, from cost over-runs in the military to routinely stealing trillions of dollars from the lower 90% of the population and handing them to billionaires.

The Second Pillar of American "Democracy:" Misinformation

*If you aren't careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed and loving the people who are doing the oppressing. — Malcolm X*⁴⁶⁵

To my knowledge, the most original and thorough book ever to appear on media bias in the United States is Upton Sinclair's self-published *The Brass Check*.⁴⁶⁶ For reasons that need not concern us here, this book is hardly ever mentioned by dissident media scholars, even though their work and contrived "models" are not nearly as beautifully, courageously, and insightfully written as that 1919 book. Suppression of the truth and bias were almost as brazen then as they are today. Here are just a few typical excerpts:

Our newspapers do not represent public interests, but private interests; they do not represent humanity, but property; they value a man, not because he is great, or good, or wise, or useful, but because he is wealthy, or of service to vested wealth.

I was determined to get something done about the Condemned Meat Industry. I was determined to get something done about the atrocious conditions under which men, women and children were working the Chicago stockyards. In my efforts to get something done, I was like an animal in a cage. The bars of this cage were newspapers,

which stood between me and the public; and inside the cage I roamed up and down, testing one bar after another, and finding them impossible to break.⁴⁶⁷

Sinclair also quotes a speech of John Swinton, editor of a major New York newspaper of that era. The occasion is a toast for an independent press. The audience: fellow editors.

The business of the New York journalist is to destroy the truth, to lie outright, to pervert, to vilify, to fawn at the feet of Mammon, and to sell his race and his country for his daily bread. You know this and I know it, and what folly is this to be toasting an "Independent Press." We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes. We are the jumping-jacks; they pull the strings and we dance. Our talents, our possibilities and our lives are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes.⁴⁶⁸

In the long term, the worst crime of the mass media involves falsifying or commercializing the threat which their corporate masters pose to the biosphere. Here is a summary of a 1999 academic paper, showing the decades-long cover up of climate disruptions:

This paper examines media coverage of the greenhouse effect. It does so by comparing two pictures. The first picture emerges from reading all 100 greenhouse-related articles published over a five-month period (May–September 1997) in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *New York Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Washington Post*. The second picture emerges from the mainstream scientific literature. This comparison shows that media coverage of environmental issues suffers from both shallowness and pro-corporate bias.⁴⁶⁹

Oligarchic virtual control of information flows can sometimes lead to truly bizarre outcomes. Here is an example of how oligarchs managed to convince people that ignorance is bliss:

On 6 December 2012, Californians voted on a state-wide referendum known as Proposition 37 (or 'Prop 37'), which, if passed, would have required genetically modified food to be labelled as such. Initially, support for mandatory GMO labelling ran high. Polling on 15 September 2012 (twelve weeks before the referendum) indicated that 65 per cent of voters were in favour of Prop 37 with only 20 per cent against. Alarmed at this development, manufacturers of genetically modified seed, groceries and pesticides poured their resources into the 'no' campaign. While Prop 37 supporters raised \$9.43 million, mainly from health food suppliers and Hollywood celebrities, the 'no' campaign reportedly spent up to a \$1 million publicizing their views every single day, with \$46 million spent on television advertising alone over the course of the campaign. Much of this money was used to broadcast misleading claims . . . by the time voting took place on 6 December, Prop 37 was defeated by 53 per cent against to 47 per cent for.⁴⁷⁰

Like their journalistic counterparts, experts are hired, promoted, and fired, in part, on the basis of conformity to organizational discipline and goals. The consequences are predictable:

The traditional view of expert opinion is . . . radically mistaken. An expert is traditionally seen as neutral, disinterested, unbiased. . . . On the view proposed here . . . an expert is best seen as a committed advocate. . . . It is notorious that the opinion of an expert . . . can often be predicted from knowledge of which group has his affiliation.⁴⁷¹

By contrast, in democratic Athens, there was a genuine marketplace of ideas and there was no concerted effort to mold the tastes and opinions of citizens.

The Third Pillar of American “Democracy:” Lack of Transparency

A related aspect of good governance is public access to information: “Democratic institutions can be made to work only if all concerned do their best to impart” truth.⁴⁷²

We have seen already that, in America, neither the government, nor all other mainstream sources of information, “do their best to impart” truthful information:

By now, the corporations that dominate our [U.S.] media, like alcoholic fat cats, treat this situation as theirs by right . . . Their concept of a diversity of views is the full range of politics and social values from center to far right. The American audience, having been exposed to a narrowing range of ideas over the decades, often assumes that what they see and hear in the major media is all there is. It is no way to maintain a lively marketplace of ideas, which is to say it is no way to maintain a democracy.⁴⁷³

Such wars on truth were typical of oligarchic Sparta, but not of democratic Athens: “One of the distinguishing features of liberal Athenian democracy is freedom of information.”⁴⁷⁴ It was not possible for the Athenian government to lie to the people about the existence of a documented evidence of a deliberate massacre of children, because the people were the government. It was not possible to hide from the Athenians the crimes of their government against them or against their fellow citizens.

In frequent times of war, the Council might make certain war-related decisions secret, but the secrecy in such cases was necessary and was directed against a foreign enemy, not against fellow citizens. Later, should it turn out that such secrecy was used for personal gain or some nefarious purposes (unlikely, given the size and composition of the Council or even its executive committee), there would be a price to pay.

The Athenians would have understood whistle-blowing for what it is — in an oligarchy. They would fail to understand the vast secrecy that surrounds government actions in the USA, and the severe sanctions directed at people who shine the light on illegal, cruel, or corrupt conduct.

Democratic government at Athens was accompanied by publicity to a degree otherwise unheard-of in past societies . . . everything had to be publicized, either in writing or orally.⁴⁷⁵

The Fourth Pillar of American “Democracy:” Compulsory “Education”

American education in the 18th century was private, decentralized, vibrant, and highly successful. In 18th century America:

More citizens were literate under a system where schooling was voluntary and of short duration, than ever they have been under the long-term compulsion. . . . From its beginnings, forced schooling represented a big step backwards from the exciting free

market in learning offered by the bazaar of American life, a market well-illustrated in the lives of Franklin, Jefferson, Farragut, and many others. This asystematic system of learning put the nation on a road to unparalleled power and wealth. And America's young responded brilliantly to it, out-inventing and out-trading every . . . world competitor by a country mile.⁴⁷⁶

That great system of education was deliberately subverted by the Rockefellers and their allies. In 1924, the transformation into compulsory, standardized, dumbing down education was nearly complete, leading H. L. Mencken to the view that the aim of public education is not

to fill the young of the species with knowledge and awaken their intelligence. . . . Nothing could be further from the truth. The aim . . . is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality. That is its aim in the United States . . . and that is its aim everywhere else.⁴⁷⁷

Slave owners in America understood that an educated slave posed a threat to them and to the entire system. Likewise, the oligarchs understood that free-thinking workers posed a threat to their privileged position, and so they created an “educational” system that methodically undermined creativity and non-conformity. The result is

an educational system deliberately designed to produce mediocre intellects, to hamstring the inner life, to deny students appreciable leadership skills, and to ensure docile and incomplete citizens — all in order to render the populace “manageable.” . . . Under the new system, the goals of good moral values, good citizenship skills, and good personal development were exchanged for a novel fourth purpose — becoming a human resource to be spent by businessmen and politicians. . . . the chief end of the project was “to impose on the young the ideal of subordination. . . . School has no choice but to limit free thought and speech to such a profound degree a gulf is opened between the sanctimonious homilies of pedagogy (‘searching for truth’, ‘leveling the playing field’, etc.) and the ugly reality of its practices.”⁴⁷⁸

In 1922, New York City Mayor John Hylan

announced that the schools of the city had been seized by “tentacles” of “an invisible government, just as an octopus would seize prey,” a pointed echo of the chilling pronouncement made years earlier by British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, when he claimed that all important events were controlled by an invisible government, of which the public was unaware. The particular octopus Hylan meant was the Rockefeller Foundation.⁴⁷⁹

The global system of oppression is not yet universal, and most of us have been exposed to teachers who nurtured our intellectual, spiritual, moral, physical, or artistic proclivities. But these, sadly, are the exceptions, not the rule.

I should also note that this summary of American “educational” system is entirely in line with my own experiences as a student and educator in that system. Besides the occasional brilliant teacher within the Rockefeller system itself, the only near exceptions I’m familiar with are some small-scale private educational outfits, as well as many graduate programs in the natural sciences.

The Athenians, as we have seen, let a thousand educational experiments bloom. As in 19th-century America, the system was decentralized. It was parents, not the state, who oversaw their children's education.

The Fifth Pillar of American “Democracy:” Controlled, Manipulated, Trivialized, or Rigged Elections

Politics has become a snake oil world of deception, manipulation and contempt for ordinary people. — Norman Lewis⁴⁸⁰

Question: “Why can't we vote the bastards out?” Answer: “Because we didn't even vote the bastards in.” — James and Kenneth Collier⁴⁸¹

In a rational world, the campaign chest of candidates would have little bearing on their electability. This chest's decisive influence strongly suggests that the American electoral process is a caricature of decency and rationality:

The political merchandisers appeal only to the weaknesses of voters, never to their potential strength. They make no attempt to educate the masses into becoming fit for self-government; they are content merely to manipulate and exploit them. For this purpose all the resources of psychology and the social sciences are mobilized and set to work. . . . Under the new dispensation, political principles and plans for specific action have come to lose most of their importance. The personality of the candidate and the way he is projected by the advertising experts are the things that really matter. . . . The methods now being used to merchandise the political candidate as though he were a deodorant positively guarantee the electorate against ever hearing the truth about anything.⁴⁸²

Joseph Stalin reportedly said: “It is enough that the people know there was an election. The people who cast the votes decide nothing. The people who count the votes decide everything.” When trivialization, money, cloak-and-dagger techniques, and control of information fail to deliver the desired outcome, rigging provides the oligarchs another safety valve, again making a mockery of ballot-box reformers.⁴⁸³ According to a mainstream academic study by a major American university, in 2019 the United States ranked 57 in the world in electoral integrity, sandwiched between Lesotho and Oman.⁴⁸⁴

Most officials in Athens were chosen by lot, not through elections, thereby bypassing the degrading spectacle of American elections and its disastrous outcomes. Elected officials did not belong to parties, but stood forward as individuals. Citizens usually acted on their own individual initiative, and were not beholden to a party. Elected officials gained their position often (but not always) because they were competent, or honest, or enjoyed some other outstanding attribute that appealed to their fellow citizens. Psychological manipulation and money played a minor role. Athenians took extreme precautions to prevent rigging and all officials were subject to term limits, served at the pleasure of their fellow citizens, and were screened for competence and honesty before taking office, while in office, and after leaving office.

The Sixth Pillar of American “Democracy:” Broken Electoral Promises

There is a vast gap between what politicians or parties promise before an election and what they deliver after. Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, for instance, promised peace but, once elected, through guile, false-flag operations, and propaganda, led their country to catastrophic wars.

The following quote shows that broken promises are an intrinsic feature of elections in representative republics:

In the 1784 [Pennsylvania] elections, the self-proclaimed reformers swept to victory, transforming the statehouse. . . . And then they proceeded to break their promises, and do nothing to fulfill the pledges they made to the people who elected them. Not wanting the stream of honors and gifts to end, country legislators provided “their Benefactors . . . with their Vote.” They surrendered campaign promises and, instead, cast their ballots as the moneyed men of Philadelphia “shall please to direct them.”⁴⁸⁵

Thousands of broken promises, spanning the entire history of the American republic, show that going back on your word is a vital principle of representative government. That is one reason why the phrase “representative democracy” is a contradiction in terms. The typical power seekers running for office are not interested in truthfulness but in getting elected and thereby satisfying their craving for prominence and riches. If lying is part of the deal, so be it. And, once they get elected, in the absence of ongoing built-in recall mechanisms, audits, and access to objective information, they are not accountable to the people who elected them, but to the billionaires who selected them, financed their campaign, made them a household name, and who will eventually handsomely reward these politicians for their compliance.

Athenians had few illusions about human nature and always suspected foul play from everyone. That is one reason they created a system that, for the most part, forestalled the problem of broken pledges. Most officials were chosen by lot, not on the basis of promises. All officials were subject to constant oversight by their fellow citizens and could be removed from office at any time. Officials could be sued by any citizen for corruption, hubris, or abuse of power, and, at the end of their service, had to undergo a retrospective review.

Democratic Athens depended on elections only when special skills were required, e.g., generals/admirals, military trainers, financial officers, or the superintendent of springs. There were about 100 such elected officials at any given moment (and 1,100 selected by lot).⁴⁸⁶ And, like contemporary politicians, at times elected officials reneged on their promises to the people. The Athenian system, however, was better able to minimize the temptation of not keeping your word.

Here is one example showing how Athenians dealt with promise-breakers. It is the story of Miltiades, the man who was, more than any other, responsible for the incredible Athenian victory in the Battle of Marathon (one of the most epoch-making battles of history). Herodotus says:

After the defeat of the Persians at Marathon, Miltiades' already high reputation in Athens was raised even further. So when he asked the Athenians for seventy ships, an army, and funds, without supporting his request by telling them which country he was planning to attack — in fact, without telling them anything except that they would get rich if they followed him. . . — the Athenians enthusiastically let him have them. . . . [But] Miltiades sailed back to Athens in a sorry state, without bringing any money for Athens and without having annexed Paros. [He was tried on a] charge, which carried the penalty of death, of having deceived the Athenians. . . . The Athenian people came down on his side in so far as they exonerated him from the death penalty, but they fined him fifty talents [an enormous sum of money, even for a rich Athenian like Miltiades] for the wrong he had done them.⁴⁸⁷

Has any lying politician in America ever been punished? No. In the USA you only suffer if you break promises to the oligarchs, not to the people.

The Seventh Pillar of American “Democracy: The Conspiracy Theory Bogeyman

One of the oligarchs' most spectacular conspiratorial achievements — and one more pillar supporting their power — is convincing us that they, the lily-white bankers and their allies, never plot against the American people or, for that matter, against anyone else. “Well, yes,” a CIA asset at CBS, or Huntington Post, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, or the Sierra Club might say, “Brutus and Cassius and their fellow oligarchs might have conspired to kill Julius Caesar. And yes, the oligarchs of 50 years ago might have set in motion the Gladio Conspiracy,⁴⁸⁸ killing hundreds of innocents. But all this, you see, happened such a long time ago and hence lacks relevance to the contemporary world. If you believe otherwise, I need not listen to you, consider the evidence, or think. You are an unbalanced tinfoil fanatic, and I am not going to stoop to your half-crazed level.”⁴⁸⁹

Every time I hear an intelligent person utter the disclaimer “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but . . .” a Bertrand Russell’s refrain runs through my brain: “There is no nonsense so arrant that it cannot be made the creed of the vast majority by adequate governmental action.”

Perhaps the origins of the term “conspiracy theory” might help us break away from its uncanny spell:

In January 1967, shortly after Jim Garrison in New Orleans had started his prosecution [for the murder of President Kennedy] . . . the CIA published a memo to all its stations, suggesting the use of the term ‘conspiracy theorists’ for everyone criticizing the Warren Report findings. Until then the press and the public mostly used the term ‘assassination theories’ when it came to alternative views of the ‘lone nut’ Lee Harvey Oswald. But with this memo this changed and very soon ‘conspiracy theories’ became what it is until today: A term to smear, denounce and defame anyone who dares to speak about any crime committed by the state, military or intelligence services.⁴⁹⁰

It goes without saying that if you buy the conspiracy theory mumbo jumbo, you cannot even begin to undo the enormous damage wreaked by conspiracies on yourself, your nation, and humanity. By rejecting in principle the existence of conspiracies, the Conspiracy Bogeyman offers us a false

shortcut to the truth. In the real world though, only a laborious rational analysis of facts and circumstances can cast light on the probability of any given conspiratorial claim.

Greeks, not having been indoctrinated by the CIA, *Wikipedia*, Hollywood, TV, books, newspapers, radio, and a standardized curriculum, took conspiracies for granted. They would have been dazed by the acceptance of most Westerners of the assertion that Western rulers are incapable, in principle, of plotting against their own people. Chapter 4 has already shown that Greek democrats everywhere knew that oligarchs in their clubs were forever plotting the overthrow of democracy. They knew that Peisistratos (an Athenian benevolent tyrant and a contemporary of Solon) regained power by entering the city in a chariot, accompanied by the “goddess” Athena (in reality, a beautiful woman) allegedly sanctioning his return. They knew about and celebrated the conspiracy to kill that same tyrant’s sons and resume the long march towards democracy. They suspected an oligarchic conspiracy that led to the assassination of the great democratic leader Ephialtes. They knew that some oligarchs conspired to betray the city over and over again during their 27-year war with Sparta. They had no doubt about the existence of conspiracies and the need to safeguard against them.

Here is a tale of two related conspiracies. No Greek in his right mind would dismiss their veracity on the grounds that they could not possibly happen. Both took place in Thebes, Athens’ powerful neighbor to the north-west. The first conspiracy involves a typical oligarchic plot of high treason, murders, and oppression. The second is one of the most fantastic and courageous, democratically-inspired, plots in recorded history.

The first conspiracy dates to 382 B.C., when Theban oligarchs had betrayed their city to Sparta. They treacherously introduced Spartan soldiers into the central fortress (Kadmeia) of Thebes, enslaving their city to Sparta, and, with Spartan protection, gained despotic power over their fellow citizens. This was long before the CIA contrived to use the term “conspiracy theory,” so no one in Greece doubted that this unprovoked plot by Sparta and Theban traitors actually happened. Its occurrence was not only accepted as fact, but, George Grote writes, was “condemned by the indignant sentiment of all Greece.”

Grote goes on to provide a thrilling account of the second counter-conspiracy which, in turn, led to the emancipation of Thebes from both home-grown and foreign slave drivers:

[By 379 BC], the government of Thebes had now been for three years . . . in the hands of Leontiades and his [cruel, oppressive, and rapacious] oligarchical partisans, upheld by the Spartan garrison in the Kadmeia. . . .

Those rulers must have been in constant fear of risings or conspiracies amidst a body of high-spirited citizens who saw their city degraded, from being the chief of the Boeotian federation, into nothing better than a captive dependency of Sparta. Such fear was aggravated by the vicinity of a numerous body of Theban exiles, belonging to the opposite or anti-Spartan party; three or four hundred of whom had fled to Athens at the first seizure of their leader Ismenias, and had been doubtless joined subsequently by others.

So strongly did the Theban rulers apprehend mischief from these exiles, that they hired assassins to take them off by private murder at Athens; and actually succeeded in thus killing Androkleidas, chief of the band and chief successor of the deceased Ismenias — though they missed their blows at the rest. And we may be sure that they made the prison in Thebes subservient to multiplied enormities and executions. . . .

To protect these Theban exiles, however, was all that Athens could do. Their restoration was a task beyond her power [at the time, totalitarian Sparta was the strongest military power in mainland Greece, and allied moreover with powerful Persia and Syracuse] — and seemingly yet more beyond their own. For the existing government of Thebes was firmly seated [in part thanks to the Spartan garrison, and in part thanks to Theban quislings], and had the citizens completely under control. . . .

For a certain time, the Theban exiles at Athens waited in hopes of some rising at home or positive aid from the Athenians. At length, in the third winter after their flight, they began to despair of encouragement from either quarter, and resolved to take the initiative upon themselves. Among them were numbered several men of the richest and highest families at Thebes . . .

The exiles, keeping up constant private correspondence with their friends in Thebes, felt assured of the sympathy of the citizens generally, if they could once strike a blow. Yet nothing less would be sufficient than the destruction of the four rulers [of Thebes]. . . .

The day for the enterprise was determined by Phyllidas the secretary [of the ruling despots and a fellow conspirator], who had prepared an evening banquet . . . and who had promised on that occasion to bring into their company some women remarkable for beauty, as well as of the best families in Thebes.

Pelopidas and Mellon, and their five companions, crossed Kithasron from Athens to Thebes. It was wet weather, about December B.C. 379; they were disguised as rustics or hunters, with no other arms than a concealed dagger; and they got within the gates of Thebes one by one at nightfall, just when the latest farming-men were coming home from their fields. All of them arrived safe at the house of Charon, the appointed rendezvous. . .

In the house of Charon they remained concealed all the ensuing day, on the evening of which the banquet of Archias and Philippus [2 of the 4 ruling oligarchs] was to take place.

Phyllidas had laid his plan for introducing them at that banquet, at the moment when the two polemarchs [rulers] had become full of wine, in female attire, as being the women whose visit was expected.

Archias and Philippus impatiently called upon Phyllidas to introduce the women according to his promise. Upon this the secretary retired, and brought the conspirators, clothed in female attire, into an adjoining chamber; then going back to the polemarchs, he informed them that the women would not come in unless all the domestics were first dismissed. An order was forthwith given that these latter should depart, while Phyllidas took care that they should be well provided with wine . . . The polemarchs were thus left only with one or two friends at table, half intoxicated . . .

Phyllidas now conducted the pretended women into the banqueting-room; . . . they sat down by the side of the polemarchs; and the instant of lifting their veils was the signal for using their daggers. Archias and Philippus were slain at once.

Having been thus far successful, Phyllidas conducted three of the conspirators — Pelopidas, Kephisodorus, and Damokleidas — to the house of Leontiades [the leader of

the despotic coup three years ago], into which he obtained admittance by announcing himself as the bearer of an order from the polemarchs. Leontiades was reclining after supper, with his wife sitting spinning wool by his side, when they entered his chamber.

Being a brave and powerful man, he started up, seized his sword, and mortally wounded Kephisodorus in the throat; a desperate struggle then ensued between him and Pelopidas in the narrow doorway, where there was no room for a third to approach. At length, however, Pelopidas overthrew and killed him, after which they retired, joining the wife with threats to remain silent, and closing the door after them with peremptory commands that it should not be again opened.

They then went to the house of Hypates, whom they slew while he attempted to escape over the roof. The four great rulers of the philo-Laconian [pro-Spartan] party in Thebes having been now put to death, Phyllidas proceeded with the conspirators to the prison. . . . Here the gaoler, a confidential agent in the oppressions of the deceased governors, hesitated to admit him; but was slain by a sudden thrust with his spear, so as to ensure free admission to all. To liberate the prisoners, probably for the most part men of kindred politics with the conspirators — to furnish them with arms taken from the battle-spoils hanging up in the neighbouring porticoes — and to range them in battle order near the temple of Amphion — were the next proceedings; after which they began to feel some assurance of safety and triumph.

Proclamation was everywhere made aloud, through heralds, that the despots were slain — that Thebes was free — and that all Thebans who valued freedom should muster in arms in the market-place. . . .

There was but one feeling of joy and enthusiasm among the majority of the citizens. Both horsemen and hoplites hastened in arms to the market — the agora. Here for the first time since the seizure of the Kadmeia by Phoebidas [the Spartan general who seized it three years before], a formal assembly of the Theban people was convened, before which Pelopidas and his fellow-conspirators presented themselves. The priests of the city crowned them with wreaths, and thanked them in the name of the local gods; while the assembly hailed them with acclamations of delight and gratitude, nominating with one voice Pelopidas, Mellon, and Charon, as the first renewed Boeotarchs.

Messengers had been forthwith dispatched by the conspirators to Attica to communicate their success; upon which all the remaining exiles, with the two Athenian generals privy to the plot and a body of Athenian volunteers, or corps francs, all of whom were ready on the borders awaiting the summons — flocked to Thebes to complete the work.

The Spartan generals, on their side also, sent to Platea and Thespieae [two nearby Boetian cities under their control] for aid. During the whole night, they had been distracted and alarmed by the disturbance in the city; lights showing themselves here and there, with trumpets sounding and shouts for the recent success. Apprised speedily of the slaughter of the polemarchs, from whom they had been accustomed to receive orders, they knew not whom to trust or to consult, while they were doubtless beset by affrighted fugitives of the now defeated party, who would hurry up to the Kadmeia for safety. They reckoned at first on a diversion in their favour from the forces at Platea and Thespieae. But these forces were not permitted even to approach the city-gate; being vigorously charged, as soon as they came in sight, by the newly-mustered Theban cavalry, and forced to retreat with loss. The Lacedaemonians in the citadel were thus not only left without support, but saw their enemies in the city reinforced by the other exiles, and by the auxiliary volunteers.

Meanwhile Pelopidas and the other new Boeotarchs found themselves at the head of a body of armed citizens, full of devoted patriotism and unanimous in hailing the recent revolution. They availed themselves of this first burst of fervour to prepare for storming the Kadmeia without delay, knowing the importance of forestalling all aid from Sparta. And the citizens were already rushing up to the assault — proclamation being made of large rewards to those who should first force their way in — when the Lacedaemonian commander sent proposals for a capitulation.

Undisturbed egress from Thebes, with the honours of war, being readily guaranteed to him by oath, the Kadmeia was then surrendered. As the Spartans were marching out of the gates, many Thebans of the defeated party came forth also. But against these latter the exasperation of the victors was so ungovernable, that several of the most odious were seized as they passed, and put to death; in some cases, even their children along with them. And more of them would have been thus dispatched, had not the Athenian auxiliaries, with generous anxiety, exerted every effort to get them out of sight and put them into safety. We are not told — nor is it certain — that these Thebans were protected under the capitulation. . . .

Of the three harmosts [commanders of the Spartan occupation force in the citadel] who thus evacuated the Kadmeia without a blow, two were put to death, the third was heavily fined and banished, by the authorities at Sparta.

This revolution at Thebes came like an electric shock upon the Grecian world. With a modern reader, the assassination of the four leaders, in their houses and at the banquet, raises a sentiment of repugnance which withdraws his attention from the other features of this memorable deed. Now an ancient Greek not only had no such repugnance, but sympathised with the complete revenge for the seizure of the Kadmeia and the death of Ismenias; while he admired, besides, the extraordinary personal daring of Pelopidas and Mellon — the skilful forecast of the plot — and the sudden overthrow, by a force so contemptibly small, of a government which the day before seemed unassailable. It deserves note that we here see the richest men in Thebes undertaking a risk, single-handed and with their own persons, which must have appeared on a reasonable estimate little less than desperate.

As the revolution in Thebes acted forcibly on the Grecian mind from the manner in which it was accomplished, so by its positive effects it altered forthwith the balance of power in Greece. The empire of Sparta, far from being undisputed and nearly universal over Greece, is from henceforward only maintained by more or less of effort, until at length it is completely overthrown.⁴⁹¹

I have several reasons for recounting this exploit in such great length:

1. This tale, and history as a whole, points to the naivete of dismissing, in principle, the existence of conspiracies.
2. It is also a breathtaking story of treason, despotism, courage, and determination that deserves to be widely known. It should be celebrated in plays, movies, novels, and street names.
3. Pelopidas' life as a whole shows what extremely rich people can do with their time here on Earth, fighting for freedom and sharing their wealth with deserving poor — instead of ever-accumulating more power and riches or treating soldiers as “dumb, stupid animals to be used” (to quote one American Secretary of State, echoing the views of his patrons).⁴⁹²

4. My fourth reason for recounting this tale — and for earlier recounting Athens' victory in the Battle of Marathon — is to remind us that the future is no one's to see and that sometimes victory can be gained against impossible odds. At the outset, Pelopidas' conspiracy (which was in turn inspired by Thrasybulus' exploits⁴⁹³) appeared as a suicide mission, and it did come close to unraveling on a couple of occasions. And yet the democrats prevailed. So, as long as there is life, there is hope. Right now, the people in charge of most of the planet look unassailable. They kill, brainwash, rob, and create money. They are supported by vast armies of soldiers and ignorant or bought-and-paid-for mouthpieces and experts. And yet, the tale of Pelopidas and his brave companions clearly shows that our rulers are vincible. With courage, dedication, caution, and a far-sighted strategy, democracy might still return to our weary planet.

5. My last reason for using so many bytes on the adventures of Pelopidas, Melon, and fellow-conspirators has to do with their ingenious strategy. Had they resorted to civil disobedience or peaceful demonstrations against the Spartan garrison, the four debauched oligarchs, and their minions, they would have been incarcerated and killed. Had they waited for some foreign power to come to their rescue, they would have died waiting. Had they attempted open warfare, they would have been easily defeated and many innocent lives on both sides would have been lost. The only option that could work under their circumstances — and that ended up costing a mere handful of both heroic and captive lives — was their surgical strategy. For us, this story of courage and ingenuity brings one point home: The outcome of the coming struggle to save humanity will depend on the strategy we choose.

The Eighth Pillar of American “Democracy:” The Inculcated Non-Violence Creed

Chapter 3 disclosed that our hunter-gatherer ancestors did not shy away from communal violence against incorrigible freeloaders or high-handed people. Chapter 4 showed that the Athenians were perfectly willing to violently protect their personal liberties and democracy. We have just seen that the Thebans were similarly disposed.

Likewise, in the 18th century, most Americans would have probably agreed with Thomas Jefferson that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” Needless to say, from the outset and following perhaps their Roman idols,⁴⁹⁴ America's oligarchs well knew that the a major threat to their rule was a strategically-executed violent uprising, an uprising that, among other things, would have targeted them personally. So they cynically convinced the majority of decent people everywhere that it's OK for them, the oligarchs, to murder and poison millions and destroy the very foundations of life on Earth, but that it is unnatural for their victims to save billions of lives, to save freedom, decency, and justice, to save life itself, by giving these marauders a tiny bit of their own blood-soaked medicine.

I couldn't find statistical proof, but I do feel that most Americans — unwilling yet to see that their country is an oligarchy — would probably accept the “bedrock principle,” that “the right to revolutionary violence does not apply in a democracy.”⁴⁹⁵

Numerous lovers of peace, justice, and freedom, reluctantly endorsed violent revolutions. Here again is Thomas Jefferson:

What country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms.⁴⁹⁶

Jefferson's views are likewise shared by thoughtful ethicists. Dietrich Bonhoeffer felt that there were situations where guilt becomes unavoidable and to elude it was synonymous with narcissistic attachment to one's own putative purity and a cowardly flight from personal responsibility. "On the basis of this conviction, the great Christian theologian conspired in organizing an assassination attempt on Hitler (and then faced hanging)."⁴⁹⁷

Reinhold Niebuhr, another theologian, wrote:

The middle classes and the rational moralists, who have a natural abhorrence of violence, may be right in their general thesis; but they are wrong in their assumption that violence is intrinsically immoral.⁴⁹⁸

The historical record likewise discredits the non-violence myth. Non-violence got Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. killed and, in the long run, accomplished little. As I write, thousands of environmentalists all over the world are heroically carrying on non-violent battles to save the biosphere, accomplishing here and there brush-fire victories, but overall losing the war — and at times losing their lives too.

For millennia, hunter-gatherers dealt effectively — and violently — with psychopaths and freeloaders (Chapter 3).

Most oligarchs in Greece and elsewhere used extreme violence to achieve their goals. Their rule, when in power, was oppressive, a slap in the face to decency and justice. If it suited their goals or appetites, they were perfectly willing to exile, torture, rape, or kill a large number of their fellow citizens.

Democrats, and especially Athenian democrats, were far less cruel and murderous than their oligarchic enemies. Still, unlike many Americans, Greek democrats had no compunctions whatsoever about forcibly defending or restoring democracy. We have just read about the restoration of democracy in Thebes through an assassination plot. For Greek democrats, Pelopidas and his fellow-conspirators were heroes. For the Athenians, the two men who successfully assassinated a tyrant were celebrated as freedom fighters. In 403 B.C., democracy was restored through open warfare against the then-reigning Spartan-sponsored oligarchs, and the successful rebels were admired by their fellow-citizens. Similarly, an Athenian law gave "immunity from prosecution to the killers of anybody who has overthrown democracy."⁴⁹⁹

The Ninth Pillar of American “Democracy:” Leading, Infiltrating, and Co-Opting the Opposition

Co-option incorporates Lenin’s alleged dictum that “the best way to control the opposition is to lead it.” Indeed, case-by-case studies show that most so-called reform organizations, alternative media outlets, and leading dissidents in the USA have gradually been taken over by the oligarchs.⁵⁰⁰

Bought journalism plays a particularly important role in this macabre American scenario, as we noted earlier. It doesn’t take much to figure out that the Guardian or Nation or Mother Jones sold out long ago. But as you move along, some of the co-opted and paid for media outlets appear genuinely radical. These outlets are promoted by the oligarchs in an effort to keep the lid on the opposition. Their task is to daily expose the crimes of governments and corporations, but to avoid the real burning questions: which specific individuals control Western governments? Who really killed the Kennedy brothers and Malcolm X? What goals should the reform movement set for itself? What really happened on September 11, 2001?

Here is one example of co-option in action on the organizational level:

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists emerged after World War II as a voice for peace by some of the scientists who developed the then ultimate weapon of mass destruction. Now, its mission has drifted into being an echo chamber for the US imperial project . . . The Bulletin’s Doomsday Clock, unveiled in 1947, was set at seven minutes to midnight. The clock was intended as an educational tool to serve “as a vivid symbol of these multiplying perils, its hands showing how close to extinction we are.” Today, the risk of nuclear annihilation, not to mention global warming and other threats, has never been greater, according to the Bulletin’s Doomsday Clock. But the Bulletin has morphed from an advocate for peace and against other threats to humanity to something else. From an organization run by scientists, the current governing board of the Bulletin has hardly a scientist in sight. . . . The Bulletin maintains a liberal façade and still publishes articles that contribute to peace and environmentalism. In that way, its role in collusion with the US imperial project is insidious, because the patina of peace is used to legitimize its mission drift. . . . Yes, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists’ Doomsday Clock is now 100 seconds to midnight, and they are trying to push it closer to Armageddon. . . . Instead of supporting peaceful measures . . . the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has become a cheerleader for Washington.⁵⁰¹

An ingenious variation is provided by dissident outlets that mix, in the same breath, credible and patently-false conspiracies (e.g., our rulers are reptiles; nuclear weapons do not exist). By presenting the two types of conspiracies side by side, such outlets discredit the real ones.

Of particular interest here are co-opted individuals. As in the case of co-opted organizations, there are many tell-tale signs that betray such sell-outs or compartmentalized fools: where do they get their money? Are they leading a life of luxury? Do the corporate media acknowledge or ignore them? Did they die prematurely or spend much time in prison? Do they scoff at precisely the things that might wake the people up, e.g., suggestions to abolish the Federal Reserve, re-

investigate 9/11 or Covid-19, and deaths of such well-known figures as five Kennedys, Martin Luther King, or Michael Hastings.⁵⁰² Do these “dissidents” subscribe to the fiction of three branches of government or do they explicitly recognize the existence of puppeteers behind the scenes? Do they talk about the likes of Marcon, Biden, or Sunak as the center of real power — or about the Rockefellers, Rothschilds, the British royal family, or the Vatican? Do they see that the present system, by its very nature, undermines morality, freedom, justice, peace, and human survival? Do they urge people to vote or revolt? Do they ever come forward with practical ways of overthrowing the system, or do they confine themselves to such palliatives as organizing and working within the system?

Little of this sophisticated, massive, co-option network existed in democratic Athens. Athenian democrats were fully aware of the existence of an oligarchic fifth column in their midst, but there is little evidence of a single democratic attempt to co-opt them. Apart from some sensitive foreign relations matters, everything was out in the open, so real democracy couldn’t, in principle, engage in secret co-option conspiracies against the oligarchic fifth column or anyone else.

On the other hand, Greek oligarchies at times did employ some features of the co-option strategy.

The Tenth Pillar of American “Democracy:” Compartmentalization

The modern world deliberately creates specialists, men and women who might be competent in one or two fields, but who are in the dark about all the others. Such narrow specialists cannot possibly understand the world in all its complexity and hence can be readily manipulated. Herman Daly put it this way:

Probably the major disservice that experts provide in confronting the problems of mankind is dividing the problem in little pieces and parceling them out to specialists. . . . Although it is undeniable that each specialty has much of importance to say, it is very doubtful that the sum of all these specialized utterances will ever add to a coherent solution, because the problems are not independent and sequential but highly interrelated and simultaneous. Someone has to look at the whole, even if it means foregoing full knowledge of all of the parts.⁵⁰³

Indeed, specialists all too often resemble the six blind men who studied just one part of the elephant, instead of studying the elephant as a whole. The results of narrow specialization are all too obvious:

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!⁵⁰⁴

The excuse given by educators and their patrons for this state of affairs is that humanity's store of knowledge nowadays is too vast to be acquired by a single person. But one does not need to get a Ph.D. in ecology or history to get the basic outline of both subjects and many others. There are numerous historical examples showing that it is within the reach of any curious person, in the contemporary world, to strive for the unity of knowledge ideal. The problem, rather, is systemic. Holistic thinking poses a grave risk to the oligarchs, and therefore it is suppressed.

Greek intellectuals would probably be shocked by a system that discourages holistic thinking:

The modern mind divides, specializes, thinks in categories: The Greek instinct was the opposite, to take the widest view, to see things as an organic whole. . . . It was aretê [excellence] that the [Olympic] games were designed to test – the aretê of the whole man, not a merely specialized skill. . . . The great event was the pentathlon, if you won this, you were a man. Needless to say, the Marathon race was never heard of until modern times: The Greeks would have regarded it as a monstrosity. As for the skill shown by modern champions in games like golf or billiards, the Greeks would certainly have admired it intensely, and thought it an admirable thing — in a slave, supposing that one had no better use for a slave than to train him in this way. Impossible, he would say, to acquire skill like this and at the same time to live the proper life of a man and a citizen. It is this feeling that underlies Aristotle's remark that a gentleman should be able to play the flute — but not too well.⁵⁰⁵

In wartime, a citizen of Athens often served as a sailor, rower, cavalryman, or heavy or light infantryman. He was often an able craftsman, a farmer, or both. He gained political experience by sitting in the Assembly and Council and playing a role in navigating the ship of state in times of war and peace. He at times served as a juror/judge in the law courts, as a lawmaker, and had to exercise sophisticated discernment in matters of life and death. He often served in one or another official position, thereby learning first-hand about the machinery of state. He judged sophisticated dramatic productions, and it is thanks to his holistic outlook that we now have in our hands some of the plays of such of his fellow citizens as Aeschylus and Euripides. He might have participated or officiated in the athletic and religious life of his country. If he had enough leisure and an interest in intellectual pursuits, he often delved into all fields of knowledge, rarely confining himself to just one scholarly discipline.

In short, an Athenian citizen was far more versatile and could not be as easily deceived and indoctrinated as his modern counterparts — and was thus in a better position to originate and judge policies.

The Eleventh Pillar of American “Democracy:” Strategic Brilliance

The astounding success of the interlinked U.S./U.K. oligarchies in achieving their goals, their tenacity, their cunning assassination program, their patience and habit of long-term planning, their utter ruthlessness, provide perhaps the sturdiest pillar in the Oligarchs' arsenal. Their trophies include the 1694 creation of the private Bank of England, the deceptively democratic American Constitution, the guileful 1913 creation of the private Federal Reserve, the daring false flags that

led to the Mexican-American, Spanish-American, German-American (1917-18), or two Iraqi-American wars, and the probable sinking of the Maine.⁵⁰⁶ Other remarkable exploits include nearly-effortless regime change operations in Ukraine (2014), Pakistan (2022), Peru (2022), and dozens of other countries, and sponsoring such inventions as nuclear bombs and the internet. Sadly, not one of the oligarchs' opponents, not one of the movements opposing them, has ever come close to being their strategic equal.⁵⁰⁷ Over the decades and centuries, they have of course suffered setbacks, but overall they have been winning.

For the average Athenian, the primary objectives were physical survival of his country, himself, and his family, the growth in power and prestige of his country, the defense of democracy, personal enrichment, and an improved quality of life. As we have seen, Athenians were successful for two centuries, but, in part thanks to the openness of their society and its democratic nature, they fell short of the long-term strategic brilliance of Macedonia's then and America's real rulers now.

Athenian democracy for the most part acted rationally, at times even brilliantly. It did occasionally commit costly blunders which tended to weaken it and which eventually led to its demise, e.g., not eliminating the oligarchic fifth column from their midst (by minimizing wealth disparities), not enlarging the citizenship franchise to loyal foreigners and allies, placing the honest but dull Nicias in charge of the critical Syracusean expedition, not forestalling the treachery that probably caused the Debacle at Aegospotami. Worst of all, despite repeated admonitions from Demosthenes and others, they had done too little too late to neutralize the Macedonian threat and its tragic aftermath (to Greece and humanity as a whole).

The Twelfth Pillar of American "Democracy:" Unchecked Power

The art of nation-making, as of law-making and of institution-building generally, is the art of containing power and ambition so that they act for, rather than against, the common good. The French philosopher Montesquieu put it baldly: "It's a happy situation if, when we want to act badly, we find it's not in our interest to do so." — Ivo Mosley⁵⁰⁸

The commonsense observation above is ignored in the contemporary world. Most political, economic, and even reform organizations on Earth are conducive to concentrating too much power in too few hands and to the rise to power of conscience-less, irresponsible, self-seeking, villains. The willingness of reprobates to do anything to gain riches and power gives them a tremendous competitive advantage. "We must admit to ourselves," says Michael Krieger, "that there are truly evil geniuses out there, and in most cases these characters have taken control of the power structure."⁵⁰⁹

In the USA, scoundrels enjoy a tremendous advantage in every sphere. Moreover, betrayal of the public interest typically leads to promotion and riches. No American politician has ever been disgraced for dragging the country into wars that only served oligarchic interests, no one was ever punished for knowingly giving American soldiers the dysfunctional M-16 rifle,⁵¹⁰ no one was ever fined for depleting the Social Security Fund. No one has ever been indicted for lying about inflation

in order to rob senior citizens of half their social security payments and inflate GNP statistics, no one but patsies were ever indicted for murdering public-minded influential people,⁵¹¹ no corporate head served jail time for knowingly marketing poisons, no one . . . Rather, betrayal of the public interest in America is rewarded and praised.

Moreover, power itself has a corrupting influence on ordinary people.⁵¹² The only way to address both problems is to curtail the power of any single individual—a feat that can only be accomplished in direct democracies.

We noted in Chapter 3 that tribal people everywhere and throughout most of humanity's existence, were almost always remarkably free, partly because they placed strict limits on anyone's power and because they had in place various mechanisms of restraining freeloaders and egomaniacs.

Likewise, the Athenian system was designed to limit the power of any single individual and to counter the rise of power-hungry men. Crooks like Alcibiades⁵¹³ at times secured influential positions, undermined democracy, and betrayed their country to its enemies. However, in Athens — unlike the United States — such men were not as powerful, and they were always balancing on a razor's edge:

The Athenians . . . were deeply suspicious of one another . . . They went on the basis that, given the chance, every one of them would have his hand in the till and make a profit out of political activity, and they took every possible means to limit the chances. . . . That is the background for the innumerable kinds of public prosecution and the astonishing frequency of their use. Athenian leaders were called to account more than any other such group in history: To be a rhetor [frequent speaker in the Assembly] or a general was to choose a perilous career that could easily lead to execution — if you failed to flee into exile in time. . . . [On the other hand,] political activity was regarded as a positive value, and ambition and competitiveness were fostered by all the marks of honour that the Athenians bestowed on such as merited their trust.⁵¹⁴

The Thirteenth Pillar of American “Democracy:” Banking System

We shall have more to say about the banking scam later on in this chapter. Here we note that some of the most powerful members of the oligarchy, the ones most responsible for the decay of the USA and the entire world, are top bankers. Although they operate in the shadows, their power is indisputable. Franklin Delano Roosevelt remarked that “a financial element in the large centers has owned the government ever since the days of Andrew Jackson.”⁵¹⁵ Andrew Jackson felt that “if the American people only understood the rank injustice of our money and banking system, there would be a revolution before morning.”⁵¹⁶

Why are individual at the top of the banking pyramid so powerful? What led Lord Acton to assert that “the issue which has swept down the centuries and which will have to be fought sooner or later is the people versus the banks”?

To begin with, bankers can legally create money; when they give you a loan, they create that money. Thus, one difference between you and a bank is that a bank can legally create money and you can't. The central banks of most countries, in particular, create money and lend it to the nation, charging interest. The nation could of course use its own silver or gold or create its own fiat money. But in a representative "democracy," it's child play to bribe or blackmail a few powerful people and thus deprive the people of the right to control money creation. At bottom, this arrangement constitutes a needless transfer of a sizable fraction of a nation's wealth from the people to private bankers. The government must, by definition, go into debt. To pay this continuously accumulating debt, the people are over-taxed. It is no coincidence that the federal income tax was created shortly after the 1913 creation of the Federal Reserve. Michael Hudson explains:

Your ongoing struggle to make ends meet, is not a reflection of your lack of talent or drive but the only possible outcome of having a blood-sucking financial leech affixed to your body, your retirement plan, and your economic future.⁵¹⁷

Also, ownership of so much money gives top bankers unparalleled powers. Private bankers have used that money to bribe, brainwash, or browbeat most economists — and all other professions that impinge upon their privileges. Those who refuse bribes and are capable of compassion and independent thought, do not get their degrees; if they graduate, they can't find a job or a publishing outlet; if they do find a job, they are ignored, marginalized, fired, or killed. Bankers likewise have used this money to control politicians, judges, bureaucrats, newspapers, TV stations, internet servers, social media, regulatory agencies — almost everyone and everything.

Finally, the fractional reserve scam — which was permitted even when gold and silver were money — allows bankers to lend a lot more money than they have. It can be shown mathematically that, thanks to this particular sleight of hand, in the long run bankers could in principle own everything and everyone.



Laura Gray's 1945 depiction of American "democracy."

Some Athenian bankers, like other rich Athenians, might have not been averse to corrupting the democracy, parasitizing their fellows, and gaining more power and riches for themselves. But overall, direct democracy is designed precisely to forestall such eventualities, because in real democracy the powers of any given person, or any given cabal, are limited. All final decisions are made by a large random sample of the people as a whole — a people informed enough to consult a variety of experts on any given issue and choose between the alternatives put forward. Thus, sortition, term limits, strict accountability of officials, thousands of decision-makers, political literacy, and experience of the average citizen, saw to it that bankers and the super-rich never gained a fraction of the power and wealth of their American counterparts.

Almost none of the associated costs of the Federal Reserve and its affiliated private banks were paid by the Athenians. In Athens, the people did not pay the hidden tax of inflation, unemployment was low or non-existent, and income inequalities, though vast, never reached the scandalous levels now existing in the USA. No one forced the people to hand their gold to the government, reimbursing them for only 59% of its value. The gold and silver in the public treasury were safe, routinely audited, and the rare embezzlers more often than not were caught and severely punished. Instead of stuffing their pockets with public money and avoiding taxes, the rich financed most of the expenses of the state. There were no boom and bust cycles, no engineered great depressions, no market manipulations. Genuine price discovery — the kind lauded by Adam Smith — was the reality. No war on drugs, no civil forfeitures, no police state, no stupendously effective war on truth. Bankers and drug manufacturers never came close to corrupting and controlling health care and access to drugs.

The Fourteenth Pillar of American “Democracy:” Environmentally-Caused Infirmities

Here are just ten illustrations of callous attacks on our bodies and, especially, our brains.

1. In his 1998 *Dark Alliance* Gary Webb⁵¹⁸ proved that the CIA imported drugs to America's inner cities, thereby converting these cities into gang-infested war zones, creating debilitating drug dependencies, sending millions to America's Gulag, and reducing the capacity of inner-city residents to fight for a more just world.
2. Under American occupation (2001-2021), Afghanistan had been exporting most of the heroin consumed in the world:

In 2001 [just before the American occupation of Afghanistan], 1,779 Americans were killed as a result of heroin overdose. By 2016, the number of Americans killed as a result of heroin addiction shot up to 15,446. . . . Those lives would have been saved had the US and its NATO allies NOT invaded and occupied Afghanistan in 2001. The first thing they did was to undermine the drug eradication program, restore the opium economy and the drug trade. . . . the Pentagon not to mention the CIA which launched the opium economy in Afghanistan in the late 1970s are intent upon protecting this multibillion dollar industry.⁵¹⁹

3. Fluoride is added to about 70% of U.S. public drinking water supplies, even though a sensational Harvard study⁵²⁰ confirms numerous earlier claims⁵²¹ that children in cities where fluoride is added to the water supply have a lower I.Q. than children whose water is free of fluoride.
4. The citizens of Flint, Michigan — and of many other cities — were deliberately and deviously poisoned by lead in their drinking water⁵²² — even though it has been known for centuries that lead is a potent neurotoxin.⁵²³
5. Mind-altering psychotropic drugs, painkillers, and other injurious substances are routinely prescribed to millions. “No other peaceful population, probably since the 1839 Opium Wars, has been so devastated by a drug epidemic encouraged by a government.”⁵²⁴
6. For a long time, mercury had been prevalent in dentures and vaccines.
7. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the oceans and lakes we swim in, the masks we were forced to wear for two years, often damage our health and weaken our immune system.
8. Besides the valuable biological ingredient, a typical vaccine may contain a variety of harmful, unnecessary, substances. Consequently, unvaccinated children may be “healthier overall than the vaccinated.”⁵²⁵
9. Besides poisons, Americans have been conditioned to consume excessive quantities of sugar, fats, salts, and other substances, leading to obesity, heart failure, diabetes, cancer, and other infirmities.
10. At times, the oligarchs' takeover of disobedient nations not only involves millions of tragedies, but also the fiendish poisoning for centuries to come by such substances as Agent Orange. Here is one typical illustration:

During 2004, the US military carried out two massive military sieges of the city of Fallujah, using large quantities of DU [depleted uranium] ammunition, as well as white phosphorous. . . . Official Iraqi government statistics show that, prior to the outbreak of the First Persian Gulf War in 1991, the rate of cancer cases in Iraq was 40 out of 100,000 people . . . by 2005, it [went up to] 1,600 out of 100,000 people. . . . Contamination from depleted uranium munitions and other military-related pollution is suspected of causing a sharp rise in congenital birth defects, cancer cases, and other illnesses throughout much of Iraq. Many doctors and scientists maintain that the recent emergence of diseases that were not previously seen in Iraq, such as new illnesses in the kidney, lungs, and liver, as well as total immune system collapse, are connected to public exposure to war contaminants. Depleted uranium (DU) contamination may also be related to the substantial rise in leukemia, renal, and anemia cases, especially among children. Moreover, there has also been a dramatic jump in miscarriages and premature births among Iraqi women, particularly in areas where heavy US military operations occurred, such as Fallujah.⁵²⁶

These isolated examples are just the tip of the toxiberg. There is no question that such a massive attack on our bodies, and especially on our nervous system, weakens our capacity to understand the world around us — let alone meaningfully struggle to make it better. Moreover, the recurrence of poisoning episodes strongly suggests that the attack is deliberate, aimed at financial gains and perhaps also the physical and mental debilitation of would-be revolutionaries.

A direct comparison to Athens in this particular case is impossible. So we can only conjecture: if the Athenians had our technologies, would they poison their soil, water, air, and bodies? Would they stand idly by, helplessly clutching their hands, while the sperm count of their men steadily fell? Would they do nothing while the rates of cancer, asthma, and autism, steadily rose? Would they allow their government to deliberately put poisons in their drinking water?

We know that, despite cradle-to-grave propaganda, despite media window dressing for years of every single environmental or health disaster (e.g., Love Canal, asbestos, tobacco), the majority of Americans want laws protective of their environment, health, and brains. It is almost certain that the majority of Athenians would have wanted such laws too. The only relevant difference between the two populations is that the wishes of the majority mean almost nothing in America and meant almost everything in Athens.

On the other hand, Athenians directly suffered much more often than Americans from the depredations of war, hunger, bad hygiene, and inadequate sanitation. Hence they often died much younger than Americans, and, like Americans, many of them probably failed to reach their full creative and intellectual potential.

So perhaps the most striking difference between Athens and the United States in this regard is that the Athenians were subject to unhealthy living conditions because they had no choice and did not know any better. American oligarchs often know, and yet persist in harming their fellow citizens, the world's people — and at times even themselves.

The Fifteenth Pillar of American “Democracy:” Human Nature

Human beings act in a great variety of irrational ways, but all of them seem to be capable, if given a fair chance, of making a reasonable choice in the light of available evidence. — Aldous Huxley⁵²⁷

To sustain and augment their riches and power, oligarchs promote and exploit a vast array of human failings. We are obviously not as rational or open-minded as we could be. We seem to enjoy being brainwashed. We often comply, conform, or obey when we shouldn't. We have an infinite appetite for distractions. At times, we do not behave in a sufficiently altruistic, public-minded, or compassionate manner. Here is one example (of thousands) of cruelty and spite:

Lynchings typically evoke images of Black men and women hanging from trees, but they involved other extreme brutality, such as torture, mutilation, decapitation, and desecration. Some victims were burned alive. . . . Lynchings were often public spectacles

attended by the white community in celebration of white supremacy. Photos of lynchings were often sold as souvenir postcards.⁵²⁸

Among the most unsettling realities of lynching is the degree to which white Americans embraced it, not as an uncomfortable necessity or a way of maintaining order, but as a joyous moment of wholesome celebration. “Whole families came together, mothers and fathers, bringing even their youngest children. It was the show of the countryside – a very popular show,” read a 1930 editorial in the Raleigh News and Observer. “Men joked loudly at the sight of the bleeding body . . . girls giggled as the flies fed on the blood that dripped from the Negro’s nose.” Adding to the macabre nature of the scene, lynching victims were typically dismembered into pieces of human trophy for mob members.”⁵²⁹

As we have seen, the American informal and formal educational systems foster for the most part selfishness, materialism, obedience, conformity, and memorization—and not compassion, spirituality, curiosity, critical judgment, and thinking for oneself. That in turn adds to what is perhaps the most politically-relevant human failing: the acquisition and persistence of our beliefs.⁵³⁰ To begin with, there is human indoctrinability: our political worldview is shaped, to a large extent, by cradle to grave propaganda. This propaganda serves the interests of our rulers and provides a distorted view of history and current affairs.

Next, there is closed-mindedness. Once such beliefs are firmly implanted, we walk away from anyone or anything that challenges them.

The main hindrance for the search for truth is probably the inability to abandon a present belief and adopt a better one when it comes along.⁵³¹

And finally, there is belief perseverance: if we find ourselves in a situation when we have no choice but to confront overwhelming evidence that contradicts one of our falsely-implanted beliefs, we still tend to cling to such beliefs. An article in *American Psychologist* puts it this way:

Even when we deal with ideologically neutral conceptions of reality, when these conceptions have been recently acquired, when they came to us from unfamiliar sources, when they were assimilated for spurious reasons, when their abandonment entails little tangible risks or costs, and when they are sharply contradicted by subsequent events, we are, at least for a time, disinclined to doubt such conceptions on the verbal level and unlikely to let go of them in practice.⁵³²

On the other hand, human beings are also capable of kindness, creativity, generosity, and rational behavior. Genetics might play a role in how these countervailing traits are being played out in each one of us, and so does culture and education. A society that wants less blind obedience to authority, less conformity, less greed, or more refined literary or culinary tastes, could devise an educational and social milieu that would bring it nearer to such goals.

Apart from Athens’ astoundingly higher fraction of creative and curious individuals and a far more diverse and decentralized society and educational system, Athenians appear to share the same failings as Americans. Many Athenians enjoyed watching testimony being extracted, under torture, from innocent slaves.⁵³³ They too enjoyed the spectacle of people brutalizing each under the guise

of sporting competitions, some of which were even more callous than modern competitions. If anything, they were greedier and more superstitious than the average American, and fewer Athenians than Americans seemed to have lost sleep over the plight of women, resident foreigners, slaves, or teenagers.

In other words, neither Athenian excellence nor American corruption can be traced to human nature. Most likely, it is their radically different social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political systems that principally account for the gaps between the two societies.

The Sixteenth Pillar of American “Democracy:” Cloak and Dagger

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them. . . . It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. — Ernest Hemingway⁵³⁴

To secure more power and riches, American oligarchs often resort to smears, blackmail, bribes, incarcerations, and murders. They do not only silence or murder their influential opponents, but also target any innocent bystander (such as a future witness) who might pose a threat to their power and goals. Also, when it serves their interests, the oligarchs are perfectly willing to destroy junior members of their own cabal.

For conclusive proofs of the cloak-and-dagger claim, the reader is urged to consult Jim Garrison’s interview,⁵³⁵ Ward Churchill’s history of the Black Panther Party,⁵³⁶ and The *Encyclopedia of Domestic Assassinations*.⁵³⁷



From left to right, gunned down dissidents John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr.

Athenian oligarchs, when they were in charge of the state, or when they plotted to topple the democracy, were even more murderous than their American counterparts. For instance, Ephialtes was killed in 461 B.C. by oligarchs who were opposed to his democratic reforms. An earlier example involves Cimon (the father of the Miltiades who played a leading role in the battle of Marathon). According to Herodotus:

Cimon, the son of Stesagoras, was banished from Athens by Peisistratos [the then-ruling tyrant]. In his banishment it was his fortune to win the four-horse chariot-race at

Olympia. . . . At the next Olympiad he won the prize again with the same mares; upon which he caused Peisistratos to be proclaimed the winner, having made an agreement with him that on yielding him this honour he should be allowed to come back to his country. Afterwards, still with the same mares, he won the prize a third time; whereupon he was put to death by the sons of Peisistratos, whose father was no longer living. They set men to lie in wait for him secretly; and these men slew him near the government-house in the night-time. He was buried outside the city, beyond what is called the Valley Road; and right opposite his tomb were buried the mares which had won the three prizes.⁵³⁸

We have already recounted the reign of terror of the 30 despots of Athens, who, with Spartan support, ruled Athens for eight months, killing off in that short period some 5% of their fellow citizens and robbing, disarming, and terrorizing the rest.

The democracy, on the other hand, was entirely different. Sadly, democrats resorted to capital punishment far more often than the USA does today, but almost always, even during wars for survival, did so legally, following a trial by one's peers.

Many scholars cite the 399 B.C. case of Socrates as an exception. But Socrates's execution was perfectly legal, provoked by Socrates himself, and not entirely unwarranted (see Chapter 4).

Another frequently cited case is the 406 B.C. victorious Battle of Arginusae, in which the 10 winning commanders failed to rescue hundreds of sailors from disabled or sunken ships: "So many of the brave partners in the victory had been left to drown miserably on the sinking hulls, without any effort, on the part of their generals and comrades near, to rescue them."⁵³⁹ Two of the commanding generals in that battle accused the others of cruelty and needlessly letting these sailors die. "The assembly had before them the grave and deplorable fact, that several hundreds of brave seamen had been suffered to drown on the wrecks, without the least effort to rescue them."⁵⁴⁰ The Assembly trial which followed resulted in the execution of six of the ten generals. Even though the generals deserved "censure and disgrace,"⁵⁴¹ the trial was "a gross violation of legal form not less than of substantial justice"⁵⁴² — "one of the most gloomy and disgraceful proceedings in all Athenian history."⁵⁴³ Shortly after, most Athenians regretted their conduct.

Regardless of one's opinion of either of these two trials and a few others, the available record suggests they were exceptions. This record thus shows that Athenian democracy — unlike American "democracy" — did not routinely assassinate dissidents. Apart from Arginusae, "even under the strongest political provocation, and towards the most hated traitors . . . the Athenians never . . . deprived an accused party of the customary judicial securities."⁵⁴⁴

Moreover, in Athens everything was above board; the majority of the hundreds or thousands of jurors present in any trial found the defendants innocent or guilty. By contrast, in America assassinations originate in a small cabal, and are illegally and routinely carried out against influential people who pose a threat to the status quo.

Political Franchise

So far, we have restricted our comparison to features of the American system that undergird the Acquiescence Paradox: the acceptance by the majority of a system that runs counter to their interests and convictions. The following sections compare additional features of the American and Athenian systems.

Gradually in the USA, in sharp contrast to Athens, the formal franchise has been extended to most of the adult population (with one notable exception: millions of foreigners who reside in the country illegally). The degrading institution of slavery is long gone, and women, racial or religious minorities, and foreign-born citizens often enjoy equality before the law, and close to equal career opportunities.

Deplorably, in Athens, the majority of the adult population was discriminated against and had little say in running the nation. These groups, however, did take part in the religious, economic, and cultural life of Athens. Some slaves owned their own businesses, women played an important role in the religious life of the community, and some non-citizens were extremely rich.⁵⁴⁵

Moreover, as we have seen, the USA is a full-fledged oligarchy masquerading as a democracy and where the vast majority is powerless. Paradoxically then, the reality is that in the USA an infinitely smaller proportion of the adult population possesses meaningful political and economic power than in Athens.

Cultural Achievements

The USA has been one of most innovative countries in the modern world and a leader in most fields, e.g., literature, popular music, computer science, molecular genetics. Also, for most of its history the USA served as a magnet for foreign scientists, intellectuals, and artists. These newcomers and their descendants often became fully assimilated citizens in their new homeland.

Democratic Athens was the innovation and cultural leader of the Greek world. Although it too served as a magnet for foreign intellectuals, artists, and craftsmen, it rarely granted them citizenship.

The greatest Greek accomplishment — the leap from a tradition-bound view of the world toward rational inquiry — is unique in world history. The most admirable cultural achievements of the USA and the entire world today rest on the shoulders of that gigantic leap forward.

Also, as we have seen, never in the recorded history of the world have so few people achieved so much in such a comparatively short period of time as had the ancient Greeks, and especially the Athenians.

Military Achievements and Innovations

By the 1990s, the United States was, by far, the foremost global military power and had practically a free hand in world affairs. By 2023, there were signs of imperial decline and, perhaps, a gradual movement towards a multi-polar world.

The United States has a record of many more technical military innovations and conquests than Athens. Behind the facade of independence, many countries in the world today are ruled by a de facto alliance between American and British oligarchs on one hand, and their hand-picked local opportunistic oligarchs, theocrats, or fascists on the other. The remarkable imperial and subversive record of the United States outshines Athens' and, in fact closely resembles the records of Sparta and of America's model — the Roman Empire.

Democratic Athens introduced many innovations in the military fields, and won many victories, sometimes against all odds. The two versions of the Athenian empire were however short-lived, and Athens never became the single dominant power in Greece — let alone the entire world.

Governmental Structures and Operations

The USA has always been an oligarchy in democratic clothing. To lull the people into believing that they are free, that voting makes a difference, there is allegedly a system of checks and balances, with elections, three branches of government, and a decentralized power structure.

But that old chestnut bears little resemblance to reality. As we have seen, the oligarchic Constitution itself, the legality of sunshine bribery in the United States, the oligarchs' near-monopoly of public discourse and information sources, their control of the intelligence services and their power to surveil, smear, incarcerate, and kill influential opponents, the trivialized election process, the politicians' proclivity to break election promises and to ignore the preferences of the majority, the lack of meaningful alternatives during elections, all suggest that the nominal decision makers in America are mere puppets of the oligarchy. Moreover, the Federal Reserve — perhaps the most powerful entity in the USA — is a private institution that is nominally made up of mere millionaires. But in fact these millionaires are the puppets of the real owners of that institution — a few banking families.

President Theodore Roosevelt observed that politicians are “the tools of corrupt interests which use them impartially to serve their selfish purposes. Behind the ostensible government sits enthroned an invisible government, owing no allegiance and acknowledging no responsibility to the people.”⁵⁴⁶ President Wilson wrote that the USA was “no longer a Government by free opinion, no longer a Government by conviction and the vote of the majority, but a Government by the opinion and duress of a small group of dominant men.”⁵⁴⁷

A century later, George Carlin observed:

The politicians are put there to give you the idea that you have freedom of choice. You don't. You have no choice. You have owners. They own you. They own everything. They own all the important land. They own and control the corporations. They've long since bought and paid for the senate, the congress, the state houses, the city halls, they got the judges in their back pockets and they own all the big media companies so they control just about all of the news and information you get to hear.⁵⁴⁸

And, in a semi-fictionalized account of the execution of President Kennedy, Taylor Caldwell wrote:

[The men of the] Invisible Government would continue to grow in strength, until they had the whole silly world, the whole credulous world, the whole ingenuous world, in their hands. Anyone who would challenge them, attempt to expose them, show them unconcealed and naked, would be murdered, laughed at, called mad, ignored, or denounced as a fantasy-weaver.⁵⁴⁹

Here is just one example out of hundreds, taking place at the time of this writing. During the 2020 Coronavirus prolonged house arrest of an entire nation, tens of millions of Americans lost their jobs, and many small businesses had to permanently close their doors. As in so many other earlier episodes, America's rulers adhered to the fraudulent trickle-down "theory" (which brazenly "argues" that the best way helping a poor man is neither giving him fish nor teaching him how to fish, but to, directly or under the table, give public money to his rich neighbor). An article in the mainstream press explains:

As the COVID-19 pandemic overtook the U.S., it brought with it an unprecedented financial crisis and unemployment rates at their highest levels since the Great Depression . . . At least 45 million people have filed for unemployment since the pandemic began. Yet between March 18 and June 17 [2020], as the pandemic raged, the combined wealth of the 614 U.S. billionaires increased by \$584 billion.⁵⁵⁰

When Athenians were under one or a few rulers, government for them was, as it is for most of us now, something separate from themselves, something that they had no control over. But in Athenian democracy, the people were the government: "The separation of the people and its government . . . has no place in the political culture of the ancient Athenians."⁵⁵¹

Citizens ruled in accordance with the laws they themselves passed, and in accordance with their convictions and perceived interests. They sometimes erred, and sometimes fell under the spell of corrupt assembly or court orators, but overall it was a system that benefited the vast majority, not just a few unscrupulous and greedy oligarchs:

Today, governments are only a screen of institutions masking real power in the hands of an elite. . . . But for Athens it is anachronistic . . . Policy was made by debate in the Assembly and not by . . . back-room negotiations.⁵⁵²

In classical Athens, the "power of the people" was not a cover for elite rule.⁵⁵³

In democratic Athens, the entire political structure was aimed at people empowerment. Every government branch, every law, subserved that one goal. The people's courts, the legislative

courts, the assembly, and the council, were, first and foremost, guardians and implementers of people rule.

Likewise, laws and political traditions of the nation were designed to protect and enhance freedom and democracy. Citizens were paid to take part in the political and cultural life of their country so that politics and culture were not the exclusive playground of oligarchs. Sortition and term limits protected the democracy by maximizing fairness and by minimizing bribery, rackets, and the ascent of reprobates to positions of power. Decentralization and strict accountability of citizens and officials served the same goals. Welfare payments and a remarkable degree of individual liberties strengthened the democracy and citizens' allegiance to it. State ownership of resources, self-sufficiency, and tolerable wealth inequalities, likewise strengthened the system and made every citizen feel that Athens was a country of, by, and for, its male citizens.

Term Limits

In the United States, as we have seen, there are few or no term limits for politicians, judges, and bureaucrats. In the rare cases where there are term limits, they are long, e.g., an American president can “only” serve eight years. Supreme court judges, cops, tax collectors, senators, congress people, prosecutors, forest rangers, and water quality inspectors can, in principle, serve for life. This opens the doors wide for Michels' “iron law of oligarchy” (see Chapters 4, 9), corruption, bribes, abuses of power, co-option, economic gaps, and a psychological distance from the people the official is supposedly serving.

With few unavoidable exceptions, as we have seen, the opposite was true in Athens. Most officials could only serve one year in any particular capacity. For instance, every fourth Athenian citizen could say: “I have been for 24 hours President of Athens.” But no Athenian citizen could ever boast of having been so for more than 24 hours.⁵⁵⁴

The most problematic exception involved military leaders and treasurers. These were elected for one year, but, based on performance, could be re-elected again and again. However, at any given moment they could be speedily removed from office.

Stability

Although Athens and the USA enjoyed internal stability, the destabilizing threats that did exist arose from different directions.

Following the Civil War, the United States no longer faced overt external threats to its stability. The only valid external threat was foreign subversion (especially from America's former mistress, the U.K.).

Internally, the only threats posed to the American oligarchy were from below, from people and movements that wanted to move the country in a more democratic, free, peaceful, and just

direction. These efforts started early, with Benjamin Franklin's Pennsylvania State Constitution and the Shays' and Whiskey Rebellions. They later included the Progressive Era, Huey Long's popular "Share the Wealth" program, radical segments of the environmental and labor movements, Martin Luther King's planned Poor People's March on Washington, the Kennedy presidency, the Occupy Movement, and many others. Owing to the numerous pillars discussed earlier in this chapter, these efforts failed, and, if anything, the country has remained stable and has gradually become less free and less equal.

Lamentably, almost all reformers in the United States, past and present, somehow expect that working within the system can usher in meaningful change. Despite centuries of failures, it never seems to occur to them to adopt new strategies nor to study successful revolutionary movements of the past.

In Athens too, external threats to democracy and national independence came from foreign powers, especially Persia, Sparta, and Macedonia. By contrast, in Athens, internal threats to stability came from the oligarchic fifth column.

Initiation of Policy

In the USA, policies are set by small groups of individuals who are supposed to represent the American people. The reality is that these groups represent their own interests and the interests of their oligarchic masters. By contrast:

Unlike today's democracies, political actions in Athens were initiated by private individuals, not by some kind of authority. It was an individual, in principle any citizen, who initiated law changes in the legislative commissions, decrees of the Assembly, and prosecutions in the law courts.⁵⁵⁵

Accountability

We have already noted the lack of accountability in the USA. Thus, politicians in good standing with the oligarchs are not held accountable for taking bribes or breaking promises. The CIA, FBI and their loyal media are never held accountable for unjustly smearing, incarcerating, or murdering influential people who pose a threat to the web of corruption and deceit. Higher-level judges often serve for life and routinely defy the wishes of the majority. American police and prison guards often brutalize, frame, steal from ("civil forfeiture"), rape,⁵⁵⁶ or even kill, innocent people — and get away with it. Generals typically serve their own interests or the interests of their particular service (e.g, army or navy), and not the interests of the country as a whole — and get away with it.⁵⁵⁷ Corporations grossly overcharge the American military — and there is nothing a taxpayer can do about it.

In short, the average citizen is powerless to stop abuses of power by either the Invisible Government or its bought-and-paid-for functionaries. If the tax collectors say you owe them and you say you don't, you have little recourse but pay — unless you are a tycoon (in which case the

tax people are less inclined to harass you in the first place.⁵⁵⁸) If you committed no crime but yet get imprisoned, injured, or killed by a member of the police force, there is little that either you or your relatives can do. Cops steal your money? Politicians break their promises? The FBI kills your pacifist spouse for speaking out about the status quo? Your father, a state governor who tried to serve the people, was framed by the government and serves prison time? A corporation is poisoning the water in your well? There is little you can do.

On rare occasions, someone fights City Hall and wins, but such victories are rare enough to be celebrated (and depicted out of context) by Hollywood. Acquiescence in almost all cases seems to be the only realistic response. Some idealists cannot reconcile themselves to sunshine venality and criminality, and try to do something about it — hence the well-known phenomenon of the whistleblower. But since the oligarchs own most politicians, judges, law enforcers, information sources, and assassination squads, these idealists' self-sacrifice accomplishes little, nothing, or less than nothing.

Here are a few random illustrations of accountability, American-style.

I. In the United States, between 1989 and 2020, 2663 people are known to have been convicted of crimes they did not commit (the actual number of convicted innocents could be orders of magnitude higher). In more than half of these cases, the original wrong convictions were traceable to misconduct by police, prosecutors, and other government officials who produced unreliable, misleading, or false evidence of guilt; or who concealed, distorted or undercut evidence of innocence. In particular, “prosecutors committed misconduct in 30% of the cases and were responsible for concealing exculpatory evidence and misconduct at trial, and a substantial amount of witness tampering.”⁵⁵⁹ We are talking here about thousands of destroyed lives: the average time a murder exoneree spent in insufferable prison conditions from conviction to release was almost 14 years. And we are talking about heartless, criminal, and depraved behavior of prosecutors of the type that is so vividly described in A. J. Cronin's *Beyond this Place*. And yet, “prosecutors are hardly ever disciplined for misconduct that contributes to false convictions.”

It gets even worse: what might happen to a district attorney who opposed much needed criminal justice reforms and who, according to the mainstream media, “fought tooth and nail to uphold wrongful convictions that had been secured through official misconduct that included evidence tampering, false testimony and the suppression of crucial information by prosecutors”? The answer in at least one case is simple enough: elevation to the position of Vice-President of the United States (with only the heartbeat of a semi-functional 79-year-old standing between her and the presidency.⁵⁶⁰)

II. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction has concluded that at least \$19 billion — 30% of the total vast sums allocated for Afghanistan reconstruction — were lost to “waste, fraud and abuse.” The politicians politely listened — and then, as usual, proceeded to do nothing.⁵⁶¹

III. High-powered bankers are almost as unaccountable now as Darius, Dionysus, or Caligula were in the ancient world. Moreover, unlike these ancient usurpers who always feared assassination attempts (the famous sword of Damocles hanging over their heads), bankers typically live to old age. There is, for instance, a 2016 U.S. Congressional report, entitled “Too Big to Jail: Inside the Obama Justice Department’s Decision Not to Hold Wall Street Accountable.”⁵⁶² This report proved, for the umpteenth time, that top bankers are above the law.

More flagrant instances of non-accountability were observed in Greek oligarchies but nothing like the above ever took place in democratic Athens. In Athens there was tyranny too — of citizens over officials. There, office holders were truly public servants. They were mostly chosen by lot, served short terms, and were reviewed before, during, and after taking office. At any moment, if their conduct offended a citizen or a foreigner, that person could drag them to court, with potentially severe consequences.

The Athenians provided for both public and private prosecution of magistrates . . . [so officials had] to respect the laws when dealing with citizens. . . . Any citizen could at any time impeach a magistrate . . . Any citizen could propose a vote of no confidence against any one soever of the 700 or so magistrates, whether elected or selected by lot. . . . If the show of hands went against him . . . the magistrate was instantly suspended.⁵⁶³

Rule of Law

American laws or practices are often a travesty of justice and fair play. As this chapter shows, in the USA it is legal to defy the wishes of the majority, buy politicians, break election promises, start wars on false pretenses, torture dissidents, criminals, and alleged criminals, conduct intrusive surveillance of law-abiding citizens, intimidate and physically harm peaceful protesters, violently break into houses of people who should be presumed innocent until proven guilty, steal money from people who have committed no crime, or exempt the rich from paying their fair share of taxes.

Many Americans likewise are incarcerated for a long time before their trial begins. In some undisputed cases, a president ordered the “extrajudicial” killing of a citizen. In thousands of other cases, the murders are carried out undercover. Innocent defendants often plead guilty knowing that they would receive a spine-chilling sentence if they go to trial and lose. And no one, for that matter, could ever claim that American laws are clear and comprehensible.

As we have seen, when it came to its male citizens, Athens almost always conformed to the practice

that law must consist of general principles equally applied, that laws should not be enacted against individuals, that no citizen should be punished without a proper trial, tried twice for the same offense, or prosecuted except according to a statute, and that statutes should be clear, comprehensible, and not contradict other provisions.⁵⁶⁴

At times, enforcement was lax, e.g., influential speakers accepting bribes, the illegal group trial of admirals who failed to rescue hundreds of sailors, or giving an award for bravery in battle to a rich man (Alcibiades) and not to the poor man who actually deserved it (Socrates; see Plato's Symposium). But this handful of often-cited exceptions actually proves the rule: in Athens, the rule of law frequently prevailed.

Equality Before the Law

In the USA, there is one law for government functionaries, policemen, and billionaires, and another law for the majority. Reformers are particularly vulnerable, and the law is often used as a weapon against them. In many such cases, the police and intelligence agencies break the laws with impunity. For instance, the government planned to poison Julian Assange for disclosing inconvenient truths and sent a blackmail letter to Martin Luther King, Jr. The government also planted spies in Fred Hampton's and Martin Luther King's inner circles and later assassinated these two fighters for justice.⁵⁶⁵

In the USA, bankers routinely break the law and only receive a slap on the wrist — paying back on rare occasions some of the profits they had made by breaking the law, or paying back a minuscule fraction of the trillions of hand-outs they received from their political puppets.

Here is a typical example. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2012, the Rockefeller family's bank, JPMorgan Chase, continued "to get loads of free government money — probably \$14 billion per year" (the actual sum is much higher of course). "The money helps the bank pay big salaries and bonuses. More important, it distorts markets, fueling crises such as the recent subprime-lending disaster and the sovereign-debt debacle that is now threatening to destroy the euro and sink the global economy."⁵⁶⁶ And of course, the same bank might receive a lot more in the occasional bailout money — a net transfer of money from the majority to the already obscenely-rich 0.001%. Meanwhile, says the government, "for over eight years, traders on JP Morgan's precious metals and U.S. Treasuries desks engaged in separate schemes to defraud other market participants that involved thousands of instances of unlawful trading." And yet the "punishment" for that particular, proven crime, is that these traders agreed to pay a minuscule fraction of the welfare handouts (bail-outs) the American people gave them every year — or of the profits they made by breaking the law.

In Athens, a rich citizen enjoyed certain advantages over his poor fellows. For instance, when accused of a crime, a rich man could hire the best ghost writer that money could buy. He could also afford to take the risky step of paying witnesses to lie on his behalf at a trial. Overall, however, citizens enjoyed equal rights and were treated equally in their courts of law. In particular, the historical record is crammed with instances of the crimes and punishments of Athenian tycoons.

Legislation

In the USA, on the Federal and state levels, the key legal framework was established centuries ago. That framework is cleverly designed to (i) be an oligarchy in democratic clothing, (ii) concentrate wealth and power in a few hands, (iii) resist change, and (iv) override the popular will.

On the federal level, a myriad of laws are passed by Congress. Congress is supposed to represent the people and hence laws are supposed to promote the public interest. However, this is rarely the case, since the oligarchs control Congress and most information sources. The reality is that laws are written by bankers and fellow oligarchs and then rubber-stamped by Congress (or state legislatures). In the rare cases where federal legislation serves the national interest — as opposed to the interests of oligarchs — it is often vetoed by the president, governors, or judges.

Only extreme, sustained, public outrage can, on rare occasions, lead to public-minded laws, e.g., laws that were passed on the state level during the Progressive Era, the Glass-Steagall Act of the Great Depression, or the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Given the built-in corruption of the system, though, such measures are quickly co-opted or overthrown and America returns to the scandalous status quo ante — or worse.

Athenian legislators were recruited from a panel of 6,000 qualified people who presented themselves at dawn. Their number varied according to the importance of the proposed legislation — at least 501, but at times 1,001, 1,501 or even more. The legislative panel heard the opinions of experts who were for and against the law, and then passed its verdict. Unlike the USA, both champions and detractors of the new law were given equal time and equal access to the lawmakers. No oligarchic bankers, judges, presidents, or governors breathed down the lawmakers' neck, so they were freer to follow the dictates of their hearts and brains. Sortition and term limits made bribery nearly impossible. As a result, unlike their American counterparts, Athenian laws were clear, accessible, and public-minded.

Unlike the fossilized federal and state constitutions of the USA, all Athenian laws underwent frequent revisions. Athenian legislators could learn from the oversights of their predecessors and introduce meaningful changes. They could also readily adjust to new circumstances. As usual, the end result was that in Athens — more so than in any country in the modern world — laws served the commonweal.

Citizens' Attitudes Towards their Political System

Overall, at the time of this writing Americans display lukewarm attitudes towards their "democracy:"

- "Less than half of U.S. citizens are happy with their democracy."⁵⁶⁷

- “A 62% majority says that significant changes are needed in the fundamental design and structure of American government.”⁵⁶⁸
- While 85% of Americans believe that elected officials should face serious consequences for misconduct, 73% believe that in the real world, they don’t.
- 73% believe that campaign contributions influence political decisions.
- 69% say that the government is not open and transparent.
- Only 1 in 5 believe democracy is working very well.
- Only 1 in 3 have a favorable opinion of the federal government.⁵⁶⁹
- Less than 1 in 5 “expressed trust in government in Washington to do what’s right.”
- Three out of four Americans believe that elected officials put their own interests first and don’t “care what people like me think.”⁵⁷⁰

We have no polls of Athenian democracy, so no direct comparisons to the USA are possible. However, as shown in Chapter 4, indirect evidence suggests that, with the exception of the oligarchic fifth column — a wealthy but small minority — most citizens adored their political system. For example, surviving speeches that were presented before the assembly and law courts, give the overall impression that the average Athenian took great pride in the political institutions of his country. Indeed, for the Athenians, democracy was a goddess.⁵⁷¹

Freedom to Live as One Chooses

Pity the nation oh, pity the people who allow their rights to erode and their freedoms to be washed away. – Lawrence Ferlinghetti⁵⁷²

The American government “can now monitor any phone conversation, email message, website visit, social network interaction, text message, or online book purchase in the country. Privacy has been destroyed in the United States.”⁵⁷³

In *The Limits of the Criminal Sanction*, H. J. Packer documents the futility of criminalizing drugs, gambling, gun ownership, abortions, or prostitution. In an ideal world, such habits as heroin addiction would not exist. In practice, however, criminal sanctions against them accomplish less than nothing. That is the key lesson of the ill-conceived prohibition of alcohol in the USA, and of the more recent well-conceived partial legalization of drugs in Portugal and of cannabis in some American states.

A former drug addict reflects:

Drug addiction is an illness. Criminalizing people that are ill is cruel, yes, but also insidious. It’s also bloody futile: no self-respecting drug addict is remotely dissuaded

from pursuing their habit by the legal status of the drug that they are taking. All criminalization achieves is unsafe, unregulated drug use, the demonization of users, and the creation of an international criminal economy. You know this, I know this, and more worryingly the people who maintain this system know it, so why is it being maintained? Who benefits?⁵⁷⁴

And yet, in 2016 USA, 60% of all inmates in federal prison had been kidnapped and caged by “their” government for nonviolent crimes, mostly drugs.⁵⁷⁵

Moreover, the very idea that America’s rulers are looking after the well-being of the majority is laughable. A former high-level Nixon aide explained the origins of the “war” on drugs:

You want to know what this was really all about? The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: The antiwar left and black people. . . . We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.⁵⁷⁶

According to Gary Webb, the CIA imported illegal drugs to finance its efforts to overthrow the democratic government of Nicaragua and to cause a crack cocaine epidemic in American cities. (The Dark Alliance series describing this, and Webb himself, were viciously attacked by the mainstream media, leading Webb to lose his job, his house, his marriage and, by 2004, at age 49, his life.⁵⁷⁷)

Meanwhile, while the CIA is importing life-destroying drugs, the FBI is conducting a vicious war on a far more benign substance. For instance, Bob Harte’s home was raided by a SWAT team because cops found loose tea leaves in the family’s trash and mistook them for marijuana. “Our family will never be the same,” said his wife, recalling the two-hour raid that had police invading their suburban home with a battering ram and AR-15 rifles:

Bob found himself flat on [the] floor, hands behind his head, his eyes locked on the boots of the officer standing over him with an AR-15 assault rifle. “Are there kids?” the officers were yelling. “Where are the kids?” “And I’m lying there staring at this guy’s boots fearing for my kids’ lives, trying to tell them where my children are,” Harte recalled later in a deposition on July 9, 2015. “They are sending these guys with their guns drawn running upstairs to bust into my children’s house, bedroom, wake them out of bed.”⁵⁷⁸

It didn’t matter that no drugs were found — nothing but a hydroponic tomato garden and loose tea leaves. The search and SWAT raid were reasonable, according to the courts.

The prohibition of alcohol consumption provides an earlier example of government overreach in America:

In 19th century America, alcoholism was an even bigger problem than it is now. Many attempts by well-meaning people were made to pass laws limiting the consumption of alcohol. Such attempts failed — until John D. Rockefeller, Sr. and fellow oligarchs lent the

movement financial and political support. At the time, the main competitor to Rockefeller's oil business was alcohol. Cars then could run on either gasoline or alcohol. The 1920 alcohol prohibition did not outlaw alcohol as car fuel, but it added numerous restrictions on its use. As a result, alcohol use was abandoned by the automobile industry and Rockefeller amply recovered his investment in the temperance movement⁵⁷⁹

The prohibition merely raised the price of alcohol, made alcohol consumption even more harmful than it was before, led many to disregard and hold in contempt the laws of their country, and led to the rise of organized crime.

Also, the government did not hesitate to kill its citizens in order to "protect" them. Consider, for instance, New York City.

On Dec. 28, 1926, New York City was facing a crisis. Charles Norris, the city's first-ever medical examiner, had no choice but to speak out. In a matter of days, 23 people in the city had died and 89 had been hospitalized after drinking bootlegged liquor that had contained dangerous levels of chemicals. "The government knows it is not stopping drinking by putting poison in alcohol. It knows what bootleggers are doing with it and yet it continues its poisoning processes, heedless of the fact that people determined to drink are daily absorbing that poison," Norris said in a statement as New Yorkers who had fallen ill from illegal alcohol continued to die. By Dec. 31, *The New York Times* was reporting that the holiday death toll from "poison rum" had jumped to 47. But the grim statistics weren't enough to stop the Prohibition zealots headed by the Department of Treasury from doctoring the industrial alcohol supply with dangerous substances. The U.S. government would continue to doctor the industrial alcohol supply through the end of Prohibition knowing that it was killing U.S. citizens. It is believed around 10,000 people died as a result, and also caused an unknown number of cases of blindness and hallucinations. "Governments used to murder by the bullet only. Now it's by the quart," humorist Will Rogers commented.⁵⁸⁰

Athens, as we have seen, was a libertarian paradise:

The Athenian citizen differed from the citizen of a modern democratic state in being, on the one hand, much more often a state official of some sort, but, on the other hand, much less frequently under the control of state officials himself. . . . After his two-year military service an Athenian citizen was only directly under the control of magistrates when taking part in a political assembly or fighting in the field or celebrating one of the city festivals; apart from that perhaps his most frequent contacts with officials was if he traded in the market-place.⁵⁸¹

What an Athenian did in his private life was of no concern to the state — as long as he abided by established norms of behavior toward others and kept his obligations to the state (e.g., paying taxes if he was well-off, serving in the armed forces). Athens comes close to J. S. Mill's ideal of freedom: "There is a circle around every individual human being, which no government . . . ought to be permitted to overstep. . . . The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant."⁵⁸²

In sum, for the most part Mill's circle was adhered to in Athens but has been routinely and legally broken in the U.S. Moreover, it is often broken for cynical reasons — and not because America's rulers are concerned for the well-being of citizens.

Freedom of Speech

There is freedom of speech in America — as long as that freedom does not pose a threat to the established power structure. Indeed, throughout history, influential critics of the establishment have paid dearly for their courage.⁵⁸³

Robert Oppenheimer, the man who headed the scientific aspects of the Manhattan Project, provides one example of many. Oppenheimer correctly believed that developing the hydrogen-bomb would be a disaster and said so. Moreover, the Soviets would have gladly signed a treaty banning its development and use.⁵⁸⁴ And yet, for this heresy, Oppenheimer's service to his country notwithstanding, his reputation was destroyed.

The earlier case of Eugene Debs is even more depressing: For openly opposing America's participation in the World War I racket, he spent years in prison, an experience which probably contributed to his death a few years after his release.⁵⁸⁵ Many others suffered the same fate throughout American history.

In most cases, however, free speech is not suppressed directly; rather, dissident views are ignored or barred from all mainstream sources of information.⁵⁸⁶

If unsure, you can check it out for yourself. Try, for instance, to submit a meticulously researched article favorable to Gary Webb to the *New York Times* — the newspaper that callously and mendaciously helped destroy his reputation and set the stage for his probable assassination. Or try the San Jose Mercury News — the newspaper that once dared publish Webb's Dark Alliance articles.

Wikipedia styles itself as the “free encyclopedia that anyone can edit.” Try to edit its scurrilous articles on Garry Webb or on “Architects & Engineers for 9/11 Truth.”

The history section of each article of *Wikipedia* contains all former versions of any given article. These versions provide a treasure trove of the oligarchs' war on free speech. For instance, a diligent soul out there attempted to enrich the Hemingway entry with this information, taken from the Guardian, an oligarch bastion with democratic pretensions:

According to A.E. Hotchner, Hemingway's close associate and a writer of *Papa Hemingway and Hemingway and His World*, Hemingway complained for years that he was under FBI surveillance. Hotchner and other friends of the Nobel prize winner dismissed such claims as paranoia. To Hotchner's surprise, in 1980, when the FBI was forced to release some of its least-damning Hemingway files, it turned out Hemingway was right. Hotchner believes that FBI's surveillance “substantially contributed to his

[friend's] anguish and . . . suicide,” adding that he had “regretfully misjudged” his friend's fear of the organization.⁵⁸⁷

Twenty-three minutes later, this inconvenient addition was removed once and then, when the naive contributor re-introduced that paragraph, unceremoniously removed again.

I spent a couple of days reviewing *Wikipedia's* censorship of controversial topics, and found hundreds of similarly speedy removals of inconvenient truths.

We have earlier mentioned the CIA's ingenious use of the historically meaningless term “conspiracy theory.” A search for that term in the English *Wikipedia* lends support to the view that *Wikipedia* is a government-run disinformation campaign masquerading as an encyclopedia (and which, it must be admitted, is a free, accessible, and useful source of non-political information). In the English *Wikipedia*, on November 17, 2022, “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” numbered in the thousands.

Consider Euripides' denunciation of war in his 415 B.C. Trojan Women. Euripides' play was first performed in 415 B.C., during Athens' 27-year war of survival against Sparta, not during a bankers' war in a far-away land. Every Athenian personally experienced the agonies of that terrible war. The play was probably interpreted by Athenian spectators as a scathing criticism of that war and of their worst international crime — the shocking Melian massacre (see Chapter 4), which took place a few months before the play was first produced. And yet, Euripides' fellow citizens did not incarcerate him, put him in solitary confinement, or drive him to suicide. Instead, his play was awarded second prize.

In more general terms, we noted in Chapter 4 that “Athens was par excellence the state that celebrated freedom of speech.”⁵⁸⁸

Religious Freedom

Unlike former centuries, in 21st-century America there is a clear separation of church and state and a comparatively high degree of religious tolerance (apart, sadly, from the day-to-day lives of Muslims). For instance, followers of minority religions are often encountered in the top echelons of American society.

By contrast, there was no religious freedom in Athens. Only variations of a single religion were allowed, and open skepticism about official dogmas was crushed. The superstitious majority supported such restrictions, so the fewer independent thinkers had to keep their opinions to themselves or else.

National Self-Determination

On the surface, the USA charts its own course, free from foreign meddling. The reality, however, is more nuanced.

Perhaps the most powerful institution in the country is its private central bank. Although the ownership of that bank is shrouded in secrecy, it is almost certain that it is at least partially owned by foreigners who play a role in setting its policies.

Likewise, through bribery, media ownership, cloak-and-dagger tactics, and co-option, foreigners often stir American policies in a direction that serves their interests and not the interests of Americans. The United Kingdom, for instance, has often played a key role in American history. Saudi Arabia is another key player in American politics, and there are many others.

One striking example of such interference is provided by the tiny state of Israel (with about eight times the area of Athens). For instance, a senior advisor to the U.S. president suggested that American politicians become “very, very rich” by supporting Israel and that some of America’s wars are in reality Israel’s wars.⁵⁸⁹ Conversely, politicians whose Middle East policies defy Israel may as well pack up their belongings and leave Washington D.C. In 1973, for instance, Senator Fulbright observed that “Israel controls the Senate.” A year later, Israel proved him right, and, after a distinguished Senate service of 25 years, he lost the 1974 elections.

At times, the cravenness involves “a truly revolting display of sycophancy, servility and brownnosing.” In 2015,

came the “triumphant visit to Congress by Israel’s corrupt rightwing prime minister,” a visit that led to “23 rapturous standing ovations.”⁵⁹⁰

That was, by the way, an improvement over a 2011 visit, which led to 29 standing ovations.

Apart from a few brief periods of foreign domination, Athens enjoyed autonomy for several centuries, up to the Macedonian conquest. Through bribery and other means, Sparta and Persia made repeated attempts to turn Athens into a client state — and failed. Through bribery of key officials, however, foreign powers did at times exert considerable influence over Athens — but always subject to the sovereign oversight of the Athenians themselves.

We must sadly conclude that America is no less free than Athens from foreign meddling.

Welfare

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. — The Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁵⁹¹

The USA grudgingly provides for the welfare of wounded soldiers, their spouses and children, the handicapped, and the needy. There are exceptions, however. For instance, in 2019, there were officially 100,000 chronically homeless people in the USA.⁵⁹² And, in 2020, an estimated 54 million Americans struggled with hunger.⁵⁹³

As we have seen, the Athenian welfare state provided for the basic physical and spiritual needs of its citizens.

Economic Freedom

The framers of America's oligarchic Constitution despised democracy because they feared that it would deprive them of their excessive power and wealth. Their fears were not entirely groundless. In a democracy, they would have far less power. And, to judge by the Athenian precedent, they would have probably been able to maintain their wealth — but they would have never been able to be as hideously opulent as they are in 2022 America.

Overall, Americans still enjoy economic freedoms, but to a lesser extent than the Athenians. Many Americans do not own any real property. Many of those who do own the house or land they live in are on probation: if they cannot pay a monthly fee to a bank, if they cannot pay hefty property taxes, or if they cannot afford to cut grass or meet other zoning regulations, they lose "their" property.

Many types of businesses that were legal in Athens are illegal in most or all American states, e.g., prostitution, gambling, practicing medicine or selling drugs without a license to do so.

In the USA, the Federal Reserve, venality, a bloated military, and governments at all levels, siphon off some of the profits that an Athenian businessman would be allowed to keep.

Also, in the USA oligopolies and other major corporations see to it that the government passes rules that favor them at the expense of small entrepreneurs. For instance, the founder of America's richest dynasty, Rockefeller Sr., felt that "competition is sin," and proceeded to eliminate it through various means, legal or illegal.⁵⁹⁴ We have previously met the negative impact of the prohibition on alcohol consumption on small farmers. Red tape provides another example of the war against mom-and-pop businesses: American entrepreneurs must spend four hours a week dealing with a complex maze of rules and regulations.⁵⁹⁵ The 2020-21 draconian lockdown of the entire country provides another example of the government's war against small businesses: many had to shut their doors forever.

The Athenians respected private property. As we have seen, as soon as the highest-ranking official in the land (archon) entered upon his office, he proclaimed "through the public herald that whatever a person possessed before he entered upon his archonship he will have and possess until the end of his term — a guarantee that no redistribution of property would take place in Athens."⁵⁹⁶

Rich Athenians had to pay taxes to support cultural events. In times of war, their tax burden was heavy, but still tolerable. When they committed crimes against their fellow citizens or the state, they were forced to pay fines or, in extreme cases, their properties in Athenian territories were

confiscated and they could be executed. Most people owned their houses and land free and clear, and were not beholden to a bank. Ordinary citizens did not have to pay property taxes.

An Athenian could engage in almost any honest business activity without interference from the state.

Plight of Workers

The American economic system is unstable, characterized by frequent downturns which tragically throw millions of people out of work. Occasionally, the downturns are severe, e.g., during the Great Depression, leading to hunger, homelessness, and deaths. The USA likewise is unwilling to employ a significant fraction of the workforce, leading to diminished quality of life for millions. This systemic problem of unemployment and underemployment could be dealt with by reducing the number of hours people work for the same pay and equitably sharing available work and leisure — following a trend that prevailed in the U.S. in the first half of the 20th century.⁵⁹⁷ But there is no sign that such reduction is being contemplated.

Apart from mom-and-pop enterprises and employment by local, state, and federal governments, the basic economic unit, the large corporation, is a thoroughly undemocratic institution, where human dignity is often trampled upon, where the majority simply works at the pleasure of a few and are subservient to them. As Richard Wolff puts it, “your workplace, where you spend most of your time, is the antithesis of democracy.”⁵⁹⁸

Professor Anderson concurs: most workplaces in the USA, she says, are dictatorships

in which bosses govern in ways that are largely unaccountable to those who are governed. They don’t merely govern workers; they dominate them. . . . Employers’ authority over workers, outside of collective bargaining and a few other contexts . . . is sweeping, arbitrary, and unaccountable.⁵⁹⁹

In theory, workers can quit, but, given that (i) the USA suffers from a chronic unemployment problem, (ii) most other corporations are just as dictatorial as the corporation at which one finds oneself, and (iii) one must make a living somehow, the choice of walking out is often fictional. To deny the reality that most Americans spend their working lives as wage slaves because they can quit, is like saying that “Mussolini wasn’t a dictator, because Italians could emigrate.” In the modern workplace, the dictator is the chief executive officer (CEO), superiors are managers, subordinates are workers. “The oligarchy that appoints the CEO exists for publicly owned corporations: it is the board of directors.”⁶⁰⁰

Are farm workers in California working for starvation wages, sleeping in chicken coops, and exposed to dangerous pesticides, free? Or what about workers in one of the biggest companies, whose owner is probably richer than all of them combined, and who, according to a union spokesman, are forced to urinate in plastic bottles because they cannot go to the toilet on their shift?⁶⁰¹ Or what about the six dead employees of that same company who, while the region was

pounded by tornadoes, were told that they would be fired if they left their jobs and sought a safe shelter?⁶⁰²

Here are three more examples of wage slavery: 1. One major corporation “inspects the personal belongings of their retail workers, who lose up to a half-hour of unpaid time every day as they wait in line to be searched. 2. About half of U.S. employees have been subject to suspicion-less drug screening by their employers. 3. Millions are pressured by their employers to support particular political causes or candidates.⁶⁰³

Besides chronic unemployment, there are millions of underpaid soldiers and overpaid police and spooks whose defining modus vivendi is unquestioning obedience. Then there are millions of people in America’s prison Gulag, of whom some are innocent, many more are serving for such “crimes” as smoking cannabis, and still more are the victims of poverty, systemic neglect, and life without hope.

All this is the antithesis of Thomas Jefferson’s vision. His “ideal was an educated farmer who owned and lived off his own land, rather than one who relied on wages from an employer.” Jefferson also admired skilled artisans and tradesmen, placing them in a similar category as the yeomen. For Jefferson, political democracy could only flow from an economically independent citizenry.⁶⁰⁴

There were no business cycles in the Athenian economy, and the only real economic crises were occasioned by wars and especially by enemies closing off wheat imports from the Black Sea region. Most citizens were self-employed, either working on their own parcel of land or as artisans and merchants. The income of small yeomen was often supplemented by another form of self-employment — working or fighting for the country which they themselves ruled. Thus, for instance, an Athenian yeoman or craftsman, serving for one year as a state official, fulfilling a contract with the state as a stone mason taking part in a public project such as building the Parthenon, attending the Assembly, or serving as a juror, was paid by the state. The money came from taxing the rich, from the silver mines, and other sources.

In short, in Athens, for most of its male citizens, the Jeffersonian dream was the reality:

Plato and Aristotle despised workers and justified their contempt by asserting that manual work deformed the body and the soul. But that this was the attitude of the average poor Greek there is no evidence. An anecdote recorded by Xenophon probably gives a better insight into [a poor Greek’s] point of view. Eutherus, who has lost his overseas estates as a result of the war, has been reduced to earning his living by manual labour. Socrates asks what he will do when his bodily strength fails and suggests that he find a job as a rich man’s bailiff. Eutherus is horrified at the suggestion ‘I could not endure to be a slave . . . I absolutely refuse to be at any man’s beck and call.’ What the Athenian thete (poor citizen) objected to was not hard work . . . but being another man’s servant. He would work as an independent craftsman or at a pinch as a casual labourer, but he would not take even a black-coated job as a regular employee; we find that such

highly responsible posts as the manager of a bank or the foreman overseer of a mine are filled by slaves or freedmen of the owner.⁶⁰⁵

The Right to Bear Arms

To their great credit, the founders of the present American system of governance rightly feared governmental abuses of power, and therefore enshrined the right to bear arms in the American Constitution. It is perhaps no accident that in Switzerland (see Chapter 6), the one country where common people still exert a modicum of power, the right to bear arms is still taken for granted.

It should also be noted that in a society where a speck of freedom still exists, outlawing guns accomplishes very little. Guns will still be available to lawbreakers, and such guns might be less safe and more poorly made. Also, as the case of low-crime Switzerland shows, the correlation between legalization of guns and crime is shaky at best — crimes are chiefly traceable to poverty, alienation, culture of violence, and other such factors.

American oligarchs are not, by any stretch of the imagination, concerned with the safety and well-being of citizens. They are concerned with their own safety, and widespread gun ownership menaces their rule: ordinary people might rise up beyond a certain point of wealth gaps, poverty, police savagery, civil forfeiture, kleptocracy, imperial wars, rigged elections, and biospheric destruction. To deal with that peril, American oligarchs have been applying a three-pronged strategy:

1. Supply the police, the National Guard, and similar entities with weapons that are far more powerful and lethal than the weapons available to ordinary people. If push comes to shove, and if the run-of-the-mill trooper is paid well and is carefully screened for blind obedience, lack of mental agility, cruelty, and immorality, the oligarchs are likely to win.
2. Launch a propaganda campaign alleging a connection between legality of gun ownership and violent crime.
3. As they did in the Gladio period⁶⁰⁶ and later, launch a constant stream of senseless crimes, puff up these crimes in their mass media, and repeat the mantra: “The framers of the American Constitution were wrong; if you want to live without fear, give the police, other heavily armed government entities, and lawbreakers a monopoly on arms.” They forget to tell the people that government can pose an even greater threat than the criminals. They also forget that, more often than not, by the time the police arrive at a crime scene, the criminals had already left.

So far though, American oligarchs have only managed to introduce restrictions on gun ownership. Eventually, I suspect, the oligarchs might have their way and the people will be disarmed.

The connection between weapon ownership and freedom was absolutely clear to Greek democrats. Common people owned the best weapons they could afford, and were ready and able to use them against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

For their part, and like their American successors, Greek oligarchs were keen on depriving the people of their arms. For instance, in Athens, more than 1,500 people were put to death during the 8-months-long Spartan-installed oligarchy of 403 B.C. How did the oligarchs get away with it? Most citizens were disfranchised, disarmed, or “expelled from Athens.”⁶⁰⁷

Here is one account, involving the Athenian siege of Mytilene, the largest city-state in the Ionian island of Lesbos, showing that the Greeks understood the close link between weapons, freedom, and inequality:

Salaethus [Spartan commander stationed in Mytilene] and the Mytileneans had held out until their provisions were completely exhausted, but neither relief, nor tidings, reached them from Peloponnesus. At length even Salaethus became convinced that no relief would come: He projected, therefore, as a last hope, a desperate attack upon the Athenians and their wall of blockade. For this purpose he distributed full panoplies among the mass of the people or commons, who had hitherto been without them, having at best nothing more than bows or javelins. But he had not sufficiently calculated the consequences of this important step. The Mytilenean multitude, living under an oligarchical government, had no interest whatever in the present contest, which had been undertaken without any appeal to their opinion. They had no reason for aversion to Athens, seeing that they suffered no practical grievance from the Athenian alliance: And we shall find hereafter that even among the subject-allies (to say nothing of a privileged ally like Mytilene), the bulk of the citizens were never forward, sometimes positively reluctant, to revolt. The Mytilenean oligarchy had revolted, in spite of the absence of practical wrongs, because they desired an uncontrolled town-autonomy as well as security for its continuance: But this was a feeling to which the people were naturally strangers, having no share in the government of their own town, and being kept dead and passive, as it was the interest of the oligarchy that they should be, in respect to political sentiment. A Grecian oligarchy might obtain from its people quiet submission under ordinary circumstances, but if ever it required energetic effort, the genuine devotion under which alone such effort could be given, was found wanting. Accordingly, the Mytilenean Demos, so soon as they found themselves strengthened and ennobled by the possession of heavy armour, refused obedience to the orders of Salaethus for marching out and imperiling their lives in a desperate struggle. They were under the belief — not unnatural under the secrecy of public affairs habitually practised by an oligarchy, but which assuredly the Athenian Demos would have been too well-informed to entertain — that their governors were starving them, and had concealed stores of provision for themselves. Accordingly, the first use which they made of their arms was, to demand that these concealed stores should be brought out and fairly apportioned to all; threatening, unless their demand was complied with at once, to enter into negotiations with the Athenians and surrender the city.⁶⁰⁸

Finance

Our financial system is a relatively recent invention, devised by clever, selfish men for their personal gain. It is not the product of any natural or inevitable process, nor of

democratic deliberation. It is a scam. We need not be stuck with it, and the sooner we rid ourselves of it the better. — Adrian Kuzminski⁶⁰⁹

Rainy Day Fund. By 2023, the gold hoard of the United States of America had probably been stolen, and its official national debt exceeded \$31 trillion. The reality, as always when it comes to government statistics, was far worse: total liabilities probably exceeded \$200 trillion.⁶¹⁰

By contrast, whenever possible, democratic Athens maintained a comparatively large emergency fund which helped it survive wars, plagues, and other exigencies.

Debt Cancellation: In 2023, the USA was facing a crisis of indebtedness, once more following its Roman model:

By rejecting such alleviations of debts resulting from economic disruption, the U.S. economy is subjecting itself to depression, homelessness and economic polarization. It is saving stockholders and bondholders instead of the economy at large . . . Ever since Roman times it has become normal for creditors to use social misfortune as an opportunity to gain property and income at the expense of families falling into debt. . . . As in oligarchic Rome, financial interests in today's world have gained control of governments and captured the political and regulatory agencies, leaving democratic reformers powerless to suspend debt service, rent arrears, evictions and depression. The West is becoming a highly centrally planned economy, but its planning center is Wall Street, not Washington or state and local governments.⁶¹¹

As we have seen, one crucial step towards democracy and fiscal viability in Athens involved freeing small landholders from the burden of vassalage. It also involved debt forgiveness: debts of ordinary people that could not possibly be paid were forgiven.

Banking and Money Creation. The importance of banking and money creation to the well-being of a country cannot be overstated. As we have seen, John Acton felt that “the issue which has swept down the centuries, and which will have to be fought sooner or later, is the people versus the banks.”⁶¹² Likewise, Thomas Jefferson wrote that “banking establishments are more dangerous than standing armies.”⁶¹³

The private ownership of America's Central Bank, along with the fraudulent fractional reserve system,⁶¹⁴ permit the concentration of wealth and political power in the hands of the banking octopus and its military, academic, media, drug, death squads, industry, health, farming, mining, and “religious” tentacles. It also permits destructive and deliberate manipulations of the money supply, the hidden inflation tax, and the destructive boom-and-bust economic cycles which further enrich and empower a few banking families and their lackeys and grievously harm and impoverish the public at large.

Unlike the USA, in Athens, money was minted by the state, not created out of thin air. Bankers became rich at the pleasure of the public, not the other way around. Like everyone else, if they harmed the state in any way, they were held accountable. As well, the progressive tax system saw

to it that bankers never became as obscenely wealthy as American bankers. On the other hand, if bankers generously shared their excess profits, they gained public esteem and gratitude.

Bail-Outs. In the USA, the entire financial system is rigged in favor of billionaires. For instance, during the 2020 Coronavirus crisis:

People are hurting, and they're frustrated, and they're angry, and many are unemployed, and others have jobs that don't pay enough to meet the rising living expenses, and small businesses are on the ropes, and there's going to be a lot of pain. . . . So the Fed [America's Central Bank] printed \$2.9 trillion since early March. That's about \$22,000 per household. For the bottom half of households, \$22,000 would have helped a lot to get through the crisis. But this money wasn't spread to them. It was helicopter money for Wall Street. And it went on to multiply. And most of it ended up with a relatively small number of households. And their wealth increased by the trillions of dollars. . . . People took these risks because they wanted the returns. Bailing them out and making them whole destroys the discipline of capitalism – and it destroys capitalism itself . . . So what the Fed has engineered is the biggest most sudden wealth transfer from labor to capital, from the many to the few, and the more assets they hold, the more they got. And those not in the privileged capital class, the Fed tells them, you're screwed.⁶¹⁵

We are not talking about abstractions here, but a large-scale crime against the American demos. One additional datum captures the magnitude of that robbery:

One in 8 Americans reported they sometimes or often didn't have enough food to eat in the past week [mid-November, 2020], hitting nearly 26 million American adults . . . That number climbed to more than 1 in 6 adults in households with children.⁶¹⁶

An Athenian time-traveler would be stupefied by the notion that some private financial institutions are too big to fail, that their owners are too important to jail, and that vast amounts of money are flowing in the wrong direction — from the poor and middle-class majority to a tiny minority of crooks.

Capitalism. In the USA, on a lower level, genuine capitalism is still permitted to exist. In many localities one can frequent such small enterprises as a bakery or a barbershop. Such enterprises serve the public interest and have little control over market and political forces.

But, according to Adam Smith, there was another, far more sinister, side to the free enterprise system, requiring constant vigilance: "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices."⁶¹⁷ The way they go about it, Smith contended, is by using their money to buy hapless politicians, who in turn betray the public trust and pass decrees and laws that serve their patrons' interests, not the public's. Merchants collude, form monopolies and tacit oligopolies, and overprice their products. Consequently, says Smith, laws proposed by business should be treated with the utmost suspicion.

Smith's warnings are now the reality of "capitalism," American style. Legislation for the most part is written by lobbyists of big business. All regulatory bodies are a smokescreen, accountable to the

oligarchs they are supposed to oversee. Major sectors of the economy and the political system have been captured by bankers, monopolies, oligopolies, corporations, and brainwashing outfits. Over and over again in this chapter, we have seen how capitalism has been corrupted in America.

The price of insulin affords one illustration of Adam Smith's nightmare scenario. American "capitalists" colluded and captured the entire political system to the point that, in 2020, they charged \$300 for an insulin that cost them \$6 to produce. It matters not to these "capitalists" and to their political underlings that the discovery of insulin and its commercial potential took place almost exclusively in publicly-supported institutions. It matters not to them that charging 50 times the cost of production is a slap in the face to their customers and to common decencies. It matters not that such inflated prices cause sufferings, humiliations, and deaths.⁶¹⁸

This is just one example of hundreds. In America, Adam Smith's nightmare rules the land. In 2020, two outraged observers commented:

How is that capitalism? To have the government artificially suppress interest rates so that companies can borrow money for below free-market rates, use it to manipulate their own share price, and then when it comes crashing down, the government bails them out. There is nothing about this that is anything like capitalism. These are not free markets. These markets are rigged.⁶¹⁹

Bubbles for the top 10% and the consequent wealth disparity that followed for the rest of the country are dangerous indicators of a kind of post-modern feudalism wherein a questionable cabal of policy makers subsidizes a distinct minority of beneficiaries and then calls the result "economic stimulus" as the rest of the country gets poorer by the day.⁶²⁰

In Athens, capitalism, the kind whose praises were sung by Adam Smith, reigned supreme. There, such small businesspersons as butchers, bakers, or candlestick makers were indeed competing with many others. An argument could perhaps be made that in places like Athens, regardless of their intention, these entrepreneurs were being led by an invisible hand (and by a democratic framework capable of curbing misbehavior and collusion) to promote prosperity. Consequently, Athens did enjoy a thriving free enterprise economy.

The Athenians would have perfectly understood Americans' financial predicament — provided such shenanigans existed in tyrannies or oligarchies, not in self-proclaimed democracies.

Wealth Inequalities

Man's law of nature is equality. — Euripides of Athens⁶²¹

Debt cancellation is anathema to American oligarchs, wealth inequalities are growing at a shocking pace, and the rich routinely steal ever more money from the majority. The USA is a country where billionaires enjoy a lower tax rate than their secretaries or drivers, and where the entire system specializes in funneling more money and power to the 700+ members of the exclusive billionaire club and their underlings.⁶²²

In 1970, the richest Americans paid, all taxes included, more than 50% of their income in taxes, twice as much as working-class individuals. In 2018 . . . billionaires have paid less than steel workers, schoolteachers, and retirees. . . . what argument can justify that billionaires should pay less than each of us, and pay less and less as they get wealthier and wealthier? What principle could justify such an obviously perverse situation? This looks like the tax system of a plutocracy. With tax rates of barely 20% at the top, wealth will keep accumulating with hardly any barrier. And with that, so too will the power of the wealthy accumulate, including their ability to shape policymaking and government for their own benefit.⁶²³

This creates a self-reinforcing loop of malignancy. From 1975 to 2018, \$50 trillion had been siphoned from the bottom 90% and handed over to the top 1% (the group that is in the best position to bribe American politicians and judges, liquidate opponents, and brainwash the public to accept this unnatural state of affairs) — costing the median worker \$42,000 a year.⁶²⁴

This, it must be reiterated, is an accelerating, pestilential, vicious circle. By hook or by crook, a few individuals and their descendants became far richer than Croesus. They then used that money to corrupt the politicians, judges, the Federal Bureau of Intimidation, and the information stream and to rob the vast majority of even more money, in a never-ending cycle of enrichment of the corrupt few and their lackeys at the expense of the vast majority. By 2021,

America's 719 billionaires held over four times more wealth (\$4.56 trillion) than all the roughly 165 million Americans in society's bottom half (\$1.01 trillion), according to Federal Reserve Board data. In 1990, the situation was reversed — billionaires were worth \$240 billion and the bottom 50% had \$380 billion in collective wealth.⁶²⁵

All this is especially striking, because, thanks to scientific and technological advances of the last two millennia, poverty today can be readily and effortlessly eliminated (see Chapter 1). We know how, and we can readily provide food, shelter, education, and health care for every human being on the planet. Why do we fail to do it? One probable ugly answer, suggests Caitlin Johnstone, is this:

Poverty itself is a weapon of the powerful. Keep people too poor to fund political campaigns and you keep them powerless. Keep them too busy to research and they can't see through your propaganda. Keep them desperate and you can get them hating each other instead of hating you. They're not just robbing ordinary people so they can have more for themselves; the poverty itself actually benefits them. They would benefit from keeping you poor even if it gave them nothing else.⁶²⁶

Beyond the statistics of vast wealth inequalities, there are often millions of individual tragedies: such misfortunes as homelessness, joblessness, degrading employment, despair, drug addiction, and suicides. Growing inequalities, for instance, probably triggered the 2019-2022 striking decline in life expectancy in the U.S.⁶²⁷

There were vast wealth inequalities in Athens, but, compared to the USA, Athens was an egalitarian utopia:

The very wealthy in Athens were . . . something equivalent to modern millionaires – they may have possessed \$1 million or \$5 million or even \$30 million in property, usually in the form of land, but they did not possess hundreds of millions or billions.⁶²⁸

Nothing like the swarm of billionaires, and the handful of probable trillionaires, that parasitize the world, existed in Athens. The richest man in Athens might have had 2,000 times the average income of Athens' poorest working citizen. In the USA, the comparable ratio is, roughly, 7,000,000; that is, in the U.S. the gap between the richest and poorest approaches infinity.

In Athens, wealth inequalities were fairly stable. At the time of Solon, this stability was achieved by cancellation of debt and vassalage. During the democracy, the gap between rich and poor remained stationary thanks to a progressive tax system: it was the 1-3% richest citizens who shouldered the costs of equipping warships and the more than one hundred yearly cultural events.⁶²⁹

Currency Debasement

The incipient United States financed the transfer of power from British to American oligarchs (the so-called War of Independence) in part through the debasement of both the federal currency (the Continental), and the paper currencies of the various states. Massive inflation ensued, serving as indirect tax on the American people, already suffering from the depredations of war.

To avoid another such tragedy, the American Constitution seems to require that only precious metals can function as the official currency of the United States. And indeed, up to the Civil War, the only legal tender in the USA was gold and silver. When the war between the states broke out, the North could only secure loans from English bankers (who were trying to break up the United States) at an extortionate rate. So in 1862, the North resorted once again to fiat currency, the Greenback, which was not backed by precious metals. Overall, the Greenback had been handled far more responsibly than the Continental and helped the North win the war. The Greenback lost more than half its value during the war, causing economic losses to most ordinary Americans, but by 1878 it recovered. (In passing, this suggests that the problem is not fiat money itself — but its venal handlers, free from the restraints of direct democracy.)

Another critical milepost in the debasement of the U.S. dollar took place in 1933, when Americans were forced to surrender most of their gold. "Millions of Americans waited in long lines to hand in their gold."⁶³⁰ After the government confiscated the gold, it debased the currency, raising the price of an ounce of gold from \$20.67 to \$35. Millions of Americans lost some of their wealth. This devaluation similarly impacted foreign individuals and governments who held American dollars.

The last major development took place in 1971, when the Nixon Administration abolished the link between the dollar and gold, thus enshrining the now-familiar practice of highly-unstable and readily-manipulable free-floating fiat currencies. At the same time, steps were taken to secure the status of the dollar as the reserve currency of the world — a necessary condition for the continued

existence of the American empire. For one thing, the USA had to boost its military and be ever ready to suppress any attempt to break away from dollar payments. That is one reason the USA perpetrated the still-ongoing Iraqi and Libyan genocides and why it protected such a chillingly oppressive regime as Saudi Arabia. This heavy cost of empire is again borne by ordinary Americans, whose yearly income could go up by thousands of dollars if military spending in the USA didn't exceed the combined military spending of the next ten big spenders.

Also, inflation again became a major problem for the average American — but a boon to the oligarchs controlling the country. To begin with, the major beneficiaries of currency debasement are powerful bankers, who are the first to receive their newly “minted” digital creations. Bankers also benefit from fudging inflation statistics, an underhanded tactic that accelerated since the early 1980s⁶³¹ — with the paradoxical result that a single independent economist provides more truthful data than the battalion of scammers at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In this scam, the government forcibly collects about 13% from everyone's paycheck, under the cover of Social Security taxes. Then, by failing to provide a real cost of living adjustment, it robs America's elderly population of about half the money they were forced to contribute towards their own retirement.⁶³²

Moreover, there was likewise no longer a need for the gold of Fort Knox, the property of the American people, to back the dollar. So, some people claim, that gold had been stolen.⁶³³ The refusal since 1974 to meaningfully audit that gold confers a measure of support for this claim.⁶³⁴

One indication of the gigantic monetary loss caused by Nixon's move and subsequent shenanigans is furnished by the decline of the U.S. dollar compared to gold, despite decades-long downward manipulations of the price of that precious metal. In 1970, you could get an ounce of gold for \$36;⁶³⁵ by early 2023, despite manipulations, the same ounce cost more \$1,800. By this measure alone, in just 50 years, each American citizen could be a lot richer — had her country been run in the public interest.

The gradual decline in the value of the dollar is not limited to precious metals. Despite productivity gains in animal husbandry, the same quantity of pork chops costing \$20 in 1970 cost \$84.68 in 2020.⁶³⁶ A postal stamp that cost 8 cents in 1971 cost 63 cents in 2023.

We have seen earlier that America's founders deliberately attempted to model their country after Rome. So it should come as no surprise that their inflation tactics copy Rome too. Roman oligarchs also resorted to currency debasement to enrich themselves, impoverish the people, and support endless imperial wars — thereby undermining the long-term well-being of their country and people.

In Athens, the people themselves, not a few self-serving oligarchs, oversaw the legal tender of the state. Pure self-interest suggests that they would not perpetually tax themselves by debasing their currency. Also, a stable currency could not only facilitate and safeguard their finances, but help

create a prosperous, strong, state. In short, real democracies, unlike oligarchies, have every motivation to safeguard their currency.

And that is exactly what happened in democratic Athens. In sharp contrast to Roman and American oligarchies, Athenians scrupulously maintained the integrity of their world-famous silver owl — the most trusted reserve currency in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, if one needs one more proof that direct democracy outshines any other political system, one may consult Nikophon's 375/4 B.C. law on silver coinage.⁶³⁷

Privatization

The United States is a land of private property: railroads, mines, airlines, riverbanks, medical care, and many other resources and services are, for the most part, in private hands. Even the prison system and the military are gradually handed over to the billionaires. The stepwise replacement of the citizen-soldier with volunteers is complete. In turn, those volunteers are gradually giving way to mercenaries.⁶³⁸ In the scores of countries which the USA controls, especially through military invasions, debt, dollar dominance, and such misnamed usury outfits as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the process of privatization, deregulation, and impoverishment of the majority is widespread and undermines the social contract between people and governments.

Moreover, in the USA, public auctions and bidding for government contracts are, for the most part, carefully hidden from public view and often involve theft and bribes. One hears stories, for instance, of the F-35 \$1.5 trillion boondoggle or of the Pentagon paying hundreds of dollars for a screw that can be bought for less than a dollar at a hardware store.

Most capital and land in Athens were in private hands, and the Athenians did at times employ mercenaries to fight their wars. But overall, they did not go as far as the USA's privatization drive. Prisons for instance, were run by the government. Or consider natural resources:

The foundation of the prosperity of Athens was the great silver mines. Ownership of what lay beneath the soil was vested in the community, not the private persons under whose land it was found. The state let out the exploitation of the mines to numerous concessionaries who bought by auction the right to mine silver for a fixed period of years.⁶³⁹

In Athens, auctions and sales of confiscated property were controlled by the law courts, who confirmed and witnessed all public sales and contracts. Other built-in safeguards effectively minimized corruption.⁶⁴⁰

Personal Safety

The United States is far more violent and crime-ridden than democratic Athens was.⁶⁴¹

Suicides

A full 10% of the U.S. population had seriously contemplated suicide in the month of June, 2020. And “suicide was the 10th-leading cause of death in the United States in 2016. It was the second-leading cause of death among people ages 10 to 34 and the fourth-leading cause among people ages 35 to 54. . . . A society in which such a vast swath of the population is seriously considering suicide is failing to provide its citizens the basic necessities for a fulfilling life.”⁶⁴²

I was unable to find equivalent information for Athens. The very absence of information suggests, perhaps, that suicides were far less common in democratic Athens than in oligarchic America.

Life Expectancy

Americans in 2021 could expect to live 76.4 years,⁶⁴³ the Swiss 84.1, and the Athenians around 40.⁶⁴⁴ This striking difference between the modern and ancient Greek worlds can be traced in part to improved hygiene, sanitation, nutrition and medical practices, as well as to fewer wars and to lesser involvement of the average person today in such wars. However, in the USA life expectancy has declined by 2.4 years from 1919 to 2022. And, with declining environmental, political, international, and economic conditions, humanity might well regress to the Greek average — or worse.

Infanticide

Fortunately, in the USA, unlike Athens and other Greek cities, infanticide is both illegal and rare.

Compassion

Self-interest of the rulers, rather than compassion, normally dictated the foreign and domestic policies of both Athens and the USA; the main difference being that the USA has always been ruled by a small cabal and Athens by its male citizens.

Individual Americans have at times shown great compassion, and, at times, great cruelty. Their government’s record, on the other hand, is more uniform: one long saga of wanton cruelty towards Native Americans, African-Americans, Chinese laborers, Italian newcomers, homosexuals, labor leaders, pacifists, and many others. Overseas, to advance their global interests and power, American oligarchs harmed the lives of billions by removing from power leaders who cared for their own people and replacing them with such subservient slave drivers as Pinochet of Chile and Suharto of Indonesia.

Unlike the Americans, the Athenians tended to support democracies in their sphere of influence, but we cannot say whether compassion played a role in this pro-democratic policy. Also, as might be expected in a country ruled by ordinary people, Athens now and then behaved compassionately and perhaps also against its self-interest. For instance, Chapter 4 related

commuting the death sentence of the men of Mytilene, the amnesty following the restoration of democracy, and the unconditional freeing of a captive enemy athlete.

Luring the People into Wars

We had to struggle with the old enemies of peace — business and financial monopoly, speculation, reckless banking, class antagonism, sectionalism, war profiteering. They had begun to consider the Government of the United States as a mere appendage to their own affairs. We know now that Government by organized money is just as dangerous as Government by organized mob. — President Franklin Delano Roosevelt⁶⁴⁵

War gives oligarchs more power and riches, while the people pay for it with blood, limbs, sweat, tears, liberties, and money. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Americans had to be conned into just about every war of the last 170 years or so.⁶⁴⁶ Here is just one reminder: Iraqi Genocide #1 (1990-91):

In his endeavor to seize Kuwait, Saddam Hussein [then Iraq's ruler] had reason to believe that the US would take no position and would refrain from interfering. The American ambassador to Baghdad had said as much herself. Whether this was a trap set for Saddam to provide a pretext for American troops to enter the Middle East in force is open to debate.⁶⁴⁷

In fact, the entire invasion was based on a labyrinth of lies. In one much-publicized incident, and accepted at face value by the entire oligarchic media, a young Kuwaiti girl who only provided her first name appeared as a witness before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. Teary-eyed, she related seeing Kuwaiti babies cruelly being taken out of incubators and left to die.

Though reporters did not then have access to Kuwait, her testimony was regarded as credible at the time and was widely publicized. It was cited numerous times by United States senators and the president in their rationale to back Kuwait in the Gulf War.⁶⁴⁸

The whole episode was a shameless conspiracy. She was in fact the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States and a member of the ruling dictatorial clan (that is why she was only referred to by her first name). She had been coached in the art of lying and acting by an American public relations firm.⁶⁴⁹

The real reason for the invasion of Iraq, as John Perkins observed,⁶⁵⁰ is that Saddam, albeit a ruthless dictator installed earlier by the CIA, felt that he should control Iraq's destiny and riches. He refused to succumb to the pressure of economic hit men, and he committed the unforgivable crime of slighting the bankers' favorite fiat currency, the American dollar. As an ex-CIA operative, he knew that the next step would be assassination, and wisely took extreme precautions. Sooner or later, such defiance provokes an invasion.

Or consider the courageous testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee by the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction:

There's an odor of mendacity throughout the Afghanistan issue . . . mendacity and hubris. . . . The problem is there is a disincentive, really, to tell the truth. We have created an incentive to almost require people to lie.⁶⁵¹

In the age of nuclear weapons, one would think that American and British oligarchs would be more careful in their pursuit of world domination, if only because they too might be wiped out in an all-out nuclear exchange. And yet, they have been playing nuclear chicken, non-stop, from 1945 to 2023, by fits and starts needlessly moving the doomsday clock ever closer to midnight.

The historical record is unequivocal: there is indeed an odor of mendacity and callousness in each and every American war, including World War II⁶⁵² — the only one of America's never-ending wars that could perhaps be justified on moral grounds.

In Athens, to begin with, most of the people who chose to go to war were, for the most part, the people who would stand to gain or lose financially from it, become disabled, or die. Moreover, in some of these wars, the future survival of their country, themselves, and families, was at stake. It is therefore no surprise that they were a bit more reticent about wars than the bankers-run American government is.

In any event, before going to war, a representative sample of the entire citizenry would convene in a people's assembly chaired by a randomly selected person who presided on just that one occasion. The people would then listen to expert arguments for and against going to war, and then vote. Mistakes were made; sometimes the people declined to go to war when they should have; at other times they would have been better off not fighting a particular battle or war. But they have not been routinely duped into war for the purpose of enriching and empowering a few oligarchs.

Bellicosity, Imperialism, and Brinkmanship

The U.S. "has encircled the planet with hundreds of military bases and snuffed out millions of human lives while displacing tens of millions since 9/11 in military interventions that were based on lies." It "sanctions, sabotages and destroys any nation which dares to disobey its dictates. And it is "escalating world-threatening cold war aggressions against not one but two nuclear-armed nations." — Caitlin Johnstone⁶⁵³

The goal of America's foreign policy is to gain control over the entire world, its people, and resources. To achieve that goal, the USA spends about as much on war preparations as the next ten countries combined, striving, in its own words, for "full spectrum dominance."

The end goal, since 1945, is to subdue countries which decline to become American vassals. The main targets are China and Russia, but some attention must also be given to prevent the rise and independence of Germany, India, and Brazil. Since it would be impossible to conquer either China or Russia via conventional war, the hybrid war strategy against them involves a mixture of propaganda, economic warfare, deployment of fascists and religious fanatics, destabilization, and nurturing violent dissent. This strategy also resorts to nuclear brinkmanship, a never-ending search

for a surprise nuclear first strike, gradual withdrawals from existing arms control treaties, and other tactics.

Also, uniquely among countries, the USA maintains over 800 military bases overseas. To suppress liberty, equality, and fraternity, the USA also deploys assassination squads in 70% of the world's countries.⁶⁵⁴ Imperial control is also achieved through reliance on the dollar as the world's reserve currency, thus permitting the USA to sustain a huge negative trade balance.

Another key element sustaining the American empire is control of information flows around the globe. What people everywhere know about almost everything is shaped, to a disproportionate extent, by the five countries of the Anglosphere, and especially by the U.S. and the U.K.

Governments trying to serve their national interest or the interests of their own people pose the key challenge to the American imperial project:

The enemy was, and remains, any government or movement, or even individual, that stands in the way of the expansion of the American Empire; by whatever name the US gives to the enemy — communist, rogue state, drug trafficker, terrorist.⁶⁵⁵

To sustain and expand its existing empire, the U.S. blackmails, bribes, and assassinates. If these fail, the empire often resorts to its regime-change formula, succinctly outlined, for example, in John Michael Greer's 2014 novel, *Twilight Last Gleaming*, and in Nikolai Starikov's 2013 *Rouble Nationalization*. When all the indirect and less costly methods above fail, the empire resorts to outright military aggression.

In the late 19th century, for instance, Filipinos were fighting for independence against an oppressive Spanish rule. The United States helped the insurgency and dangled the promise of national independence. The American mass media did their part, condemning Spanish brutality and convincing Americans that war was both necessary and just. Like scores of devastated countries in the decades that followed, weaker Spain tried to avoid war. To force the issue and to convince its own reluctant people, the USA probably set up a false flag operation,⁶⁵⁶ made short work of Spain, and then decided to turn the Philippines into an American colony. When the Filipinos resisted that cynical betrayal, a blood-curdling genocide followed (1899-1902), complete with more than one million deaths from massacres, famine, and disease.

That tragic story would repeat itself, with variations, the world over.⁶⁵⁷

The carpet bombing of Cambodia was one of the most brutal and notorious war crimes of the post-WWII era and not only has no one been prosecuted for the crime, but the principal perpetrator was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize a few years later . . . A Finnish Inquiry Commission designated the years 1969 to 1975 in Cambodia (a time of massive aerial bombardment by the US and of bitter civil war wholly sustained by the US) as Phase 1 of the 'Decade of Genocide'. Estimates of Cambodian deaths resulting from the 1969-75 war range from . . . 500,000 killed to a credible 1 million excess deaths . . . Given that the Cambodian population was an estimated 6 or 7 million in the period of the

Second Indochina War, this gives us a figure of between 1 in 6 and 1 in 14 of all Cambodians killed.⁶⁵⁸

Nowadays, American-style scorched-Earth genocides continue decades, and sometimes even centuries, after the bombing stops. A 2020 mainstream article gives one example (without however reminding readers where the landmines came from):

In Cambodia, around three million landmines remain hidden, and tens of thousands of people in the country have died or been injured, often causing amputations, from the unexploded mines.⁶⁵⁹

Russia and China pose a special challenge to the empire, for the simple reason that they are capable of defending themselves. Instead of remembering its humanity and striving for peaceful coexistence, the empire resorts to breakneck brinkmanship. This, as we have seen, involves economic warfare, demonization in all imperial information outlets, destroying gas pipelines, fomenting ethnic revolts (e.g., Chechnyans in Russia, Uyghurs in China) or ideological revolts (e.g., supporting fascists, jihadists, or neo-liberals).⁶⁶⁰

Above all, brinkmanship involves a reckless and costly pursuit of decisive military superiority against both Russia and China. America's rulers could turn their country, and perhaps even the entire world, into a paradise where every human being is fed, housed, educated, and work fewer hours than now for higher pay. Instead, the empire and its vassals have been squandering tremendous resources on the elusive goal of subduing Russia, China, and their allies. And, at any time during these frightening decades of playing chicken, an arrogant miscalculation, an accident, or a maniac, could extinguish billions — or humanity itself:

Dispatching nuclear-capable B-52s on simulated bombing runs against Chinese and Russian military installations is simply nuts. Yes, it must scare the bejesus out of Chinese and Russian officials, but it will also prompt them to distrust any future peaceful overtures from American diplomats while further bolstering their own military power and defenses. Eventually, we will all find ourselves in an ever more dangerous and insecure world with the risk of Armageddon lurking just around the corner.⁶⁶¹

Strikingly, even when the main excuse for the roughly \$3,000 per capita yearly spending on warfare is removed, e.g., when Russia temporarily became a vassal state in the 1990s, military spending still goes up, suggesting that this process is driven in part by an internal logic of its own.

By now, the belligerence, the lavish spending on killing machines, the imperial ambitions to control the planet, and the numerous human-made environmental tipping points, are forcing the co-opted functionaries who took over the famous Doomsday Clock to position the minute hand in a place where it has never been before: 100 seconds to midnight!

The American people pay a heavy price for their rulers' never-ending bloodshed, a price that includes loss of lives, limbs, liberties, and happiness. Among the victims are American soldiers who die or are injured physically or psychologically. They are also routinely betrayed:

On Memorial Day and Veterans Day, politicians will speak at ceremonies all over the country and repeat their favorite mantra: “Support the troops.” This pledge is hammered into the American psyche at every turn. But there is a hidden, dark history that shows that the politicians are in fact no friend to service members — but their greatest enemy. An easy way to prove this truth is to look at how they so quickly betray and abandon their soldiers after purposely ruining their lives, and even after using them as literal lab rats. . . . this disturbing chapter . . . documents decades of experimentation on US troops — from nuclear tests to psychotropic drugs — as well as knowingly exposing them to deadly poisons, from sarin gas to Agent Orange. Most damning is that the hundreds of thousands of veterans seeking help from the government for the side-effects are always met with lies and denial.⁶⁶²

As might be expected, the parallels between Imperial America and its model, imperial Rome, are striking. Rome was a “ruthless imperial power” which “established its empire by destroying other civilizations.”⁶⁶³ Scottish chieftain Calgacus said of the Romans: “To spoil, to butcher, and to commit every kind of violence, they style by a lying name, Government; and when they have spread a general desolation, they call it Peace.”⁶⁶⁴ Eduardo Galeano said of the Americans: “Every time the US ‘saves’ a country, it converts it into either an insane asylum or a cemetery.”⁶⁶⁵

Like a school of sharks smelling blood, it appears that a citizenry can be driven into a frenzy of war. In Athens too, the evidence suggests “that a whole people can be as militant and bent on war as ruling elite or a monarch, and that in spite of the fact that the people will have to fight in the ranks.”⁶⁶⁶ History does not lend support to the view that direct democracies like Athens “will make our planet a more peaceful place to live in.” This, despite the fact that “it was the endless war, not payments to run the democracy, that brought Athens to the edge of bankruptcy. Even in peacetime, military expenses were considerable.”⁶⁶⁷ Like the USA, Athens and the entire Greek world were caught in a never-ending cycle of violence.

Similarly, both the Athenian and American empires ran against the deep-seated preference of most imperial subjects for complete national independence. Both empires forcibly suppressed secession and both browbeat unwilling nations to join the empire against their will.

Like the USA, the Athenian empire enriched itself with money which member states contributed for the sole purpose of common defense. Albeit in Athens, all citizens profited from this plunder, not just a few, as in the USA. Also, in Athens, but not in the USA, some of the tribute money was used to beautify the country and improve its infrastructure.

Unlike the coercive American empire in the Third World, both the 5th and 4th centuries versions of the Athenian confederacy came into existence as a voluntary association of independent city-states trying to protect themselves from slavery to Persia. For the most part, Athens fulfilled this obligation.⁶⁶⁸

The American empire depends on the cooperation of local oligarchs willing to betray their people. The Athenian empire tolerated oligarchic subject states, but preferred direct democracies.

Athens treated its confederates, overall, far more humanely than the American empire treated such countries as Chile or Guatemala. As a result, the majority of citizens in most confederate states were ambivalent about Athens. If they were already governed democratically, the association with Athens provided a measure of protection against their own scheming oligarchs. If they were under an oppressive oligarchy, membership in the Athenian empire lightened their load and improved their chances of freeing themselves.

Foreign victims of American imperialism can do little to redress high-handed behavior of imperial soldiers and overlords, night-time raids, assassinations, or the bombing of a wedding party. In the Athenian empire, on the other hand, the rule of law applied. Just before the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, an Athenian envoy to Sparta observed that Athenian courts treated citizens of Athens and citizens of the empire equally, certainly an improvement over Persian rule. He then correctly predicted that these allies would suffer worse if the Spartans were to take over the Athenian empire.⁶⁶⁹ In one typical incidence, two daughters of a Boeotian man were raped and then murdered by two Spartan citizens. In another case, the Spartan governor raped and killed the son of a local man. “In both cases the fathers went to Sparta to lay the enormity before the . . . authorities, and in both cases a deaf ear was turned to their complaints.”⁶⁷⁰

Things were altogether different in the Athenian empire:

Such crimes, if committed by Athenian citizens or officers, might have been brought to a formal exposure before the public sitting of the [Athenian law court], and there can be no doubt that both would have been severely punished. . . . [for example,] an enormity of this description, committed by the Athenian general Pachas at Mitylene, cost him his life before the Athenian [jurors].⁶⁷¹

As well, unlike America’s vassals, Athens’ confederates retained complete autonomy over economic and domestic policies and could govern themselves in any way they liked. Except for Melos, Athens did not kill a fraction of the population in subject states nor lower the quality of life of the vast majority. Athens did not deliberately enfeeble its partners by destroying their economies, destroying the equivalent of vital gas pipelines, and forcing them into debt slavery. Athens did not deliberately create failed states — as the USA is presently doing in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, El Salvador, Ecuador, Honduras, Ukraine . . . Athens did not treat its own soldiers as expendable guinea pigs. For instance, in one famous case where hundreds of sailors were left to drown at sea after a victorious engagement; as we have seen, some of the derelict commanders were executed. Athens also provided for its disabled veterans and the children of its dead soldiers (see Chapter 4). Money spent on defense was strictly accounted for, without the cost overruns and corruption that plague the American empire. Financially, Athens used the alliance to its own advantage, but nothing like the scale of exploitation of such imperial creations as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund.

Above all, despite some missteps, Athenian democracy acted rationally, in its own self-interest, shunning brinkmanship. When faced with such superior or equal powers as Persia, Sparta, or

Macedonia, Athenian democracy sought peace, avoided taking unnecessary risks, and only fought back in self-defense.

Another difference is that the average Athenian knew that his country was an empire, benefited from the asymmetrical relationship it engendered, and wanted it to continue. On a conscious level at least, most Americans believe that their country — the country which brought so much bloodshed and sufferings to the world, the country that authored such horrors as Operation Gladio, the country that installed and kept in power such figures as Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Suharto of Indonesia, the Muslim Brotherhood of Qatar, and the oppressive kleptocrats of Ukraine — is out there defending democracy!

Overall then, neither empire receives high marks for keeping its promises or for its humanity. At the same time, it's clear that, for the vast majority of imperial subjects, membership in the Athenian empire was not nearly as oppressive, costly, and bereft of benefits as membership in the American Empire.

Justice System

The United States has been a police state for some time now. — Ward Churchill, 2005⁶⁷²

In general terms, the American legal system is more concerned with obedience to law than with justice. A trial is conducted by a judge, or in front of a judge and jurors.

The web of laws is complicated and inaccessible to the average person, who frequently must rely on expensive experts. In fact, there are so many complex laws and regulations that, according to some students of the American “justice” system, “the average busy professional commits three felonies every day.”⁶⁷³ Thus, we have in place a condition where the government can legally arrest anyone.

Judges are selected or elected and promoted on the basis of their allegiance to oligarchs. They thus often use their privileged position during a trial to influence jurors that their duty is to abide by the letter of an abstract law, rather than obeying their conscience. This, along with cradle-to-grave indoctrination, lead American jurors to convict such champions of peace, freedom, justice, and environmental sanity as Eugene Debs, Muhammad Ali, or the Berrigan brothers.⁶⁷⁴

It is an entirely different story when it comes to rich men who can use their money and influence to game the system. A top criminal banker for instance, as long as he is a member in good standing of the oligarchy, rarely must face the American “justice” system; when he does, he often ends up paying a fine that amounts to a small fraction of his ill-gotten profits. Likewise, a jury may at times defy a judge and slap a well-deserved fine on a criminal corporation — but hardly ever on the human beings who oversee that corporation. And then the losing corporation appeals, now often facing a judge whose sympathies, promotions, and financial interests largely coincide with the corporation's interests. So the verdict of the jury (a random sample of the American people) is overturned or mitigated.

When it comes to numbers, per capita, the USA has by far the biggest prison population in the world.⁶⁷⁵ Many prisoners are innocent while many more serve years for consuming illegal drugs.

“Lucky” genuine journalists — who believe in transparency and the right of the people to know about crimes that are being committed in their names — are serving long prison terms, at time in solitary confinement and undergoing other forms of extreme psychological and physical torture. Unlucky ones are suicided, heart-attacked, or bathtubbed. Likewise, peaceful protesters and influential reformers are often brutalized, wounded, incarcerated, and sometimes even killed.⁶⁷⁶

The average citizen is helpless with no forms of meaningful redress. A prisoner in the American Gulag, a whistle-blower, a woman robbed by police, the relatives of murdered innocents, and the owners of beloved butchered pets, in practice have to take all this abuse stolidly. They can theoretically sue the police, if they can afford to, but this process takes years, and almost invariably ends in failure: “The legal system stacks the deck in favor of police officers who shoot and kill.”⁶⁷⁷

Many prisons are run by private corporations who lobby for more inmates and more draconian laws — rehabilitation is the last thing on their mind. The majority of prisoners who live in unspeakable conditions did not harm anyone. Many of them, as DNA tests show many years later, are innocent and at times had been framed by police and prosecutors. Many innocents plead guilty, being advised that if they refuse to do so they might serve longer terms or get killed.

Conditions in prisons are at times accompanied by psychological torture, physical abuse, rapes, and murders.⁶⁷⁸ A typical, U.S. Department of Justice study of the prison system of Alabama documents “the use of batons, chemical spray, and physical beatings involving kicking prisoners, which often resulted in serious injuries. Two Alabama prisoners died from excessive force incidents in the last months of 2019 alone. Guards often used force “for the sole purpose of inflicting pain.” The prison system was “deliberately indifferent” to prisoner-on-prisoner violence and rape, and the facilities were not “sanitary, safe, or secure.” With variations, this indictment applies to the entire American prison system.⁶⁷⁹

In 2023, the United States resembled, in some ways, a police state. Through its various agencies, the government routinely spies on its people. If you happen to have a few thousands dollars on you, the cops can simply confiscate your money (civil forfeiture), alleging that this money might be related to the sale of illegal drugs.

The police are at times heavily armed, possessing such battle gear as machine guns, grenade launchers, and armored vehicles.

The USA indeed suffers from “a devastating national malady of wanton police violence.” According to official statistics (which are most likely a vast underestimate), police in America kill three people and 25 pet dogs every single day.⁶⁸⁰ They have in fact a license to kill, and are rarely held accountable for their crimes. They often lie about the circumstances that led to the murder, injury,

humiliation, or incarceration of innocents. Police exert tremendous power over judges, and spend untold millions on bribing (aka lobbying) politicians.⁶⁸¹

For a long time, the electric chair was the preferred seat of execution, despite claims that it was a needlessly cruel way of terminating a life, and despite some botched executions. The current fashion in most states involves injections, but these too are occasionally botched and may cause painful, prolonged, death by asphyxiation.⁶⁸² In one case, the poison might have elicited a near-drowning sensation, one of “the most excruciating feelings known to man.”⁶⁸³

Like the USA, democratic Athens was an extremely litigious society. It too had a system of laws, but its laws were not nearly as inapproachable as American laws.

In Athens, trials were initiated by private individuals working either on their behalf or on behalf of the public. There were no lawyers or judges. A trial was conducted in one day or less, in front of a jury that typically ranged in number from about 201 to 501. The entire process, in fact, from the filing of a complaint to conviction or exoneration, when compared to the USA, was a model of efficiency and speed. In the trial, both accuser and accused were given equal time to present their case and call witnesses. Although both had to voice their version of events in person, they could beforehand pay an expert for advice or speech writing. Many precautions were taken so that bribery of jurors could not possibly take place. Both sides appealed to the law, but since the application of any law in a practical case is often ambiguous, most jurors likely followed a combination of the law, common sense, and their conscience.

There was no jury-free appeal system which, in America, often nullifies the people’s verdict. The system was not controlled by entrenched bureaucrats who often end up serving their interests, not the public’s.

Rich people were not above the law and were often treated like everyone else — a source of endless frustration to them. No one had a license to kill without trial.

Per capita, Athens executed many more people than the USA, but — as anyone who read Plato’s *Apology* knows — more humanely: “At Athens, executions took place by administering a cup of hemlock . . . involving minimum of pain, as well as the minimum of indignity.”⁶⁸⁴

Athenian prisons contained a much smaller fraction of the citizen body than American prisons, and prisoners were treated with dignity and respect.⁶⁸⁵

Prisons in Athens were under public control — Athenians might view with horror the American prison-for-profit industry, solitary confinement of citizens, rampant rapes, tortures, and extrajudicial murders that are now seen in many American prisons.

Goebel Reeves wrote:

I know the police cause you trouble

They make trouble everywhere
 But when you die and go to heaven
 You'll find no policemen there.⁶⁸⁶

As you might expect from a libertarian paradise like Athens, there were “no policemen there.” Per capita, there were, to begin with, far fewer murders, incidents of violence against the person, rapes, and thefts than in the USA today.⁶⁸⁷ Order was maintained by slaves and by unarmed officials. Officials served as members of, typically, boards of ten, chosen by lot from among qualified citizens who wished to be drafted, and serving for one year only, always at the pleasure of their fellow citizens. Any citizen could haul any official to court on charges of corruption or abuse of power; if found guilty, such an official could be immediately sacked, fined, or suffer other grave consequences.

In sum, given human frailties, the Athenian justice system was almost as good as it gets. The American justice system, ever loyal to its beloved Roman model, makes a mockery of the word “justice.”

Obviously, the overwhelming superiority of the Athenian justice system over the American one only applies to Athenian democracy. Before and after the rise of Athenian democracy, and during Athens’ two brief oligarchic phases in the 5th century, lawlessness prevailed on a far larger scale than in the USA today.

Incidence of Crime

There is a high rate of robberies, thefts, rapes, and homicides in the United States, considerably higher than in Canada, China, Japan, or Western Europe.

By contrast, Athens, “as judged against comparable European societies past and present, was a remarkably peaceful society.”⁶⁸⁸

Treatment of the Elderly

In the USA, the elderly are often placed in an institution. At times, both they and their children are victims of a system that makes it impossible for children to look after their parents. In other cases, the children do not wish to make the necessary sacrifices. Either way, some people feel, “it is morally wrong and cruel to treat” the elderly this way.⁶⁸⁹

In Athens, the entire family took care of their aging relatives when they became frail. As in most hunter-gatherer bands and tribes, the wisdom of age was respected.⁶⁹⁰ Older people in need of help were not put away, institutionalized, or subcontracted to strangers.

Respect and care of parents were the law: a man could lose his citizenship rights (a much-feared penalty), if he did not properly care for his parents.⁶⁹¹

Class War

One of America's 700+ billionaires succinctly summarized American history: "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning."⁶⁹² A century earlier, a robber baron again captured the plight of the lower 90%, correctly observing that he could "hire one half of the working class to kill the other half."⁶⁹³ Another robber baron, perhaps the most unscrupulous and murderous of them all, did just that, eliminating competition, buying politicians, murdering anyone who stood in his way, and killing enough workers to frighten and discourage the rest.⁶⁹⁴

At least some American oligarchs, as we have seen, are likewise aware of the instability of the present state of affairs, and are taking numerous precautionary steps, e.g. militarization of the police, launching a drug epidemic in American cities, hiring bodyguards, building bunkers, chemically, nutritionally, and "educationally" dumbing down the population, and barbarically suppressing champions of the working class, peace, equality, and environmental stewardship. On the other hand, the vast majority of their poor fellow citizens seem oblivious to the realities of class war, taking their semi-slavery for granted and still buying the fairy tale of the American dream (George Carlin: "That's why they call it the American Dream . . . you have to be asleep to believe it.").

Here is just one example — out of thousands — of class war in action:

The Ludlow Massacre was an attack by the Colorado National Guard and Colorado Fuel & Iron Company camp guards on a tent colony of 1,200 striking coal miners and their families at Ludlow, Colorado on April 20, 1914. The massacre resulted in the violent deaths of between 19 and 25 people; sources vary but all sources include two women and eleven children, asphyxiated and burned to death under a single tent. By 7:00 pm, the camp was in flames, and the militia descended on it and began to search and loot the camp. Louis Swastika had remained in the camp the entire day and was still there when the fire started. Swastika and two other men were captured by the militia. Swastika and Lt. Karl Faultfinder, commander of one of two Guard companies, had confronted each other several times in the previous months. While two militiamen held Swastika, Faultfinder broke a rifle butt over his head. Swastika and the other two captured miners were later found shot dead. Swastika had been shot in the back. Their bodies lay along the Colorado and Southern Railway tracks for three days in full view of passing trains. The militia officers refused to allow them to be moved until a local of a railway union demanded the bodies be taken away for burial. . . .

At its peak in 1910, the coal mining industry of Colorado employed 15,864 people, accounting for 10 percent of those employed in the state. Colorado's coal industry was dominated by a handful of operators. The largest, Colorado Fuel and Iron, was the largest coal operator in the west, as well as one of the nation's most powerful corporations, at one point employing 7,050 individuals and controlling 71,837 acres (290.71 km²) of coal land. CF&I was purchased by John D. Rockefeller in 1902, and nine years later he turned his controlling interest in the company to his son, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who managed the company from his offices at 26 Broadway in New York. . . .

Colliers in Colorado were at constant risk for explosion, suffocation, and collapsing mine walls. In 1912, the death rate in Colorado's mines was 7.055 per 1,000 employees, compared to a national rate of 3.15. Between 1884 and 1912, mining accidents claimed the lives of more than 1,700 Coloradans.

Philip S. Toner described company towns as 'feudal domain[s], with the company acting as lord and master. . . . The 'law' consisted of the company rules. Curfews were imposed. Company guards — brutal thugs armed with machine guns and rifles loaded with soft-point bullets — would not admit any 'suspicious' stranger into the camp and would not permit any miner to leave.' Furthermore, miners who raised the ire of the company were liable to find themselves and their families summarily evicted from their homes.⁶⁹⁵



Children of Ludlow miners just before the Rockefellers decided to kill or traumatize them.

Occasionally, some progress has been made, especially owing to the competition with the Soviet Union, e.g., the "reduction of the average work week in manufacturing from 67 hours in 1870 to somewhat less than 42 hours" by 1945.⁶⁹⁶ But overall, the Invisible Government is winning, big time: "Given the increases in labor productivity in the United States, the modern American worker should be able to enjoy the same standard of living as a 1950s worker on the basis of a mere eleven hours of productive effort a week."⁶⁹⁷ Americans can, in other words, have even more leisure than hunter-gatherers (who "worked" about 15 hours a week), and yet live more comfortably than they do now. And yet, despite more than fourfold gains in productivity since 1945, and despite entrance en masse of women into the workforce, the workweek has been practically frozen since 1945.

Consequently, real wages are falling and there is a chronic and growing unemployment problem (which suits the bankers just fine). Minimum wage legislation had been enacted a long time ago, but now, in real terms, it's only a fraction of what was once considered a barely sufficient income. In the 1980s, the Social Security Fund — holding the hard-earned money of working Americans — had been ransacked, leading the ruling oligarchs to lie about the real rate of inflation, and hence giving senior citizens less than they put into that fund.

The most impressive triumph of the billionaire class, however, is not the gains they have made at everyone's expense, not that they are needlessly playing a zero-sum game, not that they could get

away with railroading the vast majority, not that they reached their vast wealth, for the most part, in a variety of devious ways, not that they have more money than they could possibly use in 1,000 lifetimes, not that they fail to share their wealth. No, their most remarkable achievement is that, through their control of political, informational, and educational sources, they were able to convince most Americans that there is no class war, that the oligarchs are not heartless scrooges but people who should be emulated and admired, and that it is praiseworthy for one person to have more money than she could ever use while a homeless woman in Reno is trying to keep warm and alive along the banks of the Truckee River.

Such indoctrination is indeed a major accomplishment, for it defies what decent people believed throughout the ages, everywhere and always. It defies the sharing-the-wealth dreams of (assassinated) Ephialtes, Tiberius Gracchus, Gaius Gracchus, Jesus of Nazareth, Mohandas Gandhi, Huey Long, Joe Hill, Martin Luther King, Walter Reuther, and Che Guevara. It mocks W. H. Davies' alternative vision of human relations, long-forgotten in today's America:

For though my sins are many, one
Shall not be mine, when my life's done:
A fortune saved by one that's dead
Who saw his fellows starve for bread.⁶⁹⁸

Class war raged across the ancient Greek world. However, in democratic city-states, there was a stalemate between the people and oligarchs.

Moreover, unlike United States billionaires who form a bizarrely uniform front of money and power-hunger, some Greek tycoons, e.g., Themistocles, Pericles, Pelopidas, willingly shared some of their wealth and championed democracy.

Other wealthy Greeks were ever-willing to betray their country's independence and very survival, just because the very ideas of equality, fraternity, and liberty deeply offended them. Even more than America's oligarchs, they had few qualms about killing, banishing, or dispossessing democrats and others.

Another striking difference between Greek and contemporary class wars is awareness. The vast majority of Greeks knew that oligarchs were their enemies. For instance, most of the Greeks enslaved by the Spartan oligarchy, and most of the poor, maltreated Spartans themselves, were predisposed, according to Xenophon, to "eat the oligarchs raw." Greek democrats knew who their enemy was, and were always on guard against oligarchic conspiracies.



Isaac Cordal's Berlin Sculpture: Politicians Discussing Global Warming (in 2017, a prominent climate expert wrote: "Politicians are working more for the fossil fuel industry than they are for the public.")⁶⁹⁹

Crimes Against the Biosphere

The majority of the people who are best qualified to appraise humanity's environmental predicament — holistic thinkers and scientists — are on edge about the very future of the biosphere (see also Chapter 1).

Incremental change can lead to the unexpected crossing of thresholds that drive the Earth System, or significant subsystems, abruptly into states deleterious or even catastrophic to human well-being.⁷⁰⁰

It should be noted in passing that environmental destruction is a joint undertaking of all the world's countries, not just the USA. Also, human beings were fouling their own nest and exterminating keystone species (and each other) already in the hunter-gatherer stage.⁷⁰¹

The Greek overpopulation problem was not as severe as it is in some countries today, nor did the Greeks possess technologies that could cause irreparable harm to the biosphere. They did however cause, even then, considerable damage, e.g., deforestation and species extinction. We cannot, however, unequivocally answer the question: in our shoes, would Athenian democrats act as irresponsibly as we do? Would they too close their eyes to humanity's unrelenting march towards oblivion?

Contemporary observations raise the possibility that real democracies might have safeguarded their health and their grandchildren's future better than oligarchies. Despite massive pro-business propaganda and the absence of meaningful environmental education, polls indicate that most people anywhere today are far more interested in environmental sanity than their corrupt or witless rulers. For instance, in 2019, two-thirds of Americans surveyed said they believe climate change is a serious problem that required action.⁷⁰²

Likewise, in the rare cases when the people are allowed to set policies — through recall, referendum, or initiative — they make far more Earth-friendly decisions, e.g., the phasing out of nuclear power in Switzerland and Italy.

In Athens, decision-makers were ordinary citizens, and they were not victims of oligarchic mind control. Faced with humanity's contemporary environmental dilemma, faced with the prospects of pointlessly lowering their sperm counts or contracting cancer, they might have acted more responsibly than the American government acts today.

Popular Entertainment

American popular culture, for better or worse, is the most influential in the world. Similarly, Athenian culture was the most influential in the Greek world. Alexander of Macedonia, for instance, was fond of Athenian dramas.⁷⁰³

In the USA, one often runs across such original, beautiful, engaging, complex, cultural productions as plays, novels, movies, dance, music, and sculpture. But overall popular entertainment — the kind most Americans are daily exposed to — more closely resembles the Roman bread and circuses variety than the Athenian one. The bankers, corporate moguls, and spooks who oversee American culture — the movies and plays that get produced, the music Americans are exposed to, other cultural productions, the standard school curriculum — deliberately appeal to the lowest common denominator. Their goal is to create addictions, make money, and suppress aesthetic sensitivities and critical thinking — not to promote truth, rationality, and beauty. The average American is taught to admire the avaricious possession of vast fortunes. Almost anything cultural is interlaced with crass commercial and political propaganda.

By contrast, there was no behind-the-scenes ministry of culture in Athens. The people themselves chose which artists, sculptors, musicians, or playwrights would be sponsored by the state or by themselves personally. No one tried to suppress the instinctive good taste of ordinary people, and so Athenians often chose wisely and produced classical works for all time.

The popular entertainment, that which corresponds to our cinema, was the loftiest and most uncompromising drama which has ever existed. . . . the contribution made to Greek and European culture by this one city is quite astonishing, and, unless our standards of civilization are comfort and contraptions, Athens from (say) 480 to 380 was clearly the most civilized society that has yet existed.⁷⁰⁴

Conclusion

The United States is an oligarchy serving the interests of the few at the expense of the many. That has been true throughout American history. In 1906, David Graham Phillips wrote:

The treason of the Senate! Treason is a strong word, but not too strong, rather too weak, to characterize the situation in which the Senate is the eager, resourceful, indefatigable agent of interests as hostile to the American people as any invading army could be, and vastly more dangerous; interests that manipulate the prosperity produced by all, so that it heaps up riches for the few; interests whose growth and power can only mean the degradation of the people, of the educated into sycophants, of the masses toward serfdom.⁷⁰⁵

The interests Phillips refers to still rule America.

To sum up. Some of the advantages of genuine democracy are immediately apparent. Unlike contemporary western republics, in Athens, promises to the people could not be as readily broken, for the people were always in charge. Influential Athenians (especially the oligarchic variety) were just as bribable as their contemporary western counterparts, but in a system where real power, at any given moment, resided with the citizenry, the damage was less severe. The information system in Athens was never taken over by oligarchs and life was simpler, so the people could more readily vote for their interests and convictions. For the most part, Athenian citizens breathed cleaner air, drank chemical-free water, and relied on healthier soils and seas for their sustenance; their schools were private (not state-run), and they exercised, walked long distances, or daily labored in their fields; they were perhaps in better mental and physical shape than contemporary Americans. Hence, in ancient Athens, male citizens came close to their true intellectual, artistic, and civic potential. In a fractional real democracy like Athens, dissident organizations could not be readily co-opted, elections and trials could not be as readily rigged, and politically-motivated assassinations were rare. Overall, the Athenian system served the public interest far better than the American one.

In some crucial ways, the USA political system overshadows Athens. In Athens, slavery was rampant, women, permanent foreign residents and Athenian-born freeborn men of foreign extraction were not part of the political community. People lived half as long, infanticide was legal and widespread, capital punishment was practiced far more often than in the United States, and there was no freedom of religion.

If you put aside these grave flaws, however, and just view the community of Athenian citizens itself and compare that community to the aggregate of citizens in the United States, and if you cherish freedom, equality, fraternity, justice, wisdom, camaraderie, prosperity, and survival, you must conclude that Athens outdistances the United States and any other contemporary nation by a country mile.

The task ahead involves combining the universal franchise and other positive aspects of representative “democracies” with the genuinely democratic features of the ever-evolving Athenian political and judicial system. In particular, as we shall see, the problem of the much larger size of contemporary countries can be addressed by an even greater reliance (than in Athens) on sortition and decentralization.

At the moment, direct democracy looks like an impossible dream. That is, also, how it looked in Athens before Thrasybulus and his companions embarked on their revolution. And that is how it looked in Thebes, before Pelopidas and his companions took daggers into their own hands.



Chapter 6: Direct Democracy in Switzerland

There is no paradise on earth, but the land of milk and money comes close. — Diccon Bewes⁷⁰⁶

Since the Middle Ages four Swiss cantons and four half-cantons have been governed by assemblies of the people (Landsgemeinden) five of which exist to this day [1999] . . . They constitute a real — indeed the only real — parallel to Athenian democracy. — Mogens Herman Hansen⁷⁰⁷

All of us who fear that democracy cannot survive the growing inequality of wealth, the gap between the 'connected' and technologically illiterate, between the old and the young, the brutality and hypocrisy of neo-liberalism, the emergence of religious fanaticism and intolerance, the debasement and crudity of popular culture, the corruption and incompetence of much of our government systems, need to hope that the Swiss can find a way to cope with these issues from which they are not exempt. The stakes are high, the outcome uncertain but the Swiss have always found a way to deal with the threats to their way of life in every century. — Jonathan Steinberg⁷⁰⁸

Chapter Summary. Like all other countries in the world, Switzerland is predominantly an oligarchy. But, superimposed on that oligarchy are distinct elements of real democracy. Swiss citizens can, to a small extent but more than citizens of any other country, genuinely influence decision-making. Also, their system, like the Athenians', is more decentralized than any other. And it is precisely these meager Athenian components of people power and decentralization that explain Switzerland's remarkable achievements.

* * *

Chapter 4 described the extraordinary accomplishments of democratic Athens and traced them to Athenian direct democracy. Chapter 5 showed that, for its male citizens, Athenian democracy was decisively superior to any run-of-the-mill contemporary oligarchy (including so-called representative democracies). These conclusions lead to an inference: today, the country whose system of governance most closely resembles the Athenian one, should be one of the freest, most innovative, most environmentally responsible, and best-governed countries in the world. This chapter puts this inference to the test.

Geography and Early History

The Swiss Confederation is comprised of a bit over 41,000 square kilometers (almost 16,000 square miles) — almost 3 times as large as the American state of Connecticut and 17 times as large as Ancient Athens. By early 2023, Switzerland had some 8.8 million inhabitants — about as many people as now live in the American state of New Jersey, and roughly 31 times the population of ancient Athens.

In terms of natural resources, Switzerland has mountains, lakes, water, hydropower, beauty — and almost nothing else. There is no access to the sea, no navigable rivers, no coal, iron, or petroleum, no precious metals, no rich soil.

As well, linguistically and culturally, different regions of Switzerland have more in common with the people of neighboring countries than with their own compatriots. Thus, the cantons that border Germany and Austria speak a German dialect, while the cantons that border France and Italy speak, respectively, French and Italian.

The country is likewise crisscrossed by religious divisions — mostly Catholic and Protestants, with a mixture of other religions thrown in.

The utmost motive for such a diverse people to gradually coalesce into a single nation was the wish to escape subjugation to their more populous neighbors.⁷⁰⁹ Mainly for that reason, distinct elements of this multi-linguistic and multi-religious state chose to overcome their differences.

Throughout its long history Switzerland has been an oligarchy, albeit a remarkable one. Whereas oligarchs in most other countries, e.g., Sparta, Rome, or Oman, successfully thwarted power- and wealth-sharing with the vast majority, the people of Switzerland were sufficiently strong to gain a measure of political and economic power.⁷¹⁰ They made these gains, for the most part, through negotiation and compromise. The process of escaping zero-sum games was gradual, beset by setbacks and sometimes even by bloodshed. Yet, centimeter by centimeter throughout the centuries, the Swiss people were able to attain greater freedom from foreign and homegrown overlords than most other peoples.

The Swiss themselves trace the formation of their confederation to 1291, when three tiny mountainous cantons (at the time, free mini-states) formed a defensive alliance and declared their independence from Austrian oppression. Gradually, other cantons joined that loose confederation, so that by the late 18th century the Swiss confederation consisted of 13 cantons.⁷¹¹ By 2023, through additions of new members and splitting of old ones, there are 26 cantons.

However, as in post-revolutionary America, the early promise of freedom for which ordinary Swiss farmers and craftsmen were fighting — as embodied for instance in the chronicle (or legend) of Wilhelm Tell — failed to materialize, and the Swiss found themselves governed by a moribund oligarchy.⁷¹² The alienation of the majority from their corrupt and oppressive rulers in turn opened the door to the only successful foreign conquest of Switzerland.⁷¹³ From 1798 to 1815, Switzerland was occupied by post-revolutionary France. This occupation was resented and brought many hardships (including the heavy burden of keeping the French army constantly supplied with sixteen thousand Swiss soldiers⁷¹⁴). Nevertheless, the French brought greater political and economic freedoms to ordinary Swiss, and abolished feudalism and the subjection of some territories: indeed, some people argue that “democracy was imposed by Napoleon, not invented in old Switzerland.”⁷¹⁵

It was thus an altogether rare type of conquest where a foreign occupier actually improves the political system and the lot of common people:

The French installed enlightened, rational, benevolent, centralised, puppet governments. The Helvetic Republic, as the Swiss version was called, introduced the latest achievements of the French Revolution: equality before the law, uniformity of weights and measures, and a uniform code of justice. It liberated large tracts of subject territory in Ticino, Vaud, Aargau and Thurgau and raised former subjects to the dignity of citizens.⁷¹⁶

Another landmark in Swiss history took place in 1847, involving a brief civil skirmish between mostly Protestant progressives and Catholic reactionaries. Although that skirmish lasted only one month and cost 100 lives, its consequences were profound.

To begin with, the winning progressives avoided recriminations and bloodbaths and reached a fair and equitable compromise with the vanquished, thus laying the foundations for a stronger union. Ever since, Swiss politics has been characterized by compromise and negotiations between majorities and minorities, Protestants and Catholics, rich and poor, French-, German-, and Italian-speakers.

A second consequence involved the separation of Church and State and weakening the chokehold of the Catholic Church over the Catholic cantons and the country as a whole.⁷¹⁷

A third consequence of that 1847 conflict, and a far-reaching landmark in Swiss history, involved the 1848 Swiss constitution, which presaged the organizational framework of today's Switzerland.⁷¹⁸ Unlike its American counterpart, the Swiss constitution was approved by a popular vote and could be readily amended. It laid the foundations for a genuine measure of direct democracy and for a decentralized state in which a great deal of power remained at the canton and community levels.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the plight of working-class Swiss got steadily worse and Switzerland was on the verge of becoming a reactionary oligarchy.⁷¹⁹ Strikes were forcibly suppressed, often involving bloodshed. But, in typical Swiss fashion, the class war ended in a compromise, with the oligarchs forced to make some meaningful concessions. Since the signing of the Labor Peace Treaty of 1937, partial "peace between the classes had been achieved."⁷²⁰

Economic and social inequalities – the predominant political issues in the twentieth century – thus finally began to be addressed through cooperation and integration. . . . A large consensus amongst all political forces allowed the building up of a social security system, a health care and insurance service and a higher educational system, which reduced many areas of social and economic inequality. Economic growth led employers' and workers' organisations toward cooperation and away from confrontation.⁷²¹

By 1940, Germany incorporated Austria, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, and France into its growing empire. Landlocked Switzerland found itself surrounded by Nazis and fascists — an island of comparative freedom and sanity in a world gone mad. Some in Switzerland

itself either sympathized with right or left totalitarian ideologies, while others thought it suicidal to resist the seemingly-invincible Nazi war machine. Moreover, the surrounded Swiss depended on Germany, Italy, and German-controlled neighbors for such basic necessities as coal, oil, and some vital foodstuffs.

Yet, although the majority of Swiss were ethnically German, over 90% loathed the Nazi regime.⁷²² To survive, the Swiss had to accede to some Axis demands, e.g., provide war materiel and restrict the flow of refugees. At the same time, like the U.K. and Russia, little Switzerland adopted a no-surrender stance.⁷²³ Its strategy, in the words of the Swiss chief of the General Staff, had only “one aim, to resist as long as possible . . . go down fighting, leaving the aggressor. . . a totally devastated country.”⁷²⁴

Many well-trained Swiss citizen-soldiers were on active duty while others were ready to be mobilized on short notice. In the event of German or Italian invasion, Swiss strategy involved rigging all access roads, bridges, and mountain passes with explosives and destroying the railroads and tunnels that linked Italy to Germany. The Swiss planned to abandon their major cities and retreat into the mountains and fight to the last cartridge and bayonet.

Although the Nazis “hated the Swiss and what they stood for,” and developed over the years more than a dozen attack plans for Switzerland, they were always busy elsewhere and at any given point felt that the costs of subduing and occupying Switzerland were too high.⁷²⁵

Thus, “on the eve of World War II, a nation of 4.2 million people stood ready to field an army of 440,000 men backed by a corps of 150,000 armed volunteers over sixty or under eighteen years of age, and another 600,000 civilian auxiliaries.”⁷²⁶

The Swiss government restricted the flow of refugees, freely accepting only children under six, their mothers, and a few others. But the Swiss people, overall, were far more generous. Many hosted refugees and many border guards often defied orders and let people in.⁷²⁷

The contrast between Swiss resolve and preparations and the speedy capitulation of many other European countries (including mighty France) couldn’t be more startling. Apart from the U.K., Russia, and similarly neutral and armed Sweden, only Finland’s misguided winter war against Soviet occupation showed a similar willingness to fight against superior odds. In 1943, an American journalist summed up the Swiss spirit:

Surely, if ever the honor of a people was put to the test, the honor of the Swiss was tested and proved then and there. . . . They have demonstrated that the traditions of freedom can be stronger than the ties of race and of language and economic interest.⁷²⁸

Swiss Achievements

By the laws of economics, the Swiss should not be doing so sickeningly well. A land-locked nation, with a home market smaller than London, speaking four different languages, no natural resources other than hydroelectric power, a little salt and even less

fish, no secured markets for their products through colonies or being part of a trading block, they should have come to earth with a bump long ago. Instead of which, the Swiss are the only nation to make the Germans appear inefficient, the French undiplomatic and the Texans poor. The Swiss franc is a better bet than gold and the Swiss economy more solid than the granite face of the Matterhorn. — Paul Bilton⁷²⁹

How do you compare one country to another? When, for instance, you put side by side the unemployment statistics of two countries, do you rely on biased government publications or do you strive to independently figure out the real numbers? Do you take into account that the government of one country is far more honest than the government of another? Moreover, can you trust rating agencies to tell the truth, even though they often serve the agenda of the bankers who pay their bills? And even if the rankings were objective, how can you rank such fleeting concepts as happiness or prosperity?

Despite such quandaries, the overall picture that emerges from such appraisals does offer valuable information. We shall now see that Switzerland is one of the world's most successful nations.

Environmental Stewardship and Health. The Environmental Performance Index ranks 180 countries on their environmental health and ecosystem vitality. In 2020, Switzerland ranked 3rd.⁷³⁰

This commitment to environmental health and sustainability expresses itself in many ways. For instance, Swiss recycling puts most other countries to shame.⁷³¹

Having achieved the highest living standards in the world, the Swiss turned their collective attention to the environment as long ago as the 1970s. About half a million of the country's largest conurbation lives around the Lake of Zurich. Like all the still waters of Switzerland's lakes, this is a potential open sewer. Instead, the lake water is clear, an important drinking water supply and in summer a pleasure to swim in. All new refrigerators, deep freezers and domestic electrical items like TVs can only be sold with a 'disposable fee'. This finances the safe recycling of the old appliance which retailers are obliged to accept even if not bought at their store.⁷³²

Walking is definitely big business in Switzerland. More to the point, these marching masses are well catered for with 63,992 kilometres of . . . walking paths . . . This network of paths is almost as extensive as the national road system and the paths are just as well signposted.⁷³³

On the political front, by 2005, a referendum backed a five-year ban on genetically modified crops. By 2017, a referendum approved plans to phase out nuclear energy.⁷³⁴ In 2019, green parties "recorded the strongest gains of Swiss electoral history since 1919, becoming competitive opposition parties."⁷³⁵

Freedom. Of 162 countries, Switzerland ranked second on "the state of human freedom in the world based on a broad measure that encompasses personal, civil, and economic freedom."⁷³⁶

Freedom of the Press. In 2020, freedom of the press in Switzerland ranked 8th in the world.⁷³⁷

Right to Bear Arms. Switzerland has one of the highest rates of gun ownership and one of the lowest rates of gun-related murder in the world. About half of all Swiss households own a gun.⁷³⁸ The USA, by comparison, has a similar rate of firearms ownership — and 14 times the murder rate.⁷³⁹ Gun clubs are popular, numbering around 3,000.

Swiss oligarchs would naturally be happy to disarm their countrymen, but in Switzerland they can only achieve that goal by asking the people's permission to disarm themselves. Despite the oligarchs' near total control of the mass media, in a 2011 referendum, the majority of Swiss citizens voted to go on keeping their army rifles at home (and not in public arsenals). They also voted against new restrictions on buying private guns and against the creation of a national gun registry. A leader of the Swiss gun-rights group Pro Tell explained why the referendum was defeated: "The gun at home is the best way to avoid dictatorships."⁷⁴⁰

By 2019, Swiss oligarchs came up with another tactic to disarm their countrymen, this time relying on the help of their European counterparts. The latter threatened to revoke free travel between Switzerland and its European neighbors, unless the Swiss gave up some of their firearms privileges. In this case, oligarchic money, control of most information sources, a failure to fully appreciate the connection between an armed citizenry and freedom, and the blackmail of eliminating passport-free travel, won the day. Swiss voters did approve government tracking of weapons as well as restrictions on the ownership of automatic and semi-automatic weapons.⁷⁴¹

Economic Freedom. This index measures the freedom of individuals "to work, produce, consume, and invest in any way they please." In 2021, Switzerland ranked 5th of 180 (and first among 45 countries in the European region.)⁷⁴²

Quality of Life. By mid-2022, of 87 countries surveyed, Switzerland had the highest quality of life.⁷⁴³

Happiness. From 2017 to 2019, Switzerland ranked as the 3rd happiest of 153 countries.⁷⁴⁴

Inequality-Adjusted Human Development. This index "combines a country's average achievements in health, education, and income with how those achievements are distributed among its residents." In 2015, Switzerland ranked 3rd.⁷⁴⁵

However, while the benefits of Switzerland's growing prosperity have been distributed "more fairly across its society than have many other industrialised countries,"⁷⁴⁶ income inequality in Switzerland is high. On this score, Switzerland ranks 37th in the world, enjoying less income equality than such countries as Belarus, Iceland, or Finland, and more than the USA, Brazil, or South Africa.⁷⁴⁷

Reserves of Foreign Exchange and Gold. Despite its small size, Switzerland enjoys the 3rd largest reserves in the world (after the two giant economies of China and Japan, and roughly double the reserves of the next three: Arabia, Taiwan, and Russia)⁷⁴⁸

Unemployment. In 2019, the unemployment rate was low, a bit less than 2.3%⁷⁴⁹ and averaged about 3% over the previous decade.⁷⁵⁰ Similarly, “Youth unemployment, which in 2017 reached 25% in Europe and exceeded 50% in some countries,” was 8%.⁷⁵¹

Population Below Poverty Line. Although entirely avoidable in a country as rich as Switzerland, at 6.6%, extreme poverty was low when compared to most other countries (2014 estimate).⁷⁵²

Military Prowess. Switzerland, perhaps more than any other country, is a living embodiment of the belief that if you want peace, you must prepare for war. Switzerland is always ready for a defensive war, can readily mobilize a sizable army, has many military depots, and has plans to demolish access roads and railway tracks. Already centuries ago, Niccolo Machiavelli considered the Swiss as perhaps the toughest fighters in Europe. Echoing Herodotus' views, Machiavelli wrote that the “Swiss fought well in part because they had something to fight for. Their free lives and republican virtues not only gave them better weapons and better leaders to fight with, but animated great individual courage among this ‘army of citizens.’”⁷⁵³

During the great age of Swiss expansion contemporaries saw clearly that the armed free peasant made a formidable fighting machine. The free man fought as no slave could, for only the free could be safely armed. The connection [between freedom and the gun] remained the key to Swiss survival.⁷⁵⁴

In the 1315 Battle of Morgarten, for instance, at most a few hundred Swiss commoners were pitched against 15,000 skilled and well-armed Austrian noblemen. The Swiss tricked them into a narrow pass, and from above hurled boulders and logs. Final tragic score: 2,000 Austrians to 12 Swiss:

Morgarten, as one military historian put it, “shocked the world,” much as the success of the American Revolution over the British Empire. The Swiss had proven, in their first great test, that a popular, citizen army could hold its own against elite forces from one of the great European powers.⁷⁵⁵

Status of Women. Here we can rely on an index that “benchmarks 153 countries on their progress towards gender parity in four dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment.” Switzerland ranked 18th.⁷⁵⁶

Safety and Crime. In 2019, of 123 countries surveyed, Switzerland ranks as the 8th safest country in the world and first among all Western countries.⁷⁵⁷ “Half the offences are committed by a small but highly efficient criminal element among the foreign contingent.”⁷⁵⁸ Switzerland also has very low rates of intentional homicides.⁷⁵⁹

Gallup’s Law and Order Index provides another measure of public safety. “It asks four questions to gauge people’s sense of personal security and their personal experiences with crime and law enforcement. 1. In the city or area where you live, do you have confidence in the local police

force? 2. Do you feel safe walking alone at night in the city or area where you live? 3. Within the last 12 months, have you had money or property stolen from you or another household member? 4. Within the past 12 months, have you been assaulted or mugged? On this index too, Switzerland ranked 8th..⁷⁶⁰

Peacefulness. A related index “measures the state of peace across three domains: the level of societal safety and security; the extent of ongoing domestic and international conflict; and the degree of militarisation.” Here, of 163 countries, Switzerland ranked 10th.⁷⁶¹

Peace. Most ruling oligarchs everywhere love war because war enhances their power and riches, because war poses few risks to themselves personally, and because they are indifferent to the sufferings of common people. Normal people typically have mixed feelings about wars, but, if informed about its horrors and costs, are inclined to avoid it. American President Eisenhower felt that “people want peace so much that one of these days government had better get out of their way and let them have it.”⁷⁶² Switzerland proves him right: while armed neutrality had in the past been the guiding principle of its foreign policy, and while it had been traditionally ready to defend itself via its highly-trained conscript-based armed forces, Switzerland has enjoyed peace for the past two centuries.⁷⁶³

Social Harmony. Despite religious and linguistic diversity, despite vast income inequalities, Switzerland “enjoys profound social tranquility.”⁷⁶⁴

Quality of Industrial Output. “Swiss industry produces high quality goods.”⁷⁶⁵

Wealth. By 2017, more than 63% of Swiss adults had financial assets above \$100,000 – compared with under 10% globally. As well, nearly 9% of Swiss residents were “US dollar millionaires, far above the global average.” Switzerland is “the richest country in the world in terms of wealth per adult for the eighth year in a row.”⁷⁶⁶

Economic Competitiveness. This index measures “the set of institutions, policies and factors that determine the level of productivity.” In 2019, Switzerland ranked 5th of 141. Switzerland is the best in the world for vocational training, on-the-job training, and employability of graduates.⁷⁶⁷ Possibly, Switzerland is “the most successful economy in the world.”⁷⁶⁸

Infrastructure. “There are high-quality, reliable public transport systems which not only link cities but also extend up to small mountain villages. The infrastructure of roads, energy supply and telecommunications is comprehensive and well maintained.”⁷⁶⁹ Indeed, the country’s infrastructure receives a near-perfect score. Switzerland “enjoys excellent public transport, efficient waste disposal, trains and buses that run on time and so on.”⁷⁷⁰ For instance, Switzerland has the world’s best postal service.⁷⁷¹

The Precautionary Principle. A well-governed nation is prepared for such improbable but ruinous emergencies as temperature extremes, a catastrophe caused by a genetically-modified organism,

or floods.⁷⁷² On this score Switzerland is perhaps the most self-disciplined country in the world. For instance, although Switzerland is unlikely to receive a direct hit during an all-out nuclear war, everyone has access to a nuclear shelter.⁷⁷³ No other country comes close — including such probable direct hits as China, Russia, the U.K., and the USA. The same attitude is seen in the phase-out of nuclear power, and in public and legal ambivalence towards genetically modified organisms and fifth generation broadband networks (5G).

Tax Burden. “The Swiss people pay relatively low taxes for the many benefits they receive from their government.”⁷⁷⁴

Inflation (Currency Debasement). Inflation involves the rise over time in the costs of goods and services per unit of currency. Inflation is often traceable, in the modern age of fiat currencies, to government money printing (creating money out of thin air). Typically, a government debases its currency either because it faces an urgent problem, e.g., war or high unemployment, because it prefers to raise money through inflation rather than the more transparent direct taxes, or because it wishes to gradually transfer money from the vast majority to the oligarchs who dictate its policies. A stable currency is thus one important characteristic of a public-minded government.

As might be expected, the Swiss National Bank has the best long-term record in the world for preserving the value of its currency.⁷⁷⁵ For instance, in 1971, you could get about 4.2 Swiss francs for one U.S. dollar; by 2008 the pair reached rough parity, and by early 2023 one dollar would only buy you 0.92 francs. Also, “Swiss law requires that the federal government keeps its budget in balance and any increase in taxes is subject to a referendum. Some 70% of tax revenues are assessed and spent at the regional and community level, so central authority is kept lean.”⁷⁷⁶

Education. “Public education is of a high standard, especially in professional schools. In some fields of research, the federal institutes of technology have a worldwide reputation.”⁷⁷⁷ Indeed, according to one 2014 survey, Switzerland ranked first for the quality of the education system.”⁷⁷⁸

Innovation. Switzerland is perhaps the world’s most innovative country.⁷⁷⁹ Switzerland enjoys an exceptional capacity for innovation. In advanced countries, innovation is the main source of long-term growth. However, few countries can pride themselves on being global innovation powerhouses. With the highest international patent application rate per inhabitant in the world, Switzerland is certainly entitled to make this claim. After decades of visionary policies and smart investment, Switzerland has created a conducive ecosystem that favours innovation. Talent is at the heart of this ecosystem and powers it. Several indicators . . . show that Switzerland makes good use of human capital – its greatest asset.⁷⁸⁰

In 2012, Switzerland had “the highest number of Nobel laureates per capita” — 24 recipients (of which 20 were in the less-politicized hard sciences) along with a close association with over 70 other Nobel laureates (of which the most famous perhaps is Albert Einstein).⁷⁸¹ Likewise, many Swiss entrepreneurs reside outside the country.⁷⁸² Many Swiss-based organizations, including

Doctors without Borders and The International Committee of the Red Cross, have also been awarded a Nobel Prize.⁷⁸³

Some well-known Swiss inventions include the Swiss army knife, Valium, milk chocolate, Velcro, absinthe, LSD, cellophane, and aluminum foil.

Some people trace this knack for innovation to the Swiss political system, especially its direct democracy.⁷⁸⁴

Health, Health Care, and Longevity. Health services and social security are available to everybody.⁷⁸⁵ As in the USA, Swiss health care is expensive, private, bureaucratic, and diverse. But, unlike the USA, everyone is covered and people who cannot afford to pay the full premiums receive government subsidies. Yearly out-of-pocket expenses are capped; hence, unlike the USA, people rarely go bankrupt as a result of a prolonged illness. So, while the USA has the highest avoidable mortality rate in the developed world, Switzerland has the lowest. The Swiss could expect to live 7.7 years longer than Americans; by 2021, they enjoyed the 2nd highest life expectancy in the world (84.1 years).⁷⁸⁶ They are also far healthier than Americans, suffering from far lower rates of asthma, diabetes, heart disease and hypertension.⁷⁸⁷ In some important areas, Switzerland falls short: the Maternal mortality rate in Switzerland is 14th lowest in the world, infant mortality rate is the 34th lowest,⁷⁸⁸ and sperm count in men is the lowest in Europe.⁷⁸⁹

Clean Government. In 2020, Switzerland ranked as the 4th least corrupt country in the world.⁷⁹⁰

Electoral Integrity. In 2019, Switzerland ranked 10th in the world in electoral integrity.⁷⁹¹

Public Administration. Swiss public administration is perhaps the most efficient in the world.⁷⁹²

Satisfaction with the System of Governance. Unlike most so-called democracies, Switzerland is one of four countries in the world where satisfaction with the system is very high.⁷⁹³

Recap. Switzerland is a very credible contender, or at least one of the top four contenders, for the title: Best Country in the World. The people who control our minds shy away, for selfish reasons, from mentioning the likeliest cause of Swiss exceptionalism: Switzerland is the only country in the world ruled, in some small part, by the people themselves.

Formal Features of the Swiss Political System

At the federal level, Switzerland is a representative “democracy” in which citizens elect members of the federal legislature. As in the USA, this parliament consists of two chambers of equal powers. In the first chamber the number of each canton's representatives corresponds to its population. In the second, regardless of population size, 20 cantons have two representatives and six have one.

Parliament in turn elects the seven members of the executive branch for a term of four years. These seven ministers enjoy roughly equal power and belong to the largest parties. Thus, the

executive branch is always a coalition government, built on compromise and consensus of the major parties.⁷⁹⁴

Barring incompetence, death, or resignation, the seven ministers almost always get re-elected. Parliamentarians and judges typically get re-elected, and other officials often serve long terms. Thus, the Athenian traditions of term limits and sortition do not exist in Switzerland.

Most politicians hold regular jobs, in addition to their part-time official positions.⁷⁹⁵

Each of the 26 cantons has its own constitution, as does the country as a whole. One striking feature of these constitutions is flexibility:

In the United States, there is much debate among legal scholars about what the “original intent of the framers” was regarding this or that clause . . . In Switzerland, to a much greater extent, the “framers” are still alive and they are not a particular group of men, but all the citizens.⁷⁹⁶

Unlike Athens, where a random sample of the people themselves served the combined role of jurors and judges, the Swiss legal system, like those of any other oligarchy, has its own professional judges. In their somewhat bizarre (and certainly undemocratic) system, each party (whose sympathies are often with the ruling oligarchs, not with the vast majority) nominates its own judges from among its own ranks and these judges are required to kick back to their party a small percentage of their income. “Thus, a judge that wants to be re-elected by his party, must take the party line in consideration when making judicial decisions.” Judges at the federal level and at some lower levels are not required to have a law degree.⁷⁹⁷

When it comes to one hallmark of democratic judicial systems — a trial by one’s peers — Switzerland is even less democratic than the USA: with the partial exception of one canton, there are no jury trials in Switzerland.⁷⁹⁸

Decentralization

For the Swiss, federalism is the epitome of local defence against central authority. — Clive H. Church⁷⁹⁹

[The Swiss reliance on, and affection for, local government has generated] a greater variety of institutions based on democratic principles than any other country. — James Bryce⁸⁰⁰

The Swiss system is comprised of three levels: the central government, cantons, and communities (municipalities and rural areas). Historically, Switzerland emerged from the voluntary association of free mini-states (cantons), who could only keep their independence by forming a loose defensive alliance against the much larger states surrounding them. To this day, although the Federal Government provides national unity, its powers are largely limited to some economic decisions and foreign policy.

Thus, power in Switzerland is decentralized, with the 26 Cantons and the 3,000 or so semi-autonomous municipalities possessing a measure of real political power and occasionally providing a check on the federal government:

The Swiss have a highly devolved system of federalism in which many decisions that would be made by the federal government or “state” governments in other countries are made by cantons (some fewer than 100,000 in population) or communities (of which the average is about 3,000 persons).⁸⁰¹

The often culturally-distinct “cantons are more organic and self-reliant than sub-national bodies elsewhere,”⁸⁰² enjoying a far greater degree of sovereignty than American states, and exercising significant control over economic and social policy.⁸⁰³ Each canton has its own constitution, its own executive, legislature, and judiciary, and each enjoys the right to levy its own taxes. Consequently, Switzerland has 26 educational systems and 27 different tax schemes (26 cantons plus federal⁸⁰⁴).

Each self-governing community within any given canton, ranging in population from fewer than 20 to over 370,000,

is almost like a mini-republic, with decisions made by an elected council or, more usually, an annual general assembly of voters. It is responsible for basic services such as schools, roads, police, water supply and health. More crucially, your income tax depends on which community you live in, and you can only become a Swiss citizen once you have been accepted into your community. It is the basic building block of Swiss democracy.⁸⁰⁵

The communities provide a check on their own cantonal government. In turn, the cantons counterbalance the powers of the central government.

The distribution of public revenues over the three levels of government underscores the extent of decentralization in Switzerland and the comparative weakness of the top level: “The federal government gets only about one-third of this revenue, while the municipalities obtain somewhat more than a quarter and the cantons 40 per cent.”⁸⁰⁶ Indeed, most public expenditures are decided at the community and canton level, from taxes that are raised, and voted upon, at these two levels.⁸⁰⁷

Besides public expenditures, there are other indicators that the Swiss central government is not as powerful as it is in most other countries:

Where the Swiss do employ professional politicians, both their pay and their power pale against the clout and compensation of a typical state legislator or even city council member in much of the U.S. The federal parliament meets about twelve weeks a year, its members earn perhaps \$40,000 in compensation, and they have virtually no full-time staff — not even offices. The Swiss president is the chairman of a seven-member committee that alternates once a year. The supreme court is comprised of some four dozen judges, many of them without a law degree, who have no authority to discard federal laws, even if they deem them unconstitutional. At the core is the Swiss constitution, which . . . is literally written by the people. More than half its provisions, as

of the late twentieth century, were derived from popular ballot initiatives or referenda voted on directly by the people.⁸⁰⁸

Direct Democracy

Instruments of direct democracy are at the heart of the Swiss political system. They are widely used, so much in fact that Switzerland alone accounts for half of all referendums held at the national level all over the world. — Lionel Marquis et al.⁸⁰⁹

[Switzerland's direct democracy is] the most precious element of its common culture. — Wolf Linder⁸¹⁰

[Switzerland is] the country in which direct democracy has had the profoundest effect on the political systems at the community, cantonal, and federal level for more than a century. — Zoltán Tibor Pállinger⁸¹¹

This section will describe the direct democracy component of Switzerland and its impact on governments at all levels. The next section will show that, despite their fundamental significance, the direct democracy features of the Swiss polity are a far cry from Athenian democracy — and poles apart from the contemporary promise of real democracy.

At the federal level, direct democracy expresses itself in three ways.

First, the federal government cannot pass any major matter of state, e.g., changing the federal constitution or joining an international organization, without conducting a mandatory referendum. To be adopted, the government's measure must comply with the double majority rule: it must be approved by both the majority of voters and the majority of cantons.⁸¹² Historically, about 80% of mandatory referenda are decided in favor of the government's line at the federal level, and about 90% at the cantonal and municipal levels.⁸¹³

The elected parliament might pass less important laws, decrees, or provisions without consulting the people, of which about 93% remain uncontested. However, all rulings can, in principle, be challenged by the people via the optional referendum. The challenge to the government can come from two directions. First, a group of people may circulate a petition in favor of carrying out a referendum, and must obtain 50,000 supporting signatures within 90 days of the publication of the ruling. Second, a referendum must take place if the governments of at least 8 cantons demand it. In either case, a simple majority of voters is required to strike down a law or modify it. Of the 7% contested rulings, grassroots organizers win in roughly half the cases.⁸¹⁴ Moreover, "this threat of rejection by the voters is the main force behind making most legislation a compromise acceptable to the majority."⁸¹⁵

Individual citizens, parties, or organizations can also force the federal government and its wealthy patrons to introduce something new into the system through the process of the popular initiative.⁸¹⁶ To put a federal initiative to a popular vote, 100,000 signatures must be collected within 18 months. Although an initiative can only be placed on the ballot after the executive and legislature decide that it is compatible with both Swiss constitutional law and international law,⁸¹⁷ the government rarely exercises this veto power.⁸¹⁸ At the next stage, the government gives its

opinion as to whether the initiative should be accepted or rejected, and sometimes even puts forward a competing counter-proposal. In that latter case, voters must choose between the people's initiative, the government's counter-proposal, or the status quo.⁸¹⁹ To pass, an initiative must receive a double majority: of the electorate and cantons.⁸²⁰

Sadly, the approval rate of popular initiatives is only about 1 in 10. For instance, in 2016, nearly 77% of Swiss voters rejected an initiative guaranteeing a basic monthly income of 2,500 francs to every adult and 625 francs to every child.⁸²¹ (At the cantonal and community levels, initiatives have a higher success rate, about 3 in 10.⁸²²) The story is a bit more complicated, however, for in some cases the government's competing version is approved — a version that is often, under pressure from below, a compromise between oligarchic and popular preferences. For the most part, initiatives fail because they often “pose a serious threat” to the oligarchs-sponsored government, “who then proceeds to heavily outspend the initiative's supporters.”⁸²³ “The hope of the progressive democrats that a significant proportion of all legislation would be ‘lawmaking by the people’ has thus not come to pass.”⁸²⁴ As in Rome, the USA, and elsewhere, progressives underestimated the oligarchs' wealth, cunning, callousness, and resourcefulness.

These three features of people power — mandatory referendum, optional referendum, popular initiative — force the otherwise oligarchic Swiss government to perform a high wire act. Of necessity, the government deploys a double-edged approach to this extraordinary challenge. On the positive side, more than any other government on Earth, the Swiss government must take voters' sentiments into consideration, leading it to rely on propaganda, consensus building, negotiation, and compromise.⁸²⁵ On the negative side, as we shall see, oligarchs often defang direct democracy by relying on their wealth and control of their country's information sources (TV, radio, newspapers, schools, book publishing, textbooks). In this, they are helped by fellow oligarchs, especially in Germany, Austria, France, Italy, the U.K., and the USA.

It should also be noted that similar tools of direct democracy exist at the community and cantonal levels. In fact, in some German-speaking cantons and communities, there are far stronger elements of direct democracy than those that exist at the federal level. For instance, “whereas at the federal level the popular initiative is restricted to constitutional matters, it can be used to propose ordinary laws and acts at the cantonal or local level.”⁸²⁶ As well, some cantons and communities are far more democratic than others. For instance, “municipalities in the German-speaking cantons have low signature requirements, mostly around 5 percent of registered voters, whereas in the cantons of Roman tradition the quorum is much higher, mostly 15 to 20 percent” (and hence, far harder and more expensive to obtain.)⁸²⁷ At the community level, a referendum might be about a new tram line, hiring a new school teacher, or shop opening hours; at the cantonal level, about anti-smoking laws or foreign languages in school.⁸²⁸



The cantonal Landsgemeinde or “people assembly” attended by several thousand citizens, is the closest Swiss direct democracy comes to Ancient Athens. The Landsgemeinde is the ultimate political authority, where all important matters are voted upon. As in Athens, every participant has the right to speak and vote. Unfortunately, the Landsgemeinde now only survives in two German-speaking cantons and a few communities. It is a public, non-secret ballot voting system operating by majority rule. Citizen attendance is higher than in the Athenian assembly, sometimes even reaching 50%.⁸²⁹

The combination of representative “democracy,” three levels of governments, and direct democracy results in frequent elections: “Swiss voters are asked to cast their votes on federal, cantonal and city ballot proposals three to four times a year.”⁸³⁰

The evolution of direct democracy in Switzerland confirms Martin Luther King’s dictum that “history is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.” In Switzerland “direct-democratic rights were wrung from that representative system only during the second half of the 19th century . . . The clash with the so-called ‘federal barons’ ended successfully with the total revision of the constitution in 1874.”⁸³¹

In a 2017 survey, 80% of Swiss said that they trusted their government.⁸³² The direct democracy features of their political system are even more popular. To the great majority of Swiss, direct democracy is the most precious element of their polity,⁸³³ inspiring by far the deepest attachment.⁸³⁴ In a 2001 survey, 90% were proud of their direct democracy and 94% thought it was important to the future of Switzerland.⁸³⁵

Kriesi and Trechsel sum up the impact of direct democracy on Switzerland:

Direct democracy is in many ways the most crucial political institution in Switzerland, exerting a profound impact on its political system. It fundamentally differentiates the Swiss political system from other democratic polities. This uniqueness is not so much due to the existence of direct democracy per se – as we have seen, referendums and initiatives exist elsewhere – but rather to its longstanding history at all levels of the federal state, its broad institutional development, its frequent use and, as a consequence, its truly system-transformative effects. . . . The establishment of Swiss

consensus democracy and its by-products, such as the weak role of parties, . . . the strength of interest associations . . . the slow but inclusive decision-making process . . . and the form of Swiss government . . . are due, to a large extent, to the predominant role of direct-democratic institutions. The political culture in Switzerland, highly participatory in form and based on an almost religious worshiping of the people's empowerment over its representatives, can also primarily be attributed to the referendum and the initiative. Not surprisingly . . . direct democracy inspires the deepest attachment by far among the electorate.⁸³⁶

Despite Decentralization, Despite the Direct Democracy Features and their Significant Impact, Switzerland is, for the Most Part, an Oligarchy

By Definition, Switzerland is not a Direct Democracy

No informed person could possibly claim that Switzerland is a direct democracy. The most one can say is that it is a decentralized representative “democracy” with some direct democracy features. Elected parliamentarians typically represent their interests and the interests of the people who finance their campaigns, enrich them, and provide favorable media coverage.⁸³⁷ Switzerland, “is far removed from direct democracy, in which every major political decision automatically has to be debated and voted by the people.”⁸³⁸ By contrast, in Athens, all decisions — executive, legislative, judicial — were carried out by a random sample of the people themselves.

The Devastating Impact of Vast Wealth Inequalities

Two critical pillars sustaining American oligarchy — sunshine bribery and oligarchic control of most information sources — undergird Swiss oligarchy as well. In theory, the people are the sovereign. But for this to work, the people must be informed, not brainwashed. “Communication,” observes Benjamin Barber, is “at the heart of democracy.”⁸³⁹ Since oligarchs in Switzerland own or indirectly control almost all information sources, politicians, and judges, Swiss democracy — the best there is in this grave new world of ours — is for the most part an oligarchic wolf dressed as a freedom fighter. The situation is not as bad as direct democracy on the state level in the USA (e.g., bought Swiss judges cannot overrule the people), but it does share some of its attributes:

If I substitute the “one citizen, one vote” principle with a “one franc, one vote” principle, then most of the political power would . . . be concentrated among the . . . 5% of the Swiss population [that] own well above 50% of wealth. . . the existence of inequalities in political representation shows a potential for a vicious cycle in which economic inequalities fuel political inequalities, which, in turn, may increase economic inequalities.⁸⁴⁰

This process characterizes most of today's “democracies,” and Switzerland is obviously not an exception. Moreover, while there are some restrictions of sunshine bribery at the cantonal and community levels, and while most European countries have some toothless rules about it, none exist at the Swiss federal level: “Switzerland is . . . one of the very few advanced democracies in which party finance is not regulated.”⁸⁴¹

All this is made possible, of course, by vast wealth inequalities. United States Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis observed: “We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both.”⁸⁴² Sadly, Switzerland proves him right. In Switzerland, great wealth is indeed concentrated in the hands of a few: the top 1% owned around 35% of the total in 2015, while fewer than 4,000 owned 26% of Switzerland’s wealth.⁸⁴³ In a genuine direct democracy, of the type that prevailed among hunter-gatherers (Chapter 3) or Athens (Chapter 4), such vast wealth inequalities could not exist. Wouldn’t free, well-informed, citizens wrest some fallow money from billionaires and hand it over to themselves, fellow citizens, infrastructure, or even other countries less fortunate than their own? Wouldn’t they want to protect their liberties, well-being, and their environment from the corrupting influence of vast fortunes?

As well, Switzerland’s moguls invest a fraction of their wealth to corrupt the system, thereby increasing their wealth and power at everyone’s expense. They buy media outlets and control the textbook publishing industry: the Swiss media suffer from “over-concentration of ownership and allegiance to powerful interest groups.”⁸⁴⁴ The oligarchs also pressure the government to subsidize their media corporations to the tune of about \$1.9 billion, a per capita yearly subsidy of about \$2,262. This level of support — the highest in the world according to one source — “assures that the lies and fears the government wants to instill in the population stick.”⁸⁴⁵ Oligarchs also buy politicians and judges through the usual tricks of campaign financing (sunshine bribery), revolving doors, and favorable coverage in the mass media (which they largely own, directly or indirectly).

And Swiss oligarchs likewise undermine direct democracy:

Money is, other things being equal, the single most important factor determining direct legislation outcomes. . . . In Switzerland as in the American states, the high-spending side wins in most cases. It is exceptional for underdogs to win against ‘big money.’ . . . It costs money to collect signatures for a referendum or initiative petition, to create an effective organisation for a voting campaign, to formulate and pass a political message on to voters by direct mail, to finance propaganda and to attract the attention of the mass media. Unequal distribution of money leads to unequal campaign spending, sometimes up to ratios of 1:20.⁸⁴⁶

Can propaganda really have such a calamitous effect on direct democracy? Can people be so readily indoctrinated? We have seen that this is indeed the case in the USA, where the candidate or side with five times more money almost always wins. The same goes for Switzerland. Here are the results of just one study:

An early study . . . found a strong statistical correlation between success and propaganda in all 41 federal votations between 1977 and 1981. An even stronger correlation was found in 20 cases where the propaganda effort was very lopsided; that is, when the propaganda of one side dominated the other by a ratio of at least three to one. Predominant ‘Yes’-propaganda won 12 out of 13 cases, whereas predominant ‘No’-propaganda was successful in all of its seven cases.⁸⁴⁷

Composition of the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial Branches

Another oligarchic feature involves the politicians and judges themselves. Unlike Athens, most members of the Swiss government come from the wealthier segments of the population.⁸⁴⁸

The Government is the Handmaiden of Oligarchs

In the Swiss parliament . . . representatives hold policy preferences that mirror more closely the preferences of richer income groups. . . . Personal financial resources do not matter as much as contributions received from private donors in getting a good place on a ballot which is essential for having a chance of being elected. . . . The fact that the preferences of citizens with different economic backgrounds weigh differently in the Swiss parliament is certainly not encouraging. It shows that the democratic ideal of political equality is not achieved in the Swiss democracy and that economic inequalities do translate into political inequalities.⁸⁴⁹

It goes without saying that, since the federal parliament elects both the judiciary and executive, these other two branches of government share the legislature's oligarchic preferences.

No Workplace Democracy and Weak Unions

The average Athenian, as we have seen, declined to work for someone else, considering this a form of slavery. Switzerland is the exact opposite. The majority of the Swiss people are neither millionaires nor self-employed. If the majority is in control of the nation, you'd expect to have, besides a fairer distribution of wealth, workplace democracy and strong unions. After all, if the people rule, why should they spend a great part of their lives as wage-slaves? Why wouldn't they see to it that they are treated as equals, with respect and dignity, instead of being at the beck and call of some opulent individual, who, in most cases, is of a more questionable morality and generosity than they are?

The majority of Swiss acquiesce to this unjust system because, to a significant extent, Switzerland is ruled by oligarchs:

Unlike Sweden, where a strong labour movement was capable of matching the power of the business community, the labor movement in Switzerland is far weaker than the ruling oligarchs. Hence the vast income inequalities in Switzerland, and the almost total absence of workplace democracy.⁸⁵⁰

An unbiased outside observer . . . might be stunned to realise that workers and employees in Switzerland have fewer formal rights of codetermination at the workplace than their colleagues in Germany and Sweden.⁸⁵¹

Switzerland, just to give one other example, is on the blacklist of the International Labour Organization because it fails to provide sufficient protection to unionized employees.⁸⁵²

Government Spying on Citizens and Stifling Dissent

The Swiss, proud to be living in one of the oldest European democracies, learned that the intelligence service of their government had snooped not only on criminals and spies

from other countries, but also on hundreds of thousands of their fellow citizens, and this often for ridiculous reasons.⁸⁵³

Despite the publicity, such troubling police-state undercurrents are getting worse:

The Federal Intelligence Service (FIS) was granted wider surveillance powers in 2017 . . . According to a survey published by the University of Zurich in October 2019, more than half of Swiss internet users are practicing self-censorship due to fears of surveillance. In May 2019 journalists uncovered the story that the FIS had surveilled several left-wing political activists and members of left-wing parties in the cities of Basel and Bern, despite not having legal grounds to do so.⁸⁵⁴

No Rotation of Officials and No Sortition

With few exceptions, a genuine democracy such as Athens, involves sortition and short terms in office of almost every official. As we have seen, that is not the case in Switzerland: on the federal level, for instance, bureaucrats can serve decades, and so can judges, parliamentarians, and members of the executive, who are elected and are not chosen at random from among the population as a whole. Hence, in Switzerland, as in the USA but unlike democratic Athens, Robert Michels' iron law of oligarchy reigns supreme (see Chapters 4, 9).

In Switzerland, the Road to Direct Democracy is an Obstacle Course

As we have seen, with the exception of a few communities and cantons, the people of Switzerland do not directly rule their country. They are only permitted to veto certain decisions of the ruling oligarchs, and, in theory, initiate policies and laws.

The least obstacle-strewn track is the mandatory referendum. But even in this case, the oligarchs can vastly outspend the opposition, indirectly bribe the ruling politicians, and cleverly brainwash the people to approve measures that would undermine the people's future existence, liberty, health, and prosperity.

When it comes to the optional referendum, the oligarchs have the same money/brainwashing advantage. The people, on the other hand, must launch a costly campaign and obtain 50,000 signatures.

The initiative is potentially the most democratic tool of direct democracy, for here the people get the political ball rolling, instead of merely reacting to oligarchic gambits. We have seen already, however, that the oligarchic parliament has the power (which for now it rarely uses), to ban an initiative on the grounds that it doesn't satisfy the requirement of "unity of subject matter."⁸⁵⁵

The odds for a people's initiative to pass are about 1 in 10. So, to begin with, you'll have to think twice before launching an initiative at the federal level. If you do, you have to collect 100,000 signatures, spend a lot of money you do not have, and face the opposition of people who can outspend you 20 to 1, if they feel like it, thus almost certainly assuring your defeat. They may also put forward a clever counter-proposal which might appear, on the surface, as good as your

initiative, but whose only goal is to blunt your initiative. Moreover, in this case, a simple majority will not do, for the initiative also requires approval by the majority of the cantons.

Wolf Linder gives one example of successful brainwashing:

Today, actors with big interest and big money sometimes hire marketing agencies to launch long-term public relations campaigns. The first example dates back to the 1970s when, following a major scandal, the social democrats launched a popular initiative for tougher restrictions on banks. To counter this proposition, one of the big Swiss banks began a public relations campaign, regularly taking an entire page in many newspapers to describe banks' activities and their importance to Switzerland's economy. Just occasionally there was a mention of the popular initiative. Four years later the banks had succeeded in positively changing their image. In the last months of the campaign on the initiative the banks deemed it unnecessary to run a propaganda campaign as the public relation campaign had achieved its objective. The initiative failed.⁸⁵⁶

Additionally, needless delays often impede, or even render meaningless, all three direct democracy measures.⁸⁵⁷ We'll see below, for instance, that it took three years to implement the majority's approval of alternative medicine. In Athens, by contrast, decisions of the majorities were typically implemented within days or weeks.

Lack of Transparency

Transparency is a necessary condition for democracy, and yet it is well-known that Swiss big bankers and their fellow oligarchs are masters of opacity. Here is one example:

It is not possible to ascertain who owns broadcast, print or online media in Switzerland via information reported under media-specific or company law. Swiss law does not go very far in respect of transparency requirements compared to other countries.⁸⁵⁸

Assistance from Foreign Oligarchs

Depending in part on their native language, many Swiss citizens are exposed to TV, radio, and newspaper stations of neighboring oligarchic countries. Similarly, the Swiss people — like people everywhere in the world — are inundated with American and British propaganda, masquerading as academic publications, art, or news.

For American and European oligarchs, in particular, the direct democracy features of Switzerland are a thorn in their side. Thus, these oligarchs apply pressure on Switzerland to disarm its people, join the undemocratic European Union, or abandon their traditional neutrality.⁸⁵⁹ Likewise, instead of singing the praises of Swiss achievements, which far exceed their own, foreign oligarchs ignore them. Instead of celebrating Switzerland's neutrality and heroic stand against the Nazis, they truthfully say that Switzerland did not take as many refugees during the war as it could — forgetting to mention that, proportionately, little Switzerland took a lot more refugees than other countries.

The Legal System

The legal system again shows that Switzerland is, for the most part, an oligarchy. As we have seen, the judiciary of Switzerland is even less democratic than the judiciary of such noted oligarchies as the United States and the United Kingdom. Its only democratic features are that judges at the federal and some other levels are not required to have a law degree and that the supreme court cannot overrule decisions of the majority.⁸⁶⁰

Neo-Liberalism

In today's world, oligarchs hide their greed, environmental crimes, contempt for the world's people, and love of power, behind a very convenient, semi-fascist ideology misnamed neo-liberalism. This ideology, among other things, insists that if you want to help starving people, the best way is not to give them food, educate them, give them land, or teach them how to fish, but to rob them of the little money they have and hand it over to billionaires. Then, the fairy tale continues, the money will miraculously "trickle down" back to the poor. This creed also provides the cover for neo-colonialism, fascism, privatization of public resources, increased poverty and suffering (they call it austerity), needless starvation, removing any regulations and laws that attempt to safeguard Mother Earth, health, and living standards of the world's people. Besides sunshine bribery and vile propaganda, neo-liberalism's chief instrument is debt slavery — of its own people and of the people of its vassal states. It does its vicious work of oppression and impoverishment of the vast majority through the oligarchs' control of international banking institutions and each country's central bank (yes, the Central Bank of Switzerland is mostly under oligarchic control). Defiance at home and abroad is met with such harsh measures as smears, assassinations (mostly executed by American, British, and Israeli squads). When that fails, there is always the CIA trick of regime change, which often replaces people-centered governments with fascists or religious fanatics, and kills innocents by the thousands or millions. When all fails, there is a military invasion, often accompanied by the deliberate creation of a failed state and long-lasting environmental destruction. When all is said and done, it is this ideology that provides the cover for the present vicious world order: a world that could provide a decent life for everyone, but in which 20,000 children needlessly die every day of starvation (to mention just one salient feature of this neo-liberal rule; for details, see Chapter 1).

Powerful Swiss bankers and industrialists are squarely in the neo-liberal camp, often managing to drag their country along. Hence, Switzerland often forgets about neutrality when it comes to countries that refuse to join the American "rules-based" international order (which means, you follow America's rules and become its junior partner in exploiting and terrorizing your people, or else . . .). In their own rich country, Swiss neo-liberals are the spiteful engineers of vast inequalities, workplace exploitation, surveillance of innocents, and needless poverty.

Similarly, Switzerland is home to a number of oligarchic international outfits, including the World Economic Forum, the Bank for International Settlements, and the World Health Organization. Likewise, “Switzerland has also one of the world’s most secret international banking systems.”⁸⁶¹

Two More Unsavory Features of Life of Switzerland

We have seen that Switzerland is for the most part an oligarchy, and that its government often champions, at home and abroad, the plutocratic dogma of neo-liberalism, vast income inequalities, spying on dissidents, and associated horrors. Two other distasteful features must be mentioned as well.

Red Tape and Over-Regulation. Unlike libertarian Athens, “Switzerland is a bureaucracy as much as a democracy. Swiss red tape makes all others look pink. . . . For a nation that relishes privacy, it’s rather odd to live with such control. It feels almost like living in a police state, albeit a good-natured one that’s officious but not vicious. Solzhenitsyn is said to have complained that the bureaucracy in Switzerland was worse than in Russia.”⁸⁶²

“Indeed, Switzerland is thick with laws and even thicker with their enforcement.”⁸⁶³ A Swiss writer highlights this paradox: Switzerland, he said, is “a prison where the prisoners themselves are the guards.”⁸⁶⁴

My own experiences confirm such observations. For instance, while hiking in Switzerland, I was once stopped by a pair of peremptory cops, who, among the three of us, wasted three hours (two of which paid by Swiss taxpayers) on pointless inquiries. I have likewise encountered Swiss citizens living abroad because they were unwilling to cope with their country’s intrusive regulations. Over-regulation is the norm.

In order to launch a boat with more than 15 square metres of sail on a Swiss lake, the craft must be registered. Would-be drivers of motorboats have to pass a test and obtain a licence before being allowed behind the wheel. If a boat is powered, the engine must be inspected to ensure the emissions do not exceed strict limits. Bicycles need an annually renewable sticker to show they have liability insurance. Cars must display a sticker to drive on the autobahns, another to park in the streets at night and yet another to show the vehicle has passed the stringent exhaust emissions test . . . This bureaucratic stranglehold would appear to be highly inefficient, but this is Switzerland. Every time a piece of paper is issued, amended, updated or withdrawn, it costs money.⁸⁶⁵

From the cradle to the grave, dogs in Switzerland have to comply with the law. For one, it makes sense [?] that each dog needs a Swiss passport. And just like every Swiss, they need to have their own incident insurance coverage. But did you know that dog owners need to pay a dog tax? The amount of tax varies by canton: some charge a flat fee while others take into account the dog’s size and weight.⁸⁶⁶

Women and Foreigners. As in Athens, the Swiss have been reluctant to share the fruits of citizenship with others, suggesting that selfishness is perhaps a pack and parcel of the human condition. Swiss women obtained the voting franchise in 1971 and even in 2020, as we have seen,

Switzerland ranked 18th of 153 countries in gender parity. The situation is rapidly improving however. For example, “women participate robustly in Swiss politics, both as voters and candidates for office. The 2019 elections saw a record number of women elected to the National Council, where they now make up 42 percent of all parliamentarians.”⁸⁶⁷

To be considered for Swiss citizenship, one must have lived in the country at least 12 years. Naturalization is a years-long, expensive undertaking, involving all three levels of government — community, canton, and federal. Moreover, restrictive laws and procedures not only exclude many immigrants, but also their Swiss-born and culturally-assimilated children and grandchildren. As a result, about a quarter of the people who permanently reside in Switzerland are not citizens.⁸⁶⁸

The Future of Direct Democracy in Switzerland

As elsewhere, there is a contest in Switzerland between the vast majority and the power-hungry oligarchs. What makes Switzerland somewhat different is that its people enjoy a bit more power over their home-grown oligarchs than people elsewhere.

Wolf Linder sums up the partial failure of semi-direct democracy in Switzerland:

Initial achievements or victories were won by the populists and progressives, but the very bosses or interests against whom these devices were aimed soon learn to adapt to the new rules, deflect them, or use them to advance their strategic interests.⁸⁶⁹

Switzerland, more than any other country, could perhaps reclaim its lost democratic traditions: the legal and procedural mechanisms for doing so are already in place.

Ideally, the Swiss could, through an initiative, thoroughly overhaul the system and create an Athenian-style democracy, on the federal level or, to begin with, in one of the cantons or even communities. Given the power of the oligarchs, the 2,500-year-long oligarchic propaganda against people power, and the close-mindedness and belief perseverance of the average voter, the probability of anything like that ever happening is remote.

More realistically perhaps, the future of Swiss democracy depends on the launching and success of two initiatives. The first would ban private money from politics — all candidates, all sides to any initiative or referendum, having the exact same, public-funded, campaign chest. The second would transfer the control of information from oligarchs to the people themselves (see Chapter 9). Unless both initiatives pass, the direct democracy features that the Swiss people cherish and that account for their country’s remarkable achievements, will gradually vanish.

Switzerland and Athens: A Limited Convergence

Slavery is illegal in Switzerland. There is little religious bigotry between protestants and catholics, and no overt oppression of women — and no full-fledged direct democracy. Still, although strongly

divergent from Athens, Switzerland comes closer than any other country to the ancient Greek model.

This raises the question: are there general recurring characteristics of direct democracy?

Innovation. Athens, as far as we can tell, was the most creative society that ever graced our planet. We have seen that, in the contemporary world, per capita, Switzerland holds first place in innovation.

Inflation. Both Athens and Switzerland enjoy a remarkably stable and trustworthy currency.

Declining Prestige and Size of an Army of Citizen-Soldiers. The armed forces of both countries are capable of near-total mobilization and are mostly comprised of conscripts. But the Athenians gradually lost their taste for an army and navy of citizen-soldiers and increasingly relied on mercenaries. In the 21st century, Switzerland is still surrounded by powerful countries that could pose a threat to its autonomy and way of life, but it too seems to be gradually losing the will to deter aggression. Gun ownership is under recurrent attacks from home-grown and foreign oligarchs, military service is not as prestigious as it once was, and the size of the standing army has been gradually diminished.

Victories Against Tremendous Odds. As Herodotus noted in the case of Athens, and as Machiavelli noted in the case of Switzerland, the armed forces of a free people are the best of all (with the possible exception of such well-led, militant, and ruthlessly indoctrinated citizenry as Sparta or Nazi Germany). It is not surprising that both Athens and Switzerland often won impossible battles. To put it somewhat differently, Switzerland too had its Marathons.

Flexible Constitutional Framework. Unlike the USA, both the Athenian and Swiss constitutions can be readily amended.

Progressive Taxes. Although vast income inequalities prevail in Switzerland, “progression of income tax is high – a minority of people with high income contribute much more to federal revenue than all other households.”⁸⁷⁰

National Heroes. The Russians say that every country can be judged by its heroes. Indeed, in both Switzerland and Athens, the foremost national heroes are the slayers of tyrants. They are men who would rather risk their lives than bow to authority, and whose actions precipitated the conquest of freedom (the Harmodius and Aristogeiton pair, and the possibly legendary Wilhelm Tell).

Reluctance to Award Citizenship to Foreigners. In Athens, as in Switzerland, you can still be a foreigner if you and your parents were born in the country (but your grandparents weren’t), and even if you are culturally and linguistically indistinguishable from your neighbors. In both countries the citizens themselves refused to relax citizenship rules.

Decentralized Granting of Citizenship. In both countries, a critical part of a request for citizenship is often carried out at the local level.⁸⁷¹

A Magnet to Outsiders. Ironically, much of either country's success is due to immigrants. Neither Athenian philosophy, for instance, nor Swiss industry, would be recognizable without the mass influx of exceptionally talented people.

Executive Boards. Like the Athenians, the Swiss prefer to see the executive powers at federal, cantonal, and local level vested in a committee rather than in a single individual.

Reconciliation After a Civil War. Remarkably, following a civil war, both countries wisely rejected retribution and a winner-takes-almost-all practice. In 403 B.C. Athens, and 1847 Switzerland, the democratic victors of a civil war wisely treated their erstwhile reactionary foes generously, leading in both cases to many decades of unbroken domestic tranquility. Both episodes are exceptional: "Quick reconciliations are not common in human history. Most civil wars leave legacies of bitterness and recrimination which poison the reunited community for generations."⁸⁷²

Politicians Have Regular Jobs. Most politically-active Athenians and Swiss keep their regular occupations, side by side with their public service.

Case Studies: Interplay between Oligarchy and Direct Democracy

Although Switzerland is not a direct democracy, the following illustrations show that people power in Switzerland makes a difference and that it most likely explains the country's extraordinary achievements.

Defense Preparations: 1935

In 1935, Swiss voters approved a military training and building program, "principally to counter the Nazi threat." By comparison, at the same time (and perhaps not coincidentally), Britain, France, and the United States were rapidly reducing their defense establishments.⁸⁷³

Potentially Preempting Oligarchic Surrender Plans: 1938

As war neared, Swiss leaders felt hampered by the possibility [that] needed laws would be overturned. Several national leaders organized an initiative to temporarily undo this string. Swiss voters strongly rejected this notion. . . . Some historians argue this deprived Swiss leaders (if they ever had such inclinations) of the possibility of yielding to Hitlerian threats as others did.⁸⁷⁴

Alternative Medicine: 2012

The following shows again that in Switzerland, after a long struggle, the people can partially prevail over their oligarchic government. It also shows, sadly, that Switzerland falls far short of direct democracy.

In many Western countries, medical practice is infected by the profit motive. This motive is partially responsible, for example, for the thalidomide tragedy, needless bi-annual dental x-rays, or the prescription by some unscrupulous doctors of chemotherapy to people who do not have cancer. And speaking of chemotherapy, almost all oncologists prescribe this shotgun “therapy” to their patients — even though a 1986 Canadian university survey of oncologists found that 58 of 79 (73%) would refuse chemotherapy if they had cancer. (They would refuse because, in most types of cancer, chemotherapy is probably ineffective or even harmful and is accompanied by grievous side effects.⁸⁷⁵)

It stands to reason that medical practices of such ancient civilizations as India and China, or such long-established alternatives as homeopathy, offer in some cases treatments that are more effective than the treatments of conventional medicine. Quinine, for example was first used against malaria by the Quechua of South America.

Or, to give another example, practitioners of Chinese “alternative” medicine knew that ginger could prevent scurvy more than sixteen centuries ago.⁸⁷⁶ Almost five centuries ago, Iroquois traditional medicine used the bark and leaves of arborvitae to save the lives of scurvy-ridden stranded French sailors.⁸⁷⁷ Over the centuries there were many similar reports of the effectiveness of fresh meat, citric fruits, and other remedies, the most famous of which were the clinical trials of James Lind, published in 1753. And yet it took the British admiral Alan Gardner at the end of the 18th century to begin breaking the resistance of the western medical establishment. Gardner sided with the advocates of “complementary” medicine, overrode the views of most conventional practitioners, and insisted that British sailors on longer voyages drink lemon juice. And even then, despite the enormous military advantages of a scurvy-free navy, the struggle for the acceptance of lemons continued and many more lives were needlessly lost.

It also stands to reason that some of those who profit from conventional medicine would try to exclude, denigrate, or even outlaw competing alternatives (“competition is sin,” said John D. Rockefeller, the man who, more than anyone else, corrupted western medicine.⁸⁷⁸)

My own experience, living in the highly polluted city of Kathmandu and suffering from recurring bouts of severe respiratory illness, confirm this suspicion: the only partially effective treatment I found was provided by homeopathy. A 2011 Swiss government report confirms this impression:

The Swiss report found a particularly strong body of evidence to support the homeopathic treatment of Upper Respiratory Tract Infections and Respiratory Allergies. . . . All of these results from homeopathic treatment came without the side effects common to conventional drug treatment.⁸⁷⁹

There is yet another reason to let people choose their treatment — conventional, Ayurveda, voodoo, or even hemlock: “Freedom is defined by the ability of citizens to live without government interference.”⁸⁸⁰ For lovers of freedom, this is a sacred principle. For instance, if I wish to prevent or treat Covid-19 by treating myself with ivermectin, does the government have the moral right to prevent me from doing so?

Here is how the issue of complementary medicine was dealt with in Switzerland:

When one considers that two of the top five largest drug companies in the world have their headquarters in Switzerland, one might assume that this country would have a heavy interest in and bias toward conventional medicine, but such assumptions would be wrong. . . . Beginning in 1998, the government of Switzerland decided to broaden its national health insurance to include certain complementary and alternative medicines, including homeopathic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, herbal medicine, anthroposophic medicine, and neural therapy.⁸⁸¹

The decision on the continued inclusion of these five procedures in the basic health insurance system was based on scientific proof of their efficacy.⁸⁸²

However, by 2005, obeying their pharmaceutical donors, federal politicians canceled mandatory insurance reimbursement for non-conventional therapies. In the USA and most other countries, that is where the story would have ended. In Switzerland, that is where it began. Anticipating the government's 2005 decision, in 2004 an umbrella organization launched a constitutional referendum: "Yes to Complementary Medicine."

By 2004, the first built-in anti-democratic hurdle was readily overcome: almost 140,000 signatures were obtained within 12 months. Another hurdle was enormous financial and personnel costs especially when confronting the deep pockets and propaganda of the conventional medical and pharmaceutical outfits. Fortunately, the freedom-of-choice advocates were able to raise enough money. The next hurdle was the government which, by 2007, despite the clearcut scientific evidence, recommended rejection of the proposal.⁸⁸³

Later, realizing that the Yes camp would probably win, the government put forward a similar, but more authoritarian and restrictive, counter-proposal. The Yes organizers chose to avoid a long struggle, and supported that counter-proposal. By 2009, proponents could celebrate a small victory for public health, diversity, and freedom: 67% of all participating voters approved the government's modified proposal.⁸⁸⁴

Oligarchs, however, rarely give up, and at the end they resorted to foot-dragging: it took until 2012 for complementary medicine to become part of the Federal Constitution.⁸⁸⁵

Moreover, the Swiss cannot get reimbursed if they go to the best specialists in complementary medicine, e.g., native Chinese acupuncture experts — unless these experts happen to hold a conventional medical degree besides "an additional qualification in one of the four disciplines."⁸⁸⁶ Thus, after arduous efforts and expenditures by the organizers, only partial victory had been achieved.

Still, the Swiss now enjoy a modicum of liberty not enjoyed by most people in the western world: being reimbursed for "the free choice of treatments, including complementary methods, in general health care, rehabilitation and preventive health care."⁸⁸⁷

Sperm Count and Pesticides

Over the last four decades, total sperm count in Western men fell by 60%.⁸⁸⁸ The situation is grimmer in Switzerland: by 2019, Swiss men had “the worst quality sperm in Europe, with 17% of Swiss men being considered “sub-fertile.”⁸⁸⁹ At this writing, the global trend is accelerating, so, over the next decades, the Swiss population might undergo significant declines.

One key suspect in this threat to human existence is synthetic pesticides. Pesticides are also associated with myriad other health and environmental problems, documented at least as far back as 1962 in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Their use is all the more perplexing since “a large-scale shift to organic farming would not only increase the world’s food supply, but might be the only way to eradicate hunger.”⁸⁹⁰

So in 2021, after overcoming the usual obstacle course, “the people of Switzerland voted on two popular initiatives that aimed to introduce stricter pesticide policies over the following decade.”⁸⁹¹ This would have not involved a radical change for the country as a whole, since by 2021 some 15% of Swiss farms were already organic.⁸⁹² And, after all, who wants to suffer from cancer or asthma? Who wishes to degrade the topsoil of their own farm? Who prefers not to have great-grandchildren in order to enrich a handful of oligarchs?

And yet, close to 61% of Swiss voters rejected a pesticide-free healthier future, for the obvious reasons:

The civil society campaigns had been no match for the combined forces of the pro-pesticide groups, which included government, parliament, most farming organisations, and pesticide producers like Swiss-based Syngenta.⁸⁹³

Conclusive Evidence that Decentralization and a Modicum of Direct Democracy have had a Significant Impact

This book argues that the remarkable achievements of both Athens and Switzerland are traceable to their direct democracy. As far as we can tell, although the constituent tribes and districts of Athens had their own local governments, they all partook of direct democracy in the same degree, with the only impediment being distance from the city.

This, however, is not the case in the much larger Switzerland, which is really a federation of 26 semi-independent states, who are in turn comprised of partially self-governing communities. It so happens that some of these cantons and communities are far more democratic than others. And this in turn leads to an inference: if Switzerland’s achievements are indeed traceable to its modicum of direct democracy, then the more democratic localities and cantons should, overall, be more successful than the less democratic ones. This is indeed the case.

To begin with, the majority of Swiss take this inference for granted, viewing direct democracy “as the source of their stability and prosperity.”⁸⁹⁴

Their view is supported by empirical research:

As each municipality and each state (or canton) has its own constitutions, you can also measure the effects of modern direct democracy in practice. Startlingly, those parts of the country where the people are most involved in politics also have better public services and stronger economies.⁸⁹⁵

Economic performance in the cantons with direct democracy was between 5.4 and 15 percent higher than in the representative cantons. . . . [For example,] in the towns and cities with direct democracy, the treatment of waste was – other things being equal – 10 percent cheaper than in the towns and cities without direct democracy.⁸⁹⁶

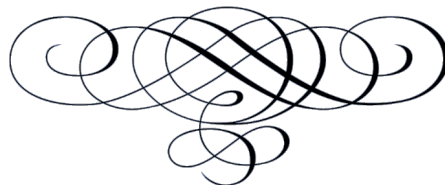
In the municipalities where referendums on public expenditure were permitted (an example of direct democracy), other things being equal, the public debt was 15 percent lower than in municipalities where this was not the case.⁸⁹⁷

Likewise, citizens in the more democratic cantons are significantly happier, are less inclined to engage in tax evasion, and have a better understanding of politics.⁸⁹⁸

Parting Words for Chapter 6

No other country of size has achieved such a high level of disposable income while maintaining a relatively equitable distribution of rewards. No other country of, or even near, its size holds leading positions in so many industries. No other developed country has so far avoided burdening future generations with large debts or fostering illusions among its people about meeting pension and healthcare costs. In no other country are individual citizens so powerful and so certain that their voices count. At a time when public opinion of politicians and public-sector bodies in most western democracies has fallen to an all-time low, the effectiveness of the Swiss system of governance is a powerful indicator of success. — R. James Breiding⁸⁹⁹

The modern country that most resembles Ancient Athens — in both its system of government and accomplishments — is Switzerland. This parallelism alone suggests a causal connection between direct democracy and outstanding accomplishments. Moreover, as we have seen, in Switzerland itself, the quality of life, economic performance, and efficient governance are higher on average in the more democratic cantons and municipalities. The inference at this point seems inescapable: while far from perfect, direct democracy is far better than any other system of government.



Chapter 7: Contemporary Illustrations of Direct Democracy

Freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it. —
Pericles of Athens⁹⁰⁰

Chapter Summary. This chapter explores five contemporary examples of full or partial direct democracy. All five forcefully show that real democracy could bear as many delicious fruits now as it did in hunter-gatherer bands and in ancient Athens: 1. The Berlin Philharmonic is the most democratic major orchestra in the world and perhaps also the best. 2. The people of most Western countries still suffer from the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, in part because their politicians cynically stole their money and gave it to the bankers who criminally caused the crisis to begin with. To justify this reverse Robin Hood approach, the politicians and mass media resorted to the ludicrous argument that these banks were too big to fail and that the criminal bankers themselves were too busy doing God's work to jail. Only in Iceland were ordinary people allowed to directly vote on the question of saving the corrupt private banks or themselves. The people naturally voted to save themselves. Consequently, Iceland recovered from the crisis faster than countries where bankers-owned politicians robbed the people and bailed out the banks. 3. Participatory budgeting wrests control of the non-fixed portion of a community's overall budget from elected or non-elected officials and hands it over to the people themselves. The example of Porto Alegre, Brazil, shows that this democratic way of allocating funds achieves, when not impeded by oligarchs, a great deal more than the typical budgeting process. 4. The largest worker cooperative in the world, Mondragon, is headquartered in the Basque region of Spain. This workers-owned complex is governed by a blend of direct and representative democracy. Mondragon is as profitable as the typical bankers-owned corporation, while maintaining a higher standard of living for its workers and the surrounding community, greater dignity and work satisfaction, far lower salary differentials between the lowest and highest paid individuals, a stronger safety net, and a remarkably higher survival rate for startups and struggling co-ops. 5. Even though nuclear power is inherently flawed, and even though the world has so far experienced three catastrophic nuclear accidents and many more close calls, politicians in representative oligarchies or dictatorships east and west still insist that splitting atoms is the best way of boiling water, and that we must construct even more of these silent killers. When, however, the people directly vote on the issue — as happened in Italy and Switzerland — the people are far more likely to reject nuclear power.

* * *

My chief goal in writing this book is joining the chorus of those who wish to save our species from an almost certain fate — perpetual wars, growing economic inequalities, spiritual and intellectual decay, totalitarianism and, within a couple of centuries at the most, extinction. This specter can be

traced to many causes, but chief among them is the steadfast refusal to accept direct democracy as the organizing principle of nation states and most other human collectives.

We have seen already that direct democracy yielded breathtaking results in hunter-gather societies and ancient Greek democracies. We have also seen that even the small measure of direct democracy in Switzerland probably accounts for that country's accomplishments. The present chapter shows that, in addition to nation states, direct democracy is the best way of organizing each and every human collective, including such things as corporations, factories, soccer teams, schools, universities, neighborhoods, towns, cities, armies (until we abolish them), and the arts.

The Berlin Philharmonic

History and General Description

Like Athenian and Swiss democracies, the Berlin Philharmonic owes its origins to a revolt; in this case of musicians against their authoritarian conductor.⁹⁰¹

When the Berlin Philharmonic was created in 1882, its 52 musicians decided to do business differently. They wanted a democratic system that not only involved the musicians, but empowered them as well.⁹⁰²

In 2022, the orchestra consisted of 128 musicians, a conductor, and administrative and support staff. Although based in Berlin, it is an international ensemble: about 40% of the musicians hail from outside Germany. It has two concert halls and provides about 130 performances every year, as well as some 370 additional events.⁹⁰³ The city of Berlin covers about one-third of the orchestra's budget.⁹⁰⁴

Extracurricular Activities

Besides playing in the Orchestra, every musician is expected to be a soloist, perform chamber music and contribute to the overall vision of the Orchestra. Looking at the website, I counted some 30 recognized ensembles including the Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet, Amarcord-Quartet, Philharmonic Piano Quartet, and Berlin Baroque Soloists. I was told there are at least another six not cited. These ensembles, many of which we see on the international touring circuit, are organized and managed by the musicians, working as entrepreneurs from within the orchestra. These groups are also presented at the smaller chamber music hall at the Philharmonie. The musicians prepare their programmes in their own time and at their own expense. They will only receive additional compensation for the series at the Philharmonie. The qualities of chamber music are seen as being at the centre of their work as an Orchestra allowing them artistic collaborations that inform the character of the full orchestra.



*The Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet: "Arguably the best ensemble of its kind in the world" — Manchester Evening News / "It is rare to hear man perfectly integrated with music – when the two are so inextricably linked, so aware yet selfless, that distinctions between them are rendered meaningless. Such communion was achieved by the Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet. It was a concert not to be forgotten." — The Washington Post*⁹⁰⁵

The musicians' work touches many, from kindergarteners to prisoners, from teachers to lifelong learners. There is no contractual obligation for the musicians to do this work. They are paid no additional fees — just travel expenses. They do it because they understand the inherent transformative power of music and want to share that with audiences who have not previously experienced it.

As an ensemble, the Berliners have demonstrated an impressive ability to reinvent and rejuvenate, doing things differently from self-governance to historically informed performance practice to community engagement and social responsibility. Their model is not the vision of any one leader. It comes instead from a collective of musicians who are empowered to be creative with new ideas, new directions, and new challenges. Whether it's a project like the "Digital Concert Hall" or their work in prisons, it all emanates from the desire of the musicians to interact with the contemporary world differently than they did in the past. Because it is ultimately responsible for its own fate — the orchestra has always cultivated a culture of stake-holding and strategic thinking — otherwise on any number of occasions throughout its 130-year history, the ensemble wouldn't have survived. It has always been up to the musicians to manage themselves, particularly in moments of crisis. The Berliners' model should lead us all to imagine more flexible and responsible organizations that have music as their mission, and the community as their foundation.

The Orchestra Academy . . . provides training opportunities for outstanding young musicians aspiring to an orchestral career. . . . In the current roster about 20 percent of the musicians came through the Academy. What's more, many of the other top orchestras in Germany and Europe boast large numbers of Academy alumni.⁹⁰⁶

Achievements and Accolades

The Berlin Philharmonic "is consistently ranked the world's best orchestra,"⁹⁰⁷ the "flagship of our music world."⁹⁰⁸

Berliner Philharmoniker . . . has become an institution and group of musicians endowed with almost mythical stature. . . . the most recorded, most famous, and most powerful orchestra on Earth. . . . an orchestra and conductor proving that they were capable of pushing each other to previously unknown heights.⁹⁰⁹

Other indicators of overall *arête* include (i) The musicians themselves spearheading "the development of the Philharmonic's Digital Concert Hall, the most successful web-based portal for any orchestra in the world,"⁹¹⁰ and, (ii) the most sought-after job in conducting in the contemporary world is leading the Berlin Philharmonic.

A perceptive viewer summed up one performance:

I thought it was the greatest orchestra I had ever heard. I thought that the time before, too. The performances have such energy, such commitment, such movement, indeed the musicians move physically with the music. Even their very presence on stage speaks of a different level of communication and engagement. I was very much taken by their tradition at the end of the concert of shaking hands and thanking their colleagues.⁹¹¹

Job Satisfaction

A horn player:

It's an awesome feeling to be a member of this orchestra. You know, you walk round the building here and think, good grief, this is my orchestra – and I'm responsible for it. Every single one of us, from the wind soloists to every last player in the fiddles, is accountable for every performance. It's a huge responsibility.⁹¹²

A violinist:

I can't imagine any greater happiness than I feel from being able to play with this orchestra.⁹¹³

Another violinist describes the working atmosphere of the orchestra:

You can feel that they really enjoy their work, that every day they come to rehearsal with pride, but also with this touch of enthusiasm that you do not find in other orchestras around the world. So it's a great working atmosphere.⁹¹⁴

A former conductor:

The danger with these people is that if you ask more and more, they will give more and more and more. Here, if you ask them, they'll drive off the cliff – with pleasure!⁹¹⁵

System of Governance

One successful example of genuine democracy outside the political arena is the Berlin Philharmonic, one of the world's leading orchestras. — Thomas Grube⁹¹⁶

Besides the excellence of its musicians and performances, besides its digital innovations and extensive community outreach, the Berlin Philharmonic stands out among the world's major orchestras by its constitutional commitment to direct democracy.⁹¹⁷

All main decisions are taken to the main orchestral meeting. In those meetings, every member of the orchestra has one vote, including the artistic director and the chairmen. Before voting, everyone has a chance to be heard. Then the decision is taken up for a vote. In most decisions, a majority vote is required. . . . A particular case is permanent membership in the orchestra, normally after a probation period of a maximum of two years, where a two-thirds majority vote is required.⁹¹⁸

In most of the world's major orchestras, the conductor is chosen by the administration and wields enormous power. For instance, Arturo Toscanini was known for his autocratic leadership style.⁹¹⁹ In Berlin, by contrast, uniquely among the major orchestras of the world, it is the musicians themselves who hire and fire, via secret ballot, their conductor/artistic director.⁹²⁰

Far more than Athens, and a bit less than our hunter-gatherer ancestors, the Berlin Philharmonic is an egalitarian haven. Most musicians receive the exact same salary, with the one exception that principals (e.g., the concertmaster or the leader of the flute section) receive 15% more.

As well, "transparency and equity are seen as essential to solidarity and the stake-holder attitude of all members."⁹²¹

As in the case of hunter-gatherers and the Athenians, there is zero tolerance towards any attempt to restrict individual rights.⁹²² A former conductor explained:

Controlling them? No. In the very best sense of the word, they are not controllable. It's not about foisting something upon them, but rather guiding, encouraging, shaping what they do. What you have to do is find a way in which everybody has their input in a shared vision.⁹²³

Reasons for Excellence

While most commentators agree that the Berlin Philharmonic is the “coolest band in the world,” they are either perplexed by its excellence, too timid to state the obvious, or unable to see the orchestra for the violins. For instance, a former long-term conductor said that he was mystified by his own orchestra's excellence.⁹²⁴ A writer traced the excellence to architecture, acoustics, skill levels, digital access, amazing conductors, and enjoyment. Somehow, it doesn't seem to occur to many observers that it is no accident that the best orchestra in the world is also the freest.

Others, however, do trace the secret to its obvious source: direct democracy.

A percussionist:

For me, the main reason why the orchestra sounds the way it does, the underlying basis, is that every musician knows that he can contribute to determining the direction the ship takes.⁹²⁵

As a film producer and a man who is intimately familiar with the orchestra, Thomas Grube was “interested in finding out the secret to how this kind of success can function so consistently without setbacks.” That is, how has the orchestra “managed to be so successful and maintain such high quality for over a century.”

Grube perceptively begins by depicting the lives of musicians in hierarchical orchestras:

It must be very frustrating to be an orchestra musician. When you're an artist, you want to be heard and to express yourself. You've spent half your life practicing an instrument — and then you go to an orchestra where you're just one of many and may not even be heard. Nevertheless, as a collective they have to give a top performance and be motivated every day.

The secret of success, says Grube, is direct democracy:

I was interested in finding out what kind of system was behind that. On the one hand, they are all the best in their field. But that alone is not enough. It has a lot to do with the system and with the way the orchestra is set up. With this group, every single musician — to put it in business terms — is like a shareholder. The orchestra chooses its members itself. The musicians elect their principal conductor. And they are also involved in choosing the general director. That's an unusual situation that leads to more self-confidence and a greater sense of responsibility.

Finally, the Berlin example is applicable to other settings:

I think that our society can learn something from it. In a project I'm currently working on, I have a lot to do with large companies, and I often think of the Berlin Philharmonic. I think that if we had more workers' participation in decision making, if we gave individuals more responsibility and didn't just make them employees, then we could expect a lot more from people – especially when it comes to innovation and passion. And we need those for our future. I often think of the orchestra because I think a lot of very good things are going on there. And that has a lot to do with self-determination and co-determination.⁹²⁶



The Icelandic Demos vs. the International Bankers

*To take that decision on my own shoulders and say I will go with the democratic will of the Icelandic people against the pressure of European governments and the financial sector in Europe was the most difficult decision I've ever had to take. — Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, President of Iceland, 1996-2016.*⁹²⁷

The Nature of Iceland's "Democracy"

Iceland, despite its small size and democratic pretensions, is a middle-of-the road representative oligarchy, even more corrupt than such other Nordic oligarchies as Norway or Denmark. In fact, the Icelandic Constitution openly defies the one-person one-vote rule — a basic tenet of other representative oligarchies:

In contrast to the other Nordic countries, where social-democratic parties have generally played a hegemonic role, here the conservative Independence Party has long held sway, often in alliance with the smaller, agrarian Centre Party. This is due in large part to the electoral over-representation of rural areas, enshrined in the Constitution, which the Independence Party has naturally defended tooth and nail.⁹²⁸

Iceland's oligarchs are also more powerful than other Nordic oligarchs:

Icelandic capitalism was dominated from the start by a bloc of some fourteen families, popularly known as The Octopus, which constituted both the economic and the political ruling elite. . . . The Octopus controlled the media and decided on senior appointments in the civil service, police and judiciary. Market transactions became political and personal, as credit and jobs were allocated by calculation of mutual advantage. Power networks became tangled webs of bullying, sycophancy and distrust.⁹²⁹

In 2016, for instance, Iceland's oligarchs took the prize in the Panama Papers Scandal — the tax-dodging and secret financial schemes of powerful politicians. Iceland, a country with a total population of just over one-third of a million,

had 600 names in the Panama Papers. By way of comparison, Ukraine had 20. Iceland had by far the most names in the Panama Papers, per capita, of any country. There were

five Cabinet ministers in all of Europe whose names appeared in the Panama Papers. Of those, three were from Iceland. And one of them is still finance minister.⁹³⁰

And again in 2016:

To appease popular discontent, a constitutional reform process was set in motion. A constituent assembly was set up to draft a post-crash constitution for Iceland . . . Once again, though, political barriers emerged. Despite being endorsed by a national referendum in which some 67% of voters expressed support for the new constitution, “Parliament put the new constitution on ice. . . . It has refused to ratify it. That is a sign of Iceland’s fraying social capital.”⁹³¹

Similarly, the fishing industry — in 2018, Iceland’s second most important source of foreign exchange earnings — is “dominated by a few oligarchs who like to throw their weight around in the political arena.”⁹³²

It is likewise hazardous to peacefully protest in Iceland:

We found that Police have sweeping powers to arrest, that courts take a very narrow interpretation of police power at the expense of these protestors, that prosecutors often severely limit or outright restrict defense lawyers’ access to the evidence against their clients, and that appealing these cases has such a high threshold that they can have a chilling effect — all of this sometimes in breach of the Icelandic constitution and European human rights laws.⁹³³

By 2020:

Freedom House lowered Iceland’s democracy score from 100 in 2014 to 94 in 2020, citing the influence of business interests over politics, corruption and a lack of transparency and media independence. Transparency International meanwhile lowered Iceland’s Corruption Perceptions Index from 97 in 2005 to 75 in 2020, suggesting a significant, gradual deterioration. . . . A 2018 survey . . . found that 65 per cent of respondents viewed many or nearly all Icelandic politicians as corrupt.⁹³⁴

Helga Baldvins Bjargardóttir, president of the Women’s Association for the New Constitution, summed it up: Iceland is comprised of two nations. “There’s the few, who have all the money, resources and own most of the media, and then just normal people.”⁹³⁵

Events Leading to the 2008 Financial Crisis

Until the late 1990s, “the financial sector remained small and consisted mainly of publicly owned banks. Privatization began in 1998, implemented in cronyist fashion.”⁹³⁶ Iceland’s bigwigs realized that “the best way to rob a bank is to own one.”⁹³⁷ So the politicians handed the banks on a “silver platter to local cronies.”⁹³⁸

What took place in Iceland arguably had much in common with the societal take-over practiced by the 19th-century American Robber Barons. Apart from controlling the banks, as well as the main insurance, shipping, retail, and aviation companies, [the bankers] exerted political influence through ownership of major newspapers, private

radio stations, and TV stations, and through their status as the largest party's political donors.⁹³⁹

Along the way, as is always the case with Ponzi neo-liberalism, social injustice skyrocketed:

In the mid-90s, the pattern of overall disposable-income distribution was comparable to the — relatively egalitarian — Nordic average; in 2007 it was on a par with that of the United States, the most unequal in the developed world.⁹⁴⁰

The 2008 Collapse

Step by step, Iceland's bankers drove "the banks into the ground. . . . The politicians and the bankers were in bed together — big time. Basically, it was under the weight of this corrupt arrangement that Iceland collapsed."⁹⁴¹ Thanks to rampant corruption and regulatory toothlessness in Iceland, the European Union, and the USA, the banks collapsed in 2008, shaking Iceland to its core:

Unemployment rates rose to 7.6%. This was 5% higher than the annual unemployment rates prior to the economic downturn. Inflation was another result of the crash. Mortgage prices [nearly doubled]. With the national currency, the krona, experiencing a decrease in value, the price of many goods and services suffered an impact as well. Iceland saw a substantial rise in housing insecurity and homelessness. . . . child poverty increased from 11.2% to 31.6% between 2008 and 2012.⁹⁴²

The Oligarchs' Plan to Throw Icelanders under the Bus

In Europe and North America too, the major western private banks — the criminals behind the 2008 global crisis — were on the verge of going under. To prevent their deserved bankruptcy, Western politicians (that is, the big bankers themselves or their pawns) have robbed the world's people of trillions, averring that the criminal bankers were too big to fail — or jail. Consequently, the problems underlying the economic crisis persist to this day, along with high unemployment, needless poverty, contrived wars, vast income inequalities, and an economic catastrophe down the road.

Iceland's bankers and fellow British and Dutch oligarchs, along with the IMF (International Monetary Fund) did everything they could to force Iceland to join the saving-the-banks international racket, circling above that small island nation, sharpening their claws, and getting ready to pounce. Their flights of fancy were however brought down to Earth by an unexpected turn of events.

Mass Demonstrations: the Icelanders' Response to the Crisis

The disastrous banking collapse of 2008, the corruption underneath it, and the hardships it caused, were followed by what were at the time the most massive and longest demonstrations in Iceland's history. Inspired by the successful pots and pans protests in Argentina against the IMF and its Argentine confederates,⁹⁴³ the Reykjavik protesters, banging a variety of kitchen implements, demanded a new constitution, new elections, and the resignation of both the right-

wing government and the corrupt head of the national bank. The oligarchs tried to curb the movement by a propaganda barrage, the usual lineup of cops against people, and by arresting, pepper spraying, and tear gassing protesters. But the protest movement continued to grow.

In particular, the protesters demanded that the then-president of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, veto the government's bill to make the people pay the foreign debts of the bankrupt private banks. Protests in Greece, the USA, and elsewhere failed. In Iceland, they succeeded thanks to a conditional direct democracy provision of the Icelandic constitution.



The Presidential Veto Clause

Until 2010, the elected president of Iceland was perceived as a figurehead, a symbol of national unity. But the Icelandic constitution, a left-over from the time Iceland was ruled by Denmark, contains a direct democracy clause, empowering the president to refuse to sign parliamentary bills. If the president chooses to exercise this veto power, the decision whether to approve or reject the unsigned bill must be made by the people themselves, via a country-wide referendum.

Prior to 2010, this veto power was exercised only once, in 2004.

Saving Iceland From the Vultures

Early in 2010 [President Grímsson] refused to sign a law stipulating how much Iceland should pay back to the UK and Holland for the so-called Icesave saving accounts. The law was then put to a general referendum and the people voted against it. Ólafur Ragnar was victorious in the eyes of many who felt that he had saved the nation from debt and disgrace. This repeated itself in early 2011 when a second Icesave bill was also vetoed by him and voted down by the people. . . . for the first time, an Icelandic president was not just echoing the standpoints of the government.⁹⁴⁴

Grímsson explained his decision:

As everybody knows now, we did not pump public money into the failed banks. We treated them like private companies that went bankrupt, and we let them fail. . . . Whereas in many other countries, the prevailing orthodoxy is you pump public money into banks and you make taxpayers responsible for the banks in the long run . . . And I have never really understood the argument: why a private bank or financial fund is somehow holier for the well being and future of the economy than the industrial sector,

the IT sector, the creative sector, or the manufacturing sector. . . . the outcome is the Icelandic economy is recovering faster and more effectively than any other economy It was absolutely very tough indeed, especially the first veto decision I took because every government in Europe was against me. Every big financial institution, both in Europe and in my own country was against me . . . it boiled down to the fundamental choice of the interest of the financial market on one hand, and the democratic will of the people on the other . . . Europe is and should be more about democracy than about financial markets. [Faced] with this choice, it was in the end clear that I had to choose democracy. [The British Government] simply decided that Iceland was small enough for them to go up against us — in the same way [it] went against Argentina over the Falklands — instead of looking at the issue from a more responsible and long-term perspective. . . . if you take the relative size of the Icelandic economy and the British economy, and you transfer over to the British economy the sum that the British government was asking the Icelandic taxpayers to be responsible for due to the failure of this private bank, would have been equal, given the relative size of the British economy, to asking the British taxpayer to be responsible for an 800 billion pound-bill from a failed British bank in Spain. . . . Everybody sees in a moment that that's not a viable proposition How on Earth was it that all the governments of the European Union supported these outrageous demands?⁹⁴⁵

Aftermath

Not surprisingly, Olafur Ragnar was re-elected in 2012. When he left office in 2016, after 20 years of serving as president, despite the enormous power of the oligarchic media, 62% of Icelanders approved his job performance and only 15% disapproved.⁹⁴⁶

In Iceland, some low-level white-collar peons ended up serving short prison sentences for their contribution to the financial crisis. This is often cited as proof of Iceland's commitment to democracy and fair play. However, the real intentions of these much-publicized arrests were to mollify the public. In reality, "most of those responsible for the collapse . . . escaped serious financial and legal repercussions and . . . can comfortably say to their significant other: 'Don't worry honey, everybody lost, except for us.'"⁹⁴⁷

The people voted and so Icelanders are now in far better economic and spiritual shape than Greeks, Spaniards, or Americans. Already in 2012, even the IMF (International Monetary Fund) conceded that "Iceland was right, we were wrong." The IMF acknowledged that Iceland "took a different path than the United States after their financial crisis and nationalized the banks . . . and bailed out the homeowners instead of worrying about only bailing out the banks. And now they're coming back and their economy is growing again."⁹⁴⁸

We may note in passing that the IMF here is shedding crocodile tears. This "imperial monstrosity"⁹⁴⁹ (IMF) knew perfectly well that the people of Iceland would be far better off rejecting its advice and "charity." Like every single action of that leech, the deliberate goal of its "advice" was a net transfer of wealth and power from ordinary people to private bankers and their cronies.

In another rare display of honesty in the same year, even the bankers' own journalists lauded Grimsson's veto:

Icelanders who pelted parliament with rocks in 2009 demanding their leaders and bankers answer for the country's economic and financial collapse are reaping the benefits of their anger. Since the end of 2008, the island's banks have forgiven loans equivalent to 13 percent of gross domestic product, easing the debt burdens of more than a quarter of the population . . . The island's steps to resurrect itself since 2008, when its banks defaulted on \$85 billion, are proving effective. Iceland's economy will this year [2012] outgrow the euro area and the developed world on average . . . The island's households were helped by an agreement between the government and the banks, which are still partly controlled by the state, to forgive debt exceeding 110 percent of home values. On top of that, a Supreme Court ruling in June 2010 found loans indexed to foreign currencies were illegal, meaning households no longer need to cover krona losses. . . . Iceland's \$13 billion economy, which shrank 6.7 percent in 2009, grew 2.9 percent last year and will expand 2.4 percent this year [2012] and next . . . The euro area will grow 0.2 percent this year . . . Iceland's approach to dealing with the meltdown has put the needs of its population ahead of the markets [a euphemism for Wall Street and the City of London] at every turn. Once it became clear back in October 2008 that the island's banks were beyond saving, the government stepped in, ring-fenced the domestic accounts, and left international creditors in the lurch. The central bank imposed capital controls to halt the ensuing sell-off of the krona and new state-controlled banks were created from the remnants of the lenders that failed. Iceland's special prosecutor has said it may indict as many as 90 people, while more than 200, including the former chief executives at the three biggest banks, face criminal charges. . . . That compares with the U.S., where no top bank executives have faced criminal prosecution for their roles in the subprime mortgage meltdown.⁹⁵⁰

This entire episode gives the lie to the belief that Iceland — or any other country on Earth — is a democracy. Each and every “democratic” government involved in this blackmail did everything it could to defy the majority. Grimsson's island-shaking decision was nothing more than forcing democracy down the throats of oligarchic wolves in democracy's clothing. And, as we have seen, although considerable efforts were made to write a more democratic, egalitarian, and environmentally-friendly constitution, and although the majority still wants it, the oligarchic parliament put it on ice.

Writing in 2016, Andie Sophia Fontaine captured the foremost lessons from the 2008 crisis and parliamentary stonewalling of the new constitution:

If we mean to fix things here at home, we should bear in mind that simply electing new players is not going to be enough . . . We need a new system altogether. What form it would or could take is up for debate, but one thing is clear: changing the players does not change the game. Whether or not the rich and powerful will continue to get away with the activities the Panama Papers have revealed is up to us.⁹⁵¹

Yes, only a new system will bring clean government, liberty, transparency, accountability, and social justice to Iceland (and the world). That system has a name: an inclusive, Athenian-style, direct democracy (see Chapter 9).

Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting wrests control of the non-fixed portion of a community's overall budget from elected or non-elected officials and hands it over to the people themselves:

The basic idea is simple and radical. It is to transfer the power to decide how the city's money is spent, away from the technocrats in City Hall and the elected politicians in the council chamber and into the hands of the population, meeting in open public assemblies. . . . The citizen's participation is not limited to the act of voting every four years; it goes much further, towards deciding on and controlling key aspects of public administration. The citizen ceases to be a simple adjunct of traditional politics, an occasional participant in occasional elections, and becomes a permanent protagonist of the public sphere. . . . [For the professional politicians to give up their] control over the budget and hand over to the population the power to decide directly all the new works and services that should be funded, meant an absolute subversion of the representative system.⁹⁵²

From 1989 to 2004, Porto Alegre, a major city in southern Brazil, was ruled by the Workers' Party. In those years, the local branch of that party was committed to empowering ordinary people. During those hopeful years, the mayoral administration, with sufficient backing from the city legislature, placed participatory budgeting "at the center of its governing and campaign strategies."⁹⁵³

The story of Porto Alegre shows that, in those rare cases where oligarchic maneuvers are overcome, participatory budgeting yields remarkable results. This in turn lends support to the main point of this book: people can govern themselves better than anyone else can.

One obvious result is empowerment:

Participatory budgeting has shown tens of thousands of working and poor people that there is an alternative to the passive, increasingly disillusioned delegation of power that characterises the prevailing systems of representative democracy.⁹⁵⁴

There were tangible results as well:

- From 1989 to 2004, the percentage of people connected to the sewage system went up from 50% to 83%.⁹⁵⁵
- Public spending on housing rose more than fourfold.
- The number of city schools also increased fourfold.
- Failure rate of students fell from 30% to 10%.
- Thanks to local government funding, the number of community-run day-care centers rose from 0 to over 114.

- Porto Alegre's municipal bus company was the first in Brazil to operate vehicles with full wheelchair access.
- The city budget more than doubled as a result of eliminating tax breaks and incentives and introducing a new code based on progressive taxes and social justice.⁹⁵⁶
- Overall, spending on health, social assistance, and housing quadrupled.⁹⁵⁷
- By 2003, 50,000 people were actively involved in the budgeting process.⁹⁵⁸
- The percentage of city households with running water rose from 77% to 99%.
- There have been notable improvements in literacy and street-paving projects.

The Mondragon Co-Operative Network

There can be no real political democracy unless there is something approaching an economic democracy. — Theodore Roosevelt⁹⁵⁹

Our economy is not only failing the vast majority of our people, it is literally destroying our planet. — Marjorie Kelly & Ted Howard⁹⁶⁰

The USA: "Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%." — Joseph Stiglitz⁹⁶¹

Most Contemporary Corporations are Oligarchies

As we have seen (Chapter 5), most modern corporations are dictatorships where profits triumph over environmental sanity, worker safety, and human dignity.⁹⁶² Most workers are alienated and oppressed, subject to the beck and call of a boss, and denied opportunities of self-actualization. In one dreadful 2011 case in the USA, managers of a warehouse of a major corporation "refused to open the doors for ventilation despite soaring temperatures. They put ambulances outside instead, for the workers who collapsed."⁹⁶³

Besides infringing on human dignity, wage slavery is often accompanied by other costs. For example, in the USA, half a century ago, one person could comfortably support a family; now it takes two to just make ends meet. Most workers are getting steadily poorer and deeper in debt, and over 20% of the workforce is chronically unemployed. In most major corporations, the wealth gap between owners and workers is astronomical.

Most people accept their imprisonment within corporate walls in part because their worldview is shaped, indirectly, by corporate oligarchs (see Chapter 5). And most people likewise are condemned to spend their lives in a corporate dictatorship because they do not remember the past. They do not know that their hunter-gatherer ancestors "prevented any individual or group from acquiring more status, authority or resources than others."⁹⁶⁴ They do not know that, to Native Americans, the hierarchical Europeans were slaves "whose life is not worth having"⁹⁶⁵ (see Chapter 3). Similarly, no one told them that Athenian citizens were averse to working for someone else, considering such work as an encroachment on their freedom and dignity (see Chapter 4).

This lamentable state of affairs leads some committed democrats to reject the prevalent dictatorial and inequitable system of workplace governance in either state-owned or privately-owned enterprises. In their view, all such enterprises, regardless of whether they are located in capitalist, socialist, or communist countries, ought to be converted into worker co-operatives.⁹⁶⁶

These committed democrats boost their case by showing that it not not only by looking back that we realize that a better world is possible. We can also, they argue, look sideways, at one of the most successful contemporary examples of workplace democracy, where there is less “economic inequality and a better alignment of the interests of workers, owners and managers.”⁹⁶⁷



The city of Mondragon, Basque Country, Spain

Origins and Master Plan of the Mondragon Co-Operative Network: José María Arizmendiarieta

There appears in history, now and then, a selfless idealist who is also a person of action capable of bringing out the best in people, uplifting the lives of thousands, and leaving behind a legacy of unparalleled achievements. Such was José María Arizmendiarieta (1915-1976), the one-eyed erudite priest who was “the soul of the cooperative movement in Mondragón.”⁹⁶⁸

By 1941, the newly-ordained 26-year-old was ordered to give up further studies and assume the duties of assistant priest in Mondragon, a village of 7,000 souls at the heart of the Basque Country, Spain. In the years before his arrival, the fascists executed dozens of democrats in that town. On his arrival, he found a town where

strikes and collective bargaining were outlawed. Workers and their communities were regularly harassed, surveilled and jailed. Those who labored in the region were forced to work 12-hour work days for below survival income while others suffered from the era’s high unemployment, overcrowded housing, and extraordinarily high rates of tuberculosis. Especially important to the rise of Mondragon was the lack of social

mobility in the early days of the Franco regime, a fact that became obvious to any worker who aspired to get an education. . . . During the early twentieth century and much of the following decades of the Franco era, businesses in Basque country excluded anyone but the children, specifically the sons, of business managers from getting an education.⁹⁶⁹

What was immediately obvious to Arizmendiarieta was that the townsfolk were caught in a vicious cycle of poverty, with only petty work available following the Civil War and no practical investment in education or industry. The war was destructive both materially and spiritually.⁹⁷⁰

The postwar period was characterized by a climate of fear and the poverty of the population. The Basques were forbidden to speak their Euskera language, and control in the schools and ration cards were introduced.⁹⁷¹

Because the line between social and educational organization and labor militancy was not clear, Arizmendiarieta was playing a delicate and risky role.⁹⁷²

Years later he recalled the situation in the Basque Country in 1941:

We lost the Civil War, and we became an occupied region. In the postwar period [1939-], the people of Mondragon suffered severely in the repression. I had known some people of Mondragon, but when I came after the war they all had either died, or were in jail, or in exile.⁹⁷³

Now that run-down village of Mondragon would serve “as a laboratory of unprecedented socioeconomic experiments at the hands of this man.”⁹⁷⁴ During the Spanish Civil War (1936-9), Arizmendiarieta served as a journalist on the anti-fascist side, barely escaping execution at the end of the war. Those years reinforced his conviction of the importance of pedagogy for the oppressed in helping them develop their human potential, escape indoctrination, and think for themselves.⁹⁷⁵ So the first task in the social transformation of the town⁹⁷⁶ involved educating the people. He summed up this critical idea with the slogan: “To democratize power, socialize knowledge.”

Educating the people, then, was his “strategic instrument, the first platform of emancipation.”⁹⁷⁷ Arizmendiarieta carried out this educational program through a newsletter, interactions with his parishioners, and setting up the groundwork for the establishment of a professional school. By 1943, two years after his arrival, a democratically-run vocational school was opened.⁹⁷⁸ Later, this school would become the prestigious Mondragon University, a co-op that is now part of the Mondragon co-operative complex.

Besides education, his key ideas at this stage — ideas that still largely guide the Mondragon complex — involved the need to create enterprises where people governed themselves and where self-sufficiency, solidarity, social justice, co-operation, transparency, innovation, flexibility, and self-management were more important than profits for the few.⁹⁷⁹

By 1956, 15 years after Arizmendiarieta's arrival in Mondragon, the community was ready for the next crucial step: the opening, by five of his young collaborators, of the first industrial co-operative, a manufacturer of heating appliances. That first step required community endorsement and support:

They built on a record of successful community organizing and their great personal prestige as the first university-educated children of blue-collar workers. With nothing more to go on than the personal promises of these men, about a hundred people in the community responded with pledges, basically as an expression of faith in the five pioneers and in the guiding hand of. Including the commitments of the five founders . . . an enormous sum at this time in a working-class community of Spain [was pledged].⁹⁸⁰

Perhaps Arizmendiarieta's most far-seeing brainchild was implemented in 1959, when a co-operative credit union was established (it now employs thousands of people and is the largest bank in the Basque Country). That bank, which is controlled in part by its own workers and in part by the co-operatives it serves, was created long before the Mondragon Corporation reached terra firma. Moreover, Father Arizmendiarieta acted in this case "single-handedly, forging documents even, because his younger associates couldn't comprehend the relevance of a bank."⁹⁸¹

The following excerpts written in the United States half a century or more after Arizmendiarieta presciently established the bank, explain the critical importance of such an institution:

Our financial system is a relatively recent invention, devised by clever, selfish men for their personal gain. It is not the product of any natural or inevitable process, nor of democratic deliberation. It is a scam. We need not be stuck with it, and the sooner we rid ourselves of it the better.⁹⁸²

You let this [fractional] con game go on for a while, and the bankers will own everyone and everything on the planet. That is why one of the biggest buildings of many a city is a bank — even though banks produce nothing of value. That is also how bankers can buy politicians, journalists, book writers, generals, spooks, foreign leaders, ordinary citizens, and assassins. The only way to stop this racket is to deprive private banks and privately-controlled central banks of the power to create money.⁹⁸³

Only a radical shift in our concepts of money and banking will save us from the cement wall looming ahead . . . Before the economy collapses and our savings and security go with it, we need to reverse the sleight of hand that created the bankers' Ponzi scheme. The [USA] Constitutional provision that 'Congress shall have the power to coin money' needs to be updated so that it covers the national currency in all its forms, including the 97 percent now created with accounting entries by private commercial banks. That modest change could transform the dollar from a vice for wringing the lifeblood out of a nation of sharecroppers into a bell for ringing in the millennial abundance envisioned by our forefathers. The government could actually eliminate taxes and the federal debt while expanding the services it provides.⁹⁸⁴

The critical contribution made by the bank to the success of the Mondragon co-operative network is noted by many observers:

Leaders in the Mondragon system freely admit that if they did not have their own banking system, their worker cooperatives could not exist today. In Europe many

cooperatives failed over the years because traditional private banks were not prepared to support them in difficult times.⁹⁸⁵ As many as half of Mondragon's cooperatives would no longer exist if [their own bank] had not come to their defense and rescue. . . . In addition to the value of the intervention and consulting services, the [bank] provided the cooperatives with subsidies [far exceeding \$212 million.] In spite of this drain, the bank has continued to be the most financially successful savings bank in the Basque country — as well as the most prosperous of the Mondragon cooperatives.⁹⁸⁶ This institution played a fundamental role, for it got not only to encourage the creation of new cooperatives through its business division, but it also made possible the growth of each cooperative, which would be impossible with their internal resources alone.⁹⁸⁷

Another radical innovation involved the disbursement of surpluses, again putting the ideals of long-term survival, community welfare, solidarity, and co-operation above profits:

When in 1959 the [first two] cooperatives had their first surpluses, the priest did away with the idea of distributing those surpluses among the cooperatives' members, for he had the conviction that it was necessary to reinvest in the cooperatives and promote the creation of other cooperatives. . . . from 70 to 80 percent of the surpluses would be destined to the so called "indivisible funds" . . . with the objective of creating more jobs and new cooperatives.⁹⁸⁸

Another principle that had been established in the early years involved solidarity and mutual help:

Conscious that they could not rely on outside sources, Don José María and his team insisted that each new enterprise should remain a part of an economic whole. Not only individuals, but also these new businesses were asked to cooperate with each other. The Polytechnical University helped the new enterprises and the enterprises helped the Polytechnical University. Isolated they were weak but together they were strong.⁹⁸⁹

Research and innovation are crucial to the survival and growth of most commercial or industrial enterprises. Arizmendiarieta understood this, and convinced his reluctant collaborators to move energetically in that direction:

In 1974 Don Jose Maria surprised even his close associates in the school by deciding that Mondragon was ready to launch a more ambitious industrial research program. Initially, capital investment of [the equivalent of over 11 million 2021 U.S. dollars] was used to construct a new building with offices, laboratories, and a machine shop. The investment was a very heavy commitment for the cooperative complex. One of the [five pioneers] commented, "We opposed this idea as we did other ideas when Don Jose Maria first presented them to us, but he always succeeded in convincing us."⁹⁹⁰

General Characteristics of the Mondragon Co-Operative Complex: 2022

Ideology

By now, "the very name 'Mondragon' conjures up a humane, economic alternative in which the interests of workers trump the dictates of capital, and the well-being of the many trumps the self-interest of the privileged few. These values are well reflected in Mondragon's operations." The Mondragon network is still committed to "social transformation, a more far-reaching, future-oriented goal that seeks the creation of social and economic systems that reinforce the best in

human nature. At the heart of this transformation is the desire to emphasize cooperation as opposed to competition as the most likely path toward creating a future that maximizes the well-being of all.”⁹⁹¹

A Complex Network

Arizmendiarieta’s single co-op has spawned a complex network of 96 separate, self-governing, co-operatives employing 67,000 in Spain⁹⁹² and 14,000 abroad.⁹⁹³ These co-operatives, in turn, are integrated into an overarching unit, the Mondragon Corporation, which is also organized as a co-operative.⁹⁹⁴

Today, Mondragon is the leading business group in the Basque Country and the tenth largest in Spain. The complex includes, for example, a supermarket chain with some 33,000 workers and over 1,600 outlets, an insurance company, language schools and translation services, consulting firms, several high-technology co-operatives, the largest refrigerator producer in Spain, and a bicycle manufacturing co-op.⁹⁹⁵ These co-ops are in turn served by second-level co-ops, which include the credit union, a university with over 5,000 students on six campuses throughout the Basque country, 14 research and development centers, and healthcare and retirement providers.

In addition to Spain, the Mondragon complex operates throughout the world, with 141 non-cooperative “production plants in 37 countries, commercial business in 53, and sales in more than 150.”⁹⁹⁶

The large size of Mondragon enables it to compete in global markets, dedicate some of its profits to research, development, and innovation, streamline its operations, and provide a cushion for its worker-owners and 96 constituent co-operatives, especially during economic downturns.

Mutual Help

While each co-operative is independent and free to leave the Mondragon network, each is a part of a mutual support group. The co-operatives, and especially the credit union, play a critical role in directing surpluses of the entire complex towards screening, advising, and financing new start-ups and towards helping struggling co-operatives. During economic downturns, worker-owners often vote to take pay cuts in order to avoid layoffs. Workers of a struggling or failing co-operative are often redeployed to other co-operatives and retrained. If this fails, worker-owners can rely on an extensive social safety net which provides health care, early retirement options, and generous unemployment insurance for up to two years.

Pay Ratios and Income Inequalities

The founders of Mondragon struck a balance between the need to find and retain competent managers on the one hand, and a commitment to egalitarian principles and economic democracy on the other. One approach involved preferential recruitment of managers from the co-operatives’ own ranks, so that managers are imbued with the democratic élan. Another entailed

removal of social barriers; for instance, managers and workers eat side by side in the common dining room. In the USA, top corporate executives sometimes make more in one hour than their workers make in a year; at Mondragon, no executive earns more in an hour than a worker earns in a day.

This semi-egalitarian principle cuts across the different co-ops as well: the maximum difference between one co-op's compensation and another's is 38%.⁹⁹⁷

Achievements

1. Despite Mondragon's enormous size, despite the many problems inherent in any complex human undertaking, the working environment is far less oppressive and alienating than in the run-of-the-mill large business enterprise. This is made possible in part through decentralization: the Corporation consists of many independent, smaller, units. As well, it is far less alienating to work in an outfit of which you are the co-owner and where the final say belongs to you and your fellow workers.

2. The co-ops of Mondragon do not provide "opportunities for neoliberal managers, predatory lenders, and outside shareholders to exploit workers and communities. Given this, it is hardly surprising that the co-operative alternative is rarely mentioned in economics classes, business schools, and public policy think tanks, as this alternative runs counter to the self-serving ideology of what constitutes 'business.'"⁹⁹⁸

3. The enormous size of the Mondragon complex is a remarkable success story all by itself.

4. The social safety net for the worker-owners of Mondragon is more robust than in Spain as a whole, and far more robust than it is in countries like the USA.

5. Most universities and academics in the Western world have been captured and tamed by major corporations, so they often serve corporate interests instead of focusing on social welfare and the advancement of knowledge:

Universities in many countries are being realigned, becoming organisations that exist to support the development of the private, for-profit economy.⁹⁹⁹

By contrast, Mondragon's university and research centers are far less dependent on major for-profit corporations and their political lackeys, and are far more accountable to their own members and fellow co-ops.

6. The university itself is perhaps "the best technical institute in Spain."¹⁰⁰⁰

7. Survival rates of the Mondragon co-ops are much higher than those of for-profit corporations in Spain or the USA.¹⁰⁰¹ In fact, the co-ops significantly outperform other kinds of businesses during economic downturns, giving them a significant overall competitive advantage.¹⁰⁰² For instance, "by the early 1980s, Spain was undergoing a severe recession. In the Basque region, in 1983, 25% of

the workforce was unemployed. By shifting workers from one co-operative to another and providing temporary assistance to those between jobs, through reorganization and refinancing of failing firms, the Mondragon co-operatives remained close to full employment.”

8. “The lower wage groups earn far more than the regional average, while the management has to be satisfied with less than their colleagues in other companies. The workforce rewards this wage justice: for example, the absence rate is half as low as in ordinary companies and productivity is eight percent higher.”¹⁰⁰³

9. There is far greater income equality in the Basque Country than in Spain as a whole.¹⁰⁰⁴

10. When Father Arizmendiarieta first came to Mondragón, it was the poorest area of Spain.¹⁰⁰⁵ He came “during what was known later as ‘the hunger period.’ Working class people . . . saw themselves as a conquered people, living under a regime that offered neither political freedom nor economic opportunity.”¹⁰⁰⁶ Today, Mondragon is the wealthiest town in Spain, and, overall in the Basque Country, the average GDP per capita is 30% higher than the rest of Spain and the standard of living is substantially higher than European averages.”¹⁰⁰⁷

11. Mondragon ranked 11th in Fortune’s list of enterprises that are changing the world. That corporate mouthpiece “praised Mondragon for being a financially sound business while putting people before profit.”¹⁰⁰⁸

Governance

Perhaps the only serious mistake made in laying down the Mondragon blueprints was rejection of an inclusive Athenian-style direct democracy. In Athens, you will recall, the general assembly, the randomly selected members of the council, law courts, legislative courts, and boards of officials, sought the advice of experts, but it was the citizens, or a random fraction of the citizens, who set policies. Likewise in Athens, most officials served just one year and could be readily recalled at any time. Arizmendiarieta, however, felt that business decisions were best left to an elite group of managers.¹⁰⁰⁹ As a result, the Mondragon co-operatives, and the mother corporation itself, are governed by a blend of direct and representative democracy.¹⁰¹⁰

In each unit, the final authority lies with the General Assembly of the worker-owners, which meets at least once a year and follows “a one-member one-vote rule to make the general, overall strategic decisions affecting the future of their co-operative.” The Assembly also elects members of other boards, including the Governing Board, which is responsible for monitoring, hiring, and firing managers. The managers serve four years and are in charge of the day-to-day operations of their co-operative.¹⁰¹¹

There is of course nothing surprising or new about the promise of workplace democracy. Karl Marx, for instance, wrote about the workers of the 1871 Paris Commune (before some 20,000 were massacred by French and German oligarchs):

The value of these great social experiments cannot be overrated. By deed instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters; that to bear fruit, the means of labour need not be monopolized as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the labouring man . . . and that, like slave labour, like serf labour, hired labour is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated or communal labour plying its toil with a willing hand, a ready mind, and a joyous heart.¹⁰¹²

Additional Weak Spots of the Mondragon Corporation

As we have just seen, Mondragon combines elements of direct and representative democracy. In my view, it owes most of its achievements to the direct democracy features, and perhaps it could achieve even more by letting the workers/owners listen to experts and then make all critical decisions themselves.

The top priorities of the various enterprises that make up the Mondragon Corporation is to survive and thrive, even though these enterprises are surrounded by a rigged economic system in which owners are everything and workers are nothing. Hence, there is a temptation, and perhaps also a necessity, not to extend membership privileges to everyone. Moreover, Mondragon is made up of ordinary human beings, who are often torn between selfishness and altruism. Why provide the same benefits to members and non-members of any single co-operative, if non-members can be found who would accept less? Why not treat workers of a Chinese subsidiary in the same way that Chinese for-profit corporations treat them, make them work 10 hours a day, and pay them for a whole day what a co-op member in the Basque Country makes in an hour?

Thus, in the Mondragon retail division, for instance, less than half of the workers are members, and most of Mondragon's "foreign subsidiaries employ non-member workers."¹⁰¹³ Overall, only some 40% of the entire workforce consists of members. Likewise, of the total number of corporations and subsidiaries, less than 40% are co-operatives.

The People of Switzerland and Italy vs. Nuclear Power

We have been warned about the menace of the "atoms for peace" newspeak right from the beginning of the nuclear age. The question is simple: do we really need such a dangerous technology to boil water? So far, the world has seen three major nuclear accidents, whose costs in human lives and damages far exceed the alleged benefits of nuclear energy, and that is just the beginning. Without fail, the 21st century will see a lot more nuclear accidents.

The criminality of the whole enterprise, it must be repeated, was crystal clear long before Khystym, Chernobyl, and Fukushima. In fact, the CIA (Buckminster Fuller calls it "Capitalism's Invisible Army"¹⁰¹⁴) knew about the first major one — the 1957 Kyshtym Catastrophe — but kept the information to itself, in an effort to protect this oligarchic project.¹⁰¹⁵

In 1979, Ralph Nader and John Abbot wrote:

What technology has had the potential for both inadvertent and willful mass destruction . . . for wiping out cities and contaminating states after an accident, a natural calamity, or sabotage? What technology has been so unnecessary, so avoidable by simple thrift or by deployment of renewable energy supplies?¹⁰¹⁶

Two years later, R. Buckminster Fuller wrote:

The would-be exploiters of atomic energy on board our planet Earth will in due course discover there is no way for them to solve atomic-energy-radiation waste-disposal problems save by rocketing it all back into the Sun, where it belongs. Humans will then have to learn how to keep all humans and their ecological support system operating successfully on our vastly adequate daily income of solar atomic energy.¹⁰¹⁷

Thirty years later, Dr. Amory Lovins, one of the world's top energy experts, repeated this warning:

Nuclear power is uniquely unforgiving: as Swedish Nobel physicist Hannes Alfvén said, “No acts of God can be permitted.” Fallible people have created its half-century history of a few calamities, a steady stream of worrying incidents, and many near-misses. . . . Nuclear-promoting regulators inspire even less confidence. The International Atomic Energy Agency’s 2005 estimate of about 4,000 Chernobyl deaths contrasts with a rigorous 2009 review of 5,000 mainly Slavic-language scientific papers the IAEA overlooked. It found deaths approaching a million through 2004, nearly 170,000 of them in North America. The total toll now exceeds a million, plus a half-trillion dollars’ economic damage. The fallout reached four continents, just as the jet stream could swiftly carry Fukushima fallout. . . . Nuclear power is the only energy source where mishap or malice can kill so many people so far away; the only one whose ingredients can help make and hide nuclear bombs; the only climate solution that substitutes proliferation, accident, and high-level radioactive waste dangers. . . . Since 2005, new U.S. reactors (if any) have been 100%-plus subsidized — yet they couldn’t raise a cent of private capital, because they have no business case.¹⁰¹⁸

And here is Lovins in 2014:

Britain's [or any other nucleophilic country] plan for a fleet of new nuclear power stations is . . . unbelievable . . . It is economically daft. The guaranteed price . . . is over seven times the unsubsidised price of new wind in the US, four or five times the unsubsidised price of new solar power in the US. Nuclear prices only go up. Renewable energy prices come down. There is absolutely no business case for nuclear. The British policy has nothing to do with economic or any other rational base for decision making.¹⁰¹⁹

Modest conservation measures could easily make up for the worldwide closure of all nuclear power plants. And so could the incomparably safer wind, solar, and photovoltaic cells. Thus, in 2020 alone, “the world put in $\frac{2}{3}$ as much renewable energy in one year as is produced by all the existing nuclear plants!”¹⁰²⁰

Clearly, when the decision is left to oligarchs, they opt for short-term gains, empowerment, and raw materials for nuclear bombs — even though in the very long run a nuclear power plant may consume more energy than it produces. For instance, Tyner and colleagues suspect that “the net-energy yield [of nuclear power] is negligible to negative.”¹⁰²¹ Moreover, as Lovins shows, nuclear

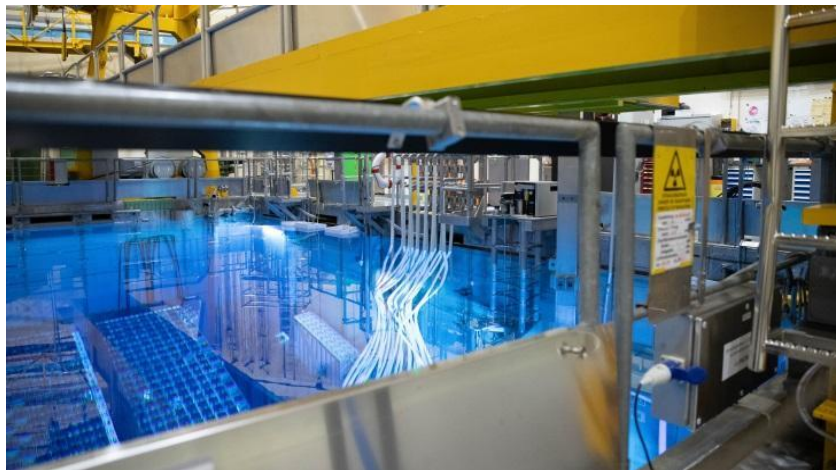
power plants could not exist without massive government subsidies and legal protections. The nucleophilic oligarchs are either ignorant, victims of the system they created, or think that after them is the deluge.

But, when the people are allowed to decide, despite propaganda, the story at times is far brighter. The Fukushima catastrophe

signaled the beginning of the end for nuclear power in Switzerland. In June 2011, the Swiss Parliament resolved to start phasing out nuclear power in 2034. But pressure, led by the Green Party, has grown for an earlier switch to renewables. As a result of the May 21 [2017] referendum, Switzerland will begin phasing out nuclear power in 2019.¹⁰²²

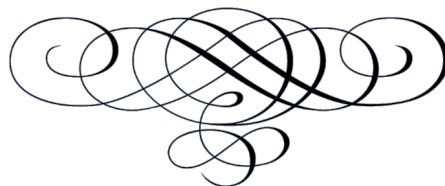
Likewise in Italy:

Following center-right parties' victory in the 2008 election, Italy's industry minister announced that the government scheduled the construction to start the first new Italian nuclear-powered plant by 2013. The announced project was paused in March 2011, after the Japanese earthquake, and scrapped after a referendum on 12–13 June 2011.¹⁰²³



Parting Words for Chapter 7

The picture which emerges from this chapter is straightforward: direct democracy is not only the best way of running nations, but also the best, freest, and most dignified way of running most, or perhaps all, subnational collectives.



Chapter 8: A Theoretical Defense of Direct Democracy

The ideally best form of government is that in which the sovereignty, or supreme controlling power in the last resort, is vested in the entire aggregate of the community, every citizen not only having a voice in the exercise of that ultimate sovereignty, but being, at least occasionally, called on to take an actual part in the government. — John Stuart Mill¹⁰²⁴

Whenever a government claims to have the people's interest at heart, you need to think again. In the entire history of mankind there has never been a political elite sincerely concerned about the well-being of regular people. What makes any of us think that it is different now? . . . Always question everything any government does or does not do. Always look for ulterior motives. And always ask cui bono? Who benefits? — Christine Anderson¹⁰²⁵

Chapter Summary. The case for direct democracy and for any other system of governance rises or falls with the historical record (Chapters 3-7), not with a priori reasoning. Hence, this chapter only tries to show that direct democracy can be, at the very least, just as strongly defended through a blend of abstract, moral, and empirical grounds as any of its competitors. This partial defense includes 18 interrelated points: 1. "If government is for the people, why can't the people do the governing?" 2. Majorities of people in Western democracies are in favor of moves towards direct democracy. 3. People's greater loyalty to the directly democratic state or organization, greater energy for public and private action, and greater general prosperity. 4. Guaranteeing everyone's rights and interests. 5. Liberty. 6. Only direct democracy is consistent with personal autonomy. 7. A free marketplace of ideas. 8. Creativity. 9. Cognitive diversity. 10. Social justice. 11. An acceptable (to most people) balance between social justice and property rights. 12. A greater likelihood of following legal norms. 13. In direct democracies, "the many are harder to diddle – or to bribe – than the few." 14. Safeguards of the public interest. 15. Superior political efficiency. 16. A built-in feedback mechanism. 17. Placing limits on anyone's power and curtailing the ascent of miscreants and criminals. 18. Only direct democracies circumvent Michels' iron law of oligarchy. The chapter concludes by turning on their heads the two most influential arguments against direct democracy: both the tyranny of the majority and the ship of fools arguments not only fail to discredit direct democracy, but actually support it.

* * *

For millennia, intellectuals have been trying to answer the question: what is the ideal political system? To do that, they often relied on a blend of a priori, moral, and empirical arguments. Unfortunately, the search for the best political system cannot be resolved theoretically or on moral grounds. For one thing, the social sciences and ethics are not yet sufficiently advanced. Also, the purported answers are typically colored by ideology, timidity, worldview, ignorance, closed-mindedness, belief perseverance, indoctrination, irrationality, authoritarianism, class affiliation,

and self-interest. For instance, rich people, or intellectuals who worship power or depend on rich people for their income and reputation, tend to support oligarchy and to feverishly come up with arguments against direct democracy. Additionally, oligarchs have been ruling the complex societies of the world for thousands of years, promoting defenders of the oligarchic worldview and suppressing champions of direct democracy. Thus, they preserved or promoted the writings of such rich people as Plato, Thucydides, Aristotle, Hegel, or Milton Friedman, and destroyed, suppressed, or vilified the writings of the likes of Democritus, Protagoras, Thomas Paine, Michael Parenti, or Michael Hudson.

This web of complexity, weak-mindedness, deceit, self-interest, and indoctrination suggests that the case for direct democracy rises or falls with the historical record (Chapters 3-7), not with a priori reasoning. Hence this chapter does not attempt the impossible task of theoretically proving the superiority of direct democracy. Instead, it shows that direct democracy can be, at the very least, just as strongly defended on rational grounds as any of its competitors. As well, it shows that the two most influential arguments against direct democracy are actually two additional arguments in its favor.

Arguments For Direct Democracy

This section does not aim at a comprehensive coverage. Instead, it merely adduces a few overlapping ancient and modern arguments for direct democracy.

“If Government is for The People, Why Can’t the People Do the Governing?”¹⁰²⁶

Representative “democracies” and some other systems of governance embed a contradiction. They claim to represent the popular will. But, if so, why not let the people directly rule themselves, instead of claiming to represent them?

As we have seen, behind the facade of representative “democracies,” and certainly behind the facade of most contemporary governments, there is the reality that the people do not matter, at all. In private, oligarchs and their lackeys concede that very point. For instance, in 1890, Marcus A. Hanna, a Rockefeller protégé who would later become a U.S. senator and chair of the Republican National Committee, wrote a letter to the Attorney General of Ohio. In that letter, Hanna ordered him to withdraw a criminal lawsuit against Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company. Among other arguments and threats, Hanna observed: “You have been in politics long enough to know that no man in public office owes the public anything.”¹⁰²⁷

Hanna’s letter captures the reality of our upside-down world, a reality that badly needs overturning:

The least bad form of government yet invented by man can advance from its present half-way house to something more like full application of the democratic principle. . . . [Direct democracy] leaves no ambiguity about the answer to the question: What did the people want? The decisions of parliament are ambiguous because nobody can be sure,

on any given issue, whether a parliamentary majority really does represent the wishes of a majority of the people. When the whole people does the deciding, the answer is there for all to see. . . . The basis of modern democracy is the proposition that every adult person's judgment about the conduct of public affairs is entitled to be given equal weight with every other person's. . . . In most places where it is practised, however, democracy is in a condition of arrested development. Every adult person exercises his or her political right every few years, in elections by which the voters send their representatives to an elected assembly; but in the intervals between elections – which can mean for anything up to about seven years – it is these representatives who take all the decisions. This is not what ancient Athenians meant by democracy.¹⁰²⁸

Western Majorities Support a Move Towards Direct Democracy

Most people in Western representative “democracies” distrust their government and support the introduction of at least some features of real democracy into the political process. In fact, “there is hardly a single Western country in which there is not a (usually large) majority of the people who want [at least some features] of direct democracy.”¹⁰²⁹ Similarly, 1999 surveys found that most Americans think that “a random sample of the population would make better decisions than the Congress.”¹⁰³⁰

Loyalty to the Directly Democratic State or Organization, Energy for Public and Private Action, Greater General Prosperity

Echoing Herodotus (see Chapter 4), George Grote wrote:

Democracy in Grecian antiquity possessed the privilege, not only of kindling an earnest and unanimous attachment to the constitution in the bosoms of the citizens, but also of creating an energy of public and private action, such as could never be obtained under an oligarchy, where the utmost that could be hoped for was a passive acquiescence and obedience.¹⁰³¹

Many others share Grote's view. For instance, J. S. Mill:

General prosperity attains a great height, and is more widely diffused, in proportion to the amount and variety of the personal energies enlisted in promoting it.¹⁰³²

Wolf Linder:

Democracy as citizens' deliberative involvement and participation in public affairs [is] part of an individual's development and creates citizenship and community.¹⁰³³

Robert Dahl:

The democratic process promotes human development, not least in the capacity for exercising self-determination, moral autonomy, and responsibility for one's choices.¹⁰³⁴

Guaranteeing Everyone's Rights and Interests

The rights and interests of every or any person are only secure from being disregarded when the person interested is himself able, and habitually disposed to stand up for them.¹⁰³⁵

[Democracy] is the surest way (if by no means a perfect one) by which human beings can protect and advance the interests and goods they share with others.¹⁰³⁶

Participation in politics helps people become better informed and encourages them to be better citizens. Fears by our Founders and others of runaway popular “passions” have proved to be unwarranted. Studies show that gaps in individuals’ political knowledge are largely offset in the public as a whole: Americans, as a collectivity, hold policy preferences that are generally real, stable, consistent, coherent, and reflective of the available information. Most important, whatever the cognitive and other limitations of ordinary citizens may be, those citizens are almost certainly better at defending their own interests and promoting the common good than any elites that one might ask to rule on their behalf, whether kings, aristocrats, theocrats, oligarchs, or property holders — or simply fellow citizens with higher levels of education or political knowledge.¹⁰³⁷

Liberty

The democratic process . . . promotes freedom as no feasible alternative can: freedom in the form of individual and collective self-determination, in the degree of moral autonomy it encourages and allows, and in a broad range of other and more particular freedoms that are inherent in the democratic process.¹⁰³⁸

Only Direct Democracy is Consistent with Personal Autonomy

Robert Wolff:

Men cannot be free so long as they are subject to the will of others, whether one man (a monarch) or several (aristocrats.) But if men rule themselves, if they are both law-givers and law-obeyers, then they can combine the benefits of government with the blessings of freedom. Rule for the people is merely benevolent slavery, but rule by the people is true freedom. Insofar as a man participates in the affairs of state, he is ruler as well as ruled. His obligation to submit to the laws stems not from the divine right of the monarch, nor from the hereditary authority of a noble class, but from the fact that he himself is the source of the laws which govern him. Therein lies the peculiar merit and moral claim of a democratic state.

Democracy attempts a natural extension of the duty of autonomy to the realm of collective action. Just as the truly responsible man gives laws to himself, and thereby binds himself to what he conceives to be right, so a society of responsible men can collectively bind themselves to laws collectively made, and thereby bind themselves to what they have together judged to be right. The government of a democratic state is then, strictly speaking, no more than a servant of the people as a whole, charged with the execution of laws which have been commonly agreed upon.¹⁰³⁹

A Free Marketplace of Ideas

Of all the known systems of governance, only direct democracy allows the freest flow of information.¹⁰⁴⁰ Views that run against the current are more likely to be heard and considered in entities like ancient Athens, the Berlin Philharmonic, or the Mondragon Corporation, than in Sparta, Rome, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, or any run-of-the-mill corporation. Likewise, schooling in a direct democracy is more likely to let a thousand educational philosophies bloom, and thus more likely to create dissent and cognitive diversity than any other system. Such freedom

and diversity in turn contribute to a more efficient governing process and “spur the body politic away from complacent rehearsal of dead dogmas and toward more creative thinking.”¹⁰⁴¹

Creativity

[Direct democracy] claims for itself a fundamental validity that no other kind of society shares; it asserts that creative activity flourishes best when ordinary men have a sense of freedom and responsibility, and extraordinary men work in free association with their fellows. History supports this claim.¹⁰⁴²

Cognitive Diversity

One of the greatest minds in recorded history, Galileo Galilei, said: “I have never met a man so ignorant that I couldn't learn something from him.” This fundamental insight serves in turn as the anchor of Hélène Landemore’s defense of democracy.¹⁰⁴³

Her argument begins with an allegory. Imagine a large group of people stranded in a complex maze. To escape, they must decipher various clues. Some clues are written in a small font that only one or a few people can see, some in languages that only a few people might be able to read, some involving mathematical symbolism that yet a few other members might be able to decipher. Clearly, to get out of the maze, it is far better to rely on the collective wisdom of the group as a whole rather than exclusively relying on a small minority.

In the same vein, people can navigate the maze of political decisions by handing over the decision-making process to the group as a whole. In a country or organization where a free marketplace of ideas flourishes, collective intelligence is superior to the intelligence of one or a few. Hence, Landemore says, “democracy is simply a smarter regime than the rest.”

The rule of the many is likely to outperform any version of the rule of the few, at least if we assume that politics is akin to a complex and long enough maze, the knowledge of which cannot reside with any individual in particular or even just a few of them. When the maze is complicated and long enough, the likelihood that the group makes the right series of choices that will ultimately get them out of the maze is higher when the decision is made in an inclusive fashion, pooling everyone’s information, arguments, and perspectives, than when it is made by one member of the group only or just a few of them.¹⁰⁴⁴

Social Justice

Direct democracy provides the most reliable way of preventing vast wealth inequalities. It is inconceivable that the vast wealth inequalities that are seen in the world today, the landlessness, starvation, and powerlessness for billions (see Chapter 1), side by side with vast landholdings, riches, and inordinate political power for the thousands, would have been tolerated by hunter-gatherers or the Athenians — or by any other well-informed ruling majority.¹⁰⁴⁵

Karl Bürkli, a fervent Swiss democrat and union leader, wrote in 1869:

Our law-makers, elected by the people, are incapable of making good laws for the working class, even if they make excellent laws for the bourgeois class. Why? Because the representative bodies, in their majority, consist of capitalists and their servants who are hostile to social progress. As slave-holders are incapable of making laws in the interests of slaves, capitalist-representatives are incapable of making laws in the interest of the workers. Representative democracy is not the form of government able to improve the living conditions of the working class and to resolve social problems. . . . [If direct democracy is realized], the people will find the right way to social freedom, because they feel themselves its daily sorrows and the need for change.¹⁰⁴⁶

Wolf Linder sums up Bürkli's political philosophy:

Unlike Karl Marx, who 20 years previously had demanded a revolutionary class struggle against the "bourgeois" and their state, Bürkli put all his hopes in direct democracy as lawmaking by the people.¹⁰⁴⁷

In passing, let me say that the picture which emerges from this book as a whole (and from the mixed record of actual Marxist experiments) supports Bürkli's views. Direct democracy — when combined with a ban on information monopolies, sunshine bribery of officials, giant corporations, and privately-owned banks — provides a surer and freer road to social justice than Marxism does.

An Acceptable (to Most People) Balance between Social Justice and Property Rights

To judge by the Athenian experience, the Berlin Philharmonic, and the Mondragon Corporation, direct democracy seems to afford a reasonable compromise between wealth inequalities, different levels of competencies, and the desire of most people to own such things as a piece of land, a house, or jewelry. On the other hand, minority rule leads, sooner or later, to vast income inequalities and to partial dispossession of the majority or, at least, of a significant fraction of the population.

Direct Democracy is Far More Likely to Follow Legal Norms than Other Systems of Governance

History shows, over and over again, that the rule of one or of the few often creates a dog-eat-dog world, with the rulers routinely breaking the laws in their interests. The kings of Persia, Critias of Athens, Caligula of Rome, Pinochet of Chile, and Yeltsin of Russia come to mind — and this probably applies to most dictatorships and oligarchies. By contrast,

The civil war had taught the Athenians that democracy ultimately depended upon law and that law was possible only under democracy. Implicitly responding to the elite critics who insisted that democracy led to lawlessness . . . the Athenians found in their recent history proof of just the opposite, that oligarchy led to lawlessness and that only democrats respected the laws.¹⁰⁴⁸

The Athenians themselves were aware of this. For instance, the Athenian orator Aeschines explained:

Tyrannies and oligarchies are administered by the whim of their leaders, democratic cities by established laws . . . Laws preserve the persons and the constitution of democratic subjects; suspicion, apistia, [distrust] and armed guards preserve oligarchies.¹⁰⁴⁹

Demosthenes concurs:

The crucial difference between oligarchy and democracy is that, whereas oligarchs view themselves as above the law and change it retrospectively as they please to suit their interests, democracies preserve their freedom by living under the laws they have established. . . . the rule of law preserves the freedom of citizens from the intrusions characteristic of autocratic government.¹⁰⁵⁰

“The Many are Harder to Diddle – or to Bribe – than the Few”¹⁰⁵¹

We have seen in Chapter 5 that representative “democracies” remain in power thanks in part to their control of most information and educational sources. A direct democracy, on the other hand, is characterized by a free marketplace of ideas (see Chapter 4). As well, sunshine bribery of politicians in representative “democracies” is rampant. Genuine friends of the people can also be targeted by smears, media campaigns, judicial overreach, harassment, incarceration, and the oligarchs’ assassination squads. It is much harder, or perhaps impossible, to bribe, blackmail, threaten, or kill everyone.

Direct Democracy Safeguards the Public Interest

The political philosopher Montesquieu wrote that “it’s a happy situation if, when we want to act badly, we find it’s not in our interest to do so.”¹⁰⁵² While direct democracy cannot stop bad behavior, it can prevent and control it more effectively than any other system of governance.

Indeed, one of the major hazards faced by every society is the conflict between private and public interests.¹⁰⁵³ When private interests prevail, the results can be catastrophic. Here are a few illustrations of this principle.

- We have seen this conflict when discussing climate disruptions and nuclear brinkmanship (see Chapters 1 & 6), where the ambitions and greed of a handful of trillionaires needlessly imperil the future of humanity.
- In Sparta, Rome, and the USA (Chapter 5), the continued existence of the state was placed at risk by vast wealth inequalities.
- According to some sources, both the Maya kings and the chiefs of Easter Island pursued their own interests “even in cases where that might conflict with the good of the current society as a whole and of the next generation.”¹⁰⁵⁴
- Norse Greenland “was a tightly controlled society, in which the few chiefs of the richest farms could prevent anyone else from doing something that seemed to threaten their

interests — including anyone experimenting with innovations that did not promise to help the chiefs.” Hence, the hierarchical Scandinavians perished while their neighbors, the democratic and egalitarian Inuits, survived to the present day. The Scandinavians vanished, at least in part, because their society's structure “created a conflict between the short-term interests of those in power, and the long-term interests of the society as a whole.”¹⁰⁵⁵

Such conflicts are one of the principal causes of the downfall of organizations, countries, and empires. And again it goes without saying that when the people rule themselves, the conflict between private and public interests is not as pronounced as in dictatorships, self-proclaimed oligarchies, and oligarchies waving a democratic banner.

Raising the Level of Political Efficiency

[Real Democracy] sharpens the ordinary man's sense of political responsibility. When he has to make up his own mind on a wide variety of specific issues . . . he learns to take politics seriously. Since the voter is the foundation-stone of any sort of democracy . . . anything that raises his level of political efficiency is profoundly to be desired.¹⁰⁵⁶

A Built-In Corrective Mechanism

A system's success depends on its willingness to acknowledge, and learn from, its mistakes. If it turns out, for example, that war undermines prosperity, freedom, and the quality of life, a country that lives by the sword should change tacks and champion peaceful resolutions of international conflicts. In totalitarian societies or oligarchies, policy makers can suppress evidence that they made a mistake or acted selfishly and shoot anyone who somehow finds out the truth and who proceeds to recommend the needed changes. In fake democracies like Japan or Italy, the same suppression is commonplace (see Chapter 5), albeit it is not as obvious to ordinary citizens. In either case, unwise or selfish policies are likely to persist. In contrast, in real democracies, the truth comes out more readily and is more likely to lead to criticism, debate, and policy shifts. Thus, real democracies enjoy a built-in feedback mechanism which assures communally-minded, wiser, more efficient, sustainable, and just policies.¹⁰⁵⁷

Placing Limits on Anyone's Power and Curtailing the Ascent of Psychopaths and Criminals

Power, by itself, tends to corrupt its holders. The only remedy to this common human failing is limiting anyone's power and creating a genuine system of accountability and checks and balances. Here too, Athenian-style direct democracy far outshines all other political systems.

Additionally, about one out of every 20 people might be a psychopath: conscienceless, compassionless, irresponsible, and power-hungry (see Chapter 4). The willingness of such werewolves to backstab, double-cross, smear, lie, steal, betray, or kill without suffering remorse gives them a decisive edge against their more principled competitors. The shrewd and power hungry among them are therefore more likely to reach the top of oligarchic, dictatorial, or fake

democratic organizations and thus shape the course of history. We see the catastrophic results of this takeover everywhere (see Chapters 1, 4, and 5).

As we have seen, direct democracy — as practiced by our hunter-gatherer ancestors (Chapter 3), the Athenians (Chapter 4), or a few contemporary organizations (Chapter 7) — is the only system that can effectively curtail the portentous ascent of psychopaths to positions of power and influence.

Only Direct Democracy Circumvents Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy

The enemies of real democracy often cite approvingly the incisive writings of the fascist Robert Michels, especially his so-called “iron law of oligarchy.” That “law” correctly observes that large organizations and countries, regardless of their initial democratic intentions, eventually degenerate into oligarchies. This in turn led Michels and other oligarchic theorists to deny that “a true democracy could exist.”¹⁰⁵⁸ Thus, according to Michels, “the majority of human beings, in condition of eternal tutelage, are predestined by tragic necessity to submit to the dominion of a small minority, and must be content to constitute the pedestal of an oligarchy.”¹⁰⁵⁹ Democracy, Michels felt, “could never exist for long (and certainly not for anything like six human generations) because it predictably and rapidly devolves into the rule of a managerial elite.”¹⁰⁶⁰ George Orwell’s premonitions of the present and future, Michels approvingly implies, were entirely justified: “If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face — forever.”

Josiah Ober conclusively shows that Michels is historically misinformed and that direct democracies constitute an obvious exception to Michels’ “iron law:”

Michels’ theory may still hold under most conditions, but it is not universally applicable and therefore should no longer be regarded as an iron law of political organization. . . . Robert Michels’ conclusion, that the problem of organizing coordinated activity at scale must in and of itself render participatory democracy an impossibility, is disproved by the Athenian case.¹⁰⁶¹

Indeed, the Athenians were aware of human failings, of the grave danger posed by the ascent of unprincipled individuals to power, of the dangers posed by a managerial elite, and of the risk of a democracy sliding into an oligarchy. For at least six generations, their system did not degenerate into an oligarchy because they figured out ways to prevent that slide. Moreover, even after those six generations, Athenian democracy was vanquished by the despots of Macedonia — not by its own internal contradictions. Thus, one can reverse the argument and insist that direct democracy provides the only way a complex society can escape Michels’ Iron Law.

The Plight of Minorities in Direct Democracies

This section and the next turn on their heads the two most influential arguments against direct democracy. The many other counter-democratic arguments will be ignored because they are less influential, even more contrived than the two below, and were ably shot down elsewhere.¹⁰⁶²

The “tyranny of the majority” argument alleges that direct democracy “would become a weapon in the hands of majorities to oppress minorities.”¹⁰⁶³ We shall now see that precisely the opposite is the case: direct democracy is the political system that is least likely to infringe upon minority rights.

To begin with, there is no question that the majority in direct democracies at times oppresses minorities. As we have seen, the Athenians expelled Anaxagoras and Protagoras because these free thinkers dared question prevailing prejudices. Athenian men also denied political rights to Athenian-born foreigners in their midst, and acted even more tyrannically towards women and slaves.

A more trivial example involves intrusive laws and social norms that are in fact favored by majorities of representative “democracies.” In many U.S. localities, majorities support regulations that compel lovers of tall grass to keep it short on their own properties. In some cities, majorities favor a ban on front-yard vegetable gardens. At times, the propagandized majority ostracizes neighbors who refuse to join the unhealthy and unecological herbicide crusade against beautiful and edible dandelions.

It should also be noted that most of the people who coined the term “tyranny of the majority,” wrote endless treatises about it, and used it to justify the oligarchic American Constitution (see Chapter 5) and similar oligarchies, were not concerned with genuine encroachments of such things as free speech and the right to live as you wish. Rather, they were reasonably worried about partial loss of either their own excessive privileges or of their benefactors. As we have seen over and over again in this book, there are wealth and power inequalities in direct democracies (e.g., democratic ancient Athens, Berlin Philharmonic, the Mondragon Corporation) — but nothing like the obscene and ever-accelerating inequalities that exist in 2023 in Poland, Israel, or the U.K.¹⁰⁶⁴ That is why, I suspect, so many crocodile tears are shed over the rights of minorities in direct democracies. The “oppressed” minorities these apologists had in mind were such members in good standing of the plutocracy as George Washington and James Madison. This argument, they hoped, would allow plutocrats to wallow in luxury and power while the rest of us, if we are lucky, live in Levittowns and helplessly subsist on a diet of beans, bacon, and gravy.

So much for the probable origins of this argument. But can it be refuted? Can it be shown that although direct democracy does at times oppress minorities, it is the least likely to do so, and the one practical system that most closely approaches the anarchist ideal?¹⁰⁶⁵

To begin with, it is possible to propose a sound theoretical and empirical thesis that is diametrically opposed to the tyranny of the majority argument:

It is commonly argued that there is a trade-off between political equality (maximized by majority rule) and minority protection (better provided by systems with external checks and balances, which require more than a simple majority to enact legislation). This paper argues that this trade-off does not exist and that actually majority rule provides most protection to minorities.¹⁰⁶⁶

Next, we have the historical record. “Throughout history, the tyranny of the minority has been a much more potent and deadly sort of tyranny than the sort practised by the majority. Majorities still have a lot to learn about tyranny from minorities.”¹⁰⁶⁷ Speaking about the United States in 1912, former president Theodore Roosevelt likewise observed: “We are to-day suffering from the tyranny of minorities. . . . No sane man who has been familiar with the government of this country for the last twenty years will complain that we have had too much of the rule of the majority.”¹⁰⁶⁸

Indeed, although there are rare exceptions of benign and far-seeing rulers, overall there is no question that authoritarian systems are more likely to mistreat minorities than direct democracies, e.g., the treatment of Shiites in Saudi Arabia or Jews in Tsarist Russia. So the only serious contenders to better treatment of minorities would be representative “democracies.” But overall, the record of such “democracies” is chillingly oppressive, e.g, genocide of Native Americans in the USA, discrimination against and lynching of African-Americans in the postbellum American south, and the incarceration and sometimes torture and execution of union members, strikers, socialists, communists, anti-war activists, and whistleblowers. In the U.K., the vicious persecution of Oscar Wilde, Alan Turing,¹⁰⁶⁹ and many other homosexuals comes to mind. Numerous such examples can probably be found in any other representative “democracy.”

Nothing on this scale of tyranny is ever seen in direct democracies. Ask yourself: which is more oppressive to minorities, the Berlin Philharmonic or all other top-down orchestras? (See Chapter 7) The Mondragon Corporation or any run-of-the-mill corporation? Athens or Sparta, Macedonia, Carthage, Persia, and the USA?¹⁰⁷⁰ How many books have been banned in the USA and how many were banned in Athens?

Besides the historical record, empirical research suggests that direct democracies are less injurious to minorities than all other known alternatives:

- “If referendums are held on minority rights, these result in large majorities in favour of such rights.”¹⁰⁷¹
- Let us suppose that genuine democracies pose an awful risk to minorities — awful enough to justify checks and balances, judicial oversight, and other oligarchic trappings of the American Constitution (see Chapter 5). If such a risk is real, you would expect that minorities would be opposed to direct democracy. And yet, surveys show that “minorities always include themselves in the majority who are in favour of direct democracy.” For instance, a 1999 survey “among Texans found that 72% of blacks and 86% of Hispanics were in favour of direct democracy, compared to 69% of whites.” Three different surveys in California obtained similar results.¹⁰⁷² Only one minority is typically opposed to direct democracy — the extravagantly rich and powerful.

To sum up. What is alleged to be an argument against direct democracy is actually an argument for it. Genuine majority rule is vastly less tyrannical than all existing alternatives — including the

much-vaunted Anglosphere variations of representative “democracies.” If you care about the rights of minorities, you should champion direct democracy.

However, if you belong to the super-wealthy and powerful tiny minority, if your academic or journalistic promotion depends on the good will of this minority, if you feel nothing but contempt for the truth, the future, and the unwashed masses, and if you crave an ever bigger share of the collective pie of power and riches, then you should undercut and malign direct democracy. In particular, you should master the art of inventing such bogus concepts as “conspiracy theory” (see Chapter 5), “trickle-down theory,” “tyranny of the majority,” or “ship of fools.”

Direct Democracy = Ship of Fools?

On one point the Athenians were distrustful of human nature, on its ability to resist the temptations of irresponsible power; hence their insistence on brief terms of office, regular review of the conduct of magistrates in office, and above all a searching scrutiny of the record of magistrates on completing their term. The philosophers are strangely blind to this danger, and are content to rely on the virtue of their usually hereditary or co-optative oligarchies of wise men. — A. H. M. Jones¹⁰⁷³

Perhaps the most often heard charge against direct democracy is incompetence. To run a ship well, say Plato and his past and present followers, you need an expert, not a bunch of laypeople. Likewise, to sail the Ship of State you need highly educated, selfless, sages. In a democracy, the captains are not sages, but ordinary people. A democratic ship of state is, therefore, a mob-ruled irrational enterprise.

However, when examined closely, the analogy between seagoing ships and ships of state totally breaks down.

I. To begin with, sailing a ship calls for a lot more than just technical competence. The most skillful captain in the world can be a power-hungry baboon who would terrorize the crew, e.g., see Jack London’s *The Sea Wolf* for a semi-fictional account. He can be corrupt, overbearing, or a coward, e.g., see the actual 18th-century mutiny on the British Royal Navy’s *Bounty* or Herman Wouk’s semi-fictional *The Cain Mutiny*. A captain can also be a greedy traitor: oligarchs were ever ready to betray their countrymen and their soldiers, “for the purpose of acquiring money.”¹⁰⁷⁴ To minimize mishaps, the private or public owner of a ship must carefully screen the captain before hiring him and then the owner must continuously monitor his performance. Even better, he can let go of the hierarchical yoke altogether and let the ship be run by its entire crew.

No one in her right mind hands a captain a blank check just because he can adroitly read the stars and steer the helm. Why then should anyone hand Plato’s alleged experts a blank check? Why shouldn’t these experts in geometry be held accountable to the people they supposedly serve? Why can’t they be recalled? Who, in other words, is to guard the guardians?

Indeed, as we have seen, a key requirement for running a state is not expertise, but commitment to serve the public interest. Only the people can be trusted to look after their own interests; all

other systems are prone to serve the selfish interests of the few. No one has ever invented — and no one ever will — an educational system that produces selfless philosopher-kings.

II. Because an ordinary citizen is directly affected by policies, she is in a better position to appraise them than the people who originated and implemented them. Politics, Aristotle says, “is one of those arts in which the best judge is not the artist himself but the user of the product. The householder is a better judge of a house than the architect, the steers-person of a rudder rather than the carpenter, the eater of a meal rather than the cook.”¹⁰⁷⁵

Indeed, if my land is stolen and I’m starving (see Chapter 1), I know better than many comfortable experts that the system is flawed. If I inform the people of war crimes committed in their names and the oligarchs try to kill me (see Chapter 5), I am a far better judge of their rule than 1,000 philosopher-kings lording over me under the pretext of creating a utopia. If I’m beaten or framed or tortured by the police, I’ve less illusions about the system I live under than the rulers who condone or encourage police brutality.

III. The people in a direct democracy often take the same role as a ship’s private or public owners when these owners hire and appraise the captain’s performance. The people listen to experts in technical matters, experts who often have conflicting opinions, and then the people choose what they feel is the most reasonable course of action. In fields where no clear expertise exists, they listen to sophisticated viewpoints, and again choose the apparent best course of action. In other words, in a direct democracy, ordinary citizens do not often originate policies but choose between policies put forward by experts. This is not mob rule but more nearly its opposite: a sophisticated way of setting policies. Protagoras:

I, like the other Greeks, think that the Athenians are wise. Well, I see that when we gather for the assembly, when the city has to do something about buildings, they call for the builders as advisers and when it is about ship construction, the shipwrights, and so on with everything else that can be taught and learned. And if anyone else tries to advise them, whom they do not think an expert, even if he be quite a gentleman, rich and aristocratic, they none the less refuse to listen, but jeer and boo, until either the speaker himself is shouted down and gives up, or the sergeants at arms, on the order of the presidents, drag him off or remove him. That is how they behave on technical questions.¹⁰⁷⁶

IV. Most major policy choices cannot be resolved by philosopher-kings, for the very simple reason that such philosopher-kings do not, and cannot, exist:

Plato’s royal science simply does not exist, and therefore its practitioners cannot exist. . . . there is no single art or science that can satisfactorily demonstrate a claim to unite in itself the moral and instrumental understanding required for intelligent policymaking. Experience with nuclear weapons decisions thus lends additional support to the conclusion of common sense that technocrats ought to be not rulers but ruled over. Human experience . . . provides little ground for counting on experts to possess the wisdom to rule that is promised by the theory of guardianship.¹⁰⁷⁷

V. If such sages existed, they cannot resolve most policy choices because such choices largely boil down to self-interest, ideology, or morality — not to wisdom or expertise. Protagoras again:

But when the debate is on the general government of the city, anyone gets up and advises them, whether he be a carpenter or a smith or a leather worker, a merchant or a sea-captain, rich or poor, noble or humble, and no one blames them like the others for trying to give advice, when they have not learned from any source and have had no teacher.¹⁰⁷⁸

Protagoras then puts forward his view of human nature, a view which explains the conduct of the Athenians and foreshadows modern theories about the evolution of morality.¹⁰⁷⁹ People differ in their talents; one is more gifted in mathematics, while another has a special gift for making musical instruments. However, all people possess a sense of shame, decency, justice, and fair play, since without them social life would be impossible.¹⁰⁸⁰ So, when it comes to technical questions, the Athenians prefer the opinion of experts. “But when they come to discuss political questions, which must be determined by justice and moderation, they properly listen to everyone, thinking that everyone shares in these qualities or cities wouldn't exist.”¹⁰⁸¹

This view is shared by many. For instance, William Jennings Bryan, the USA's Democratic Party's presidential nominee in 1896, 1900, and 1908, “likewise maintained that the great political questions were in fact moral questions and that the intuitions of the people were as good as almost any degree of experience.”¹⁰⁸²

Perhaps the best way to convince ourselves that Protagoras and Bryan are right about this critical point is to consider actual policy dilemmas. I have run dozens in my head, always concluding that the key ingredients are perceived self-interest, ideology, and morality, not expertise. Here are four randomly chosen illustrations.

Example 1. One key decision that is facing every society is the distribution of wealth (Chapter 1). We can choose to (1) have mass starvation side by side with stratosphere-high opulence, (2) place limits on wealth and poverty, e.g., the richest person has no more than 100 times the wealth of the poorest, (3) strive for complete equality, or (4) eliminate material possessions altogether (as in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*). There is clearly no way of expertly resolving this problem. Some experts will choose option 1, others 2, and still others 3 or 4. Why? Because this question is far more complex than any decision that a ship captain is called upon to make. This is also a question that touches upon the interests of whoever the experts have been trained by and whoever pays their salary. The wealth, background, and upbringing of the experts also matter a great deal. Protagoras, Thomas Paine, Eugene Debs, or Xi Jinping at certain points in their lives had to make a living with their hands, and so they were far more inclined to sympathize with poor people than silver spooners like Plato, Marie Antoinette, or Nelson Rockefeller. So experts might be able to better guess the long-term consequences of each decision, but that is as far as they go because the problem is complex and the choice between these alternatives hinges on self-interest, morality, and ideology. Poor people are greatly motivated to be half as well-fed as a rich woman's

dog, they are more likely to feel compassion for the suffering of others, and, unless mercilessly brainwashed, are more likely to oppose vast inequalities.

Example 2. Take the decision made in the Athenian Assembly to commute the death sentence of the revolting Mityleneans men (see Chapter 4). There was a debate, the people listened to various analysts who stepped forward to advise them, and then voted to partially repeal the previous day's genocidal decision. Again, this is an extremely complex quandary, about which experts then and now would have different opinions. At the end, the decision boiled down to ideology, morality, compassion, and intuition about the national interest.

Example 3. Consider the United States' decision to indirectly topple democracy in Chile and replace it with a compliant dictatorship. Besides the assassination of President Allende, this involved the murders of thousands, including the chief of the Chilean Armed Forces, a man who believed in democracy and refused to join the CIA-sponsored plotters. That coup also involved the smashing of a folksinger's hands so that he could no longer play the guitar; this was followed by taunts and murder with at least 40 bullets.¹⁰⁸³ Stalin's murder of Leon Trotsky and countless others provides another example. Clearly, such decisions are for the most part anchored in self-interest, ideology, and morality, not in expertise. On the one hand, killing a man like Allende would increase the profit margins of some American corporations, would endear the murdering politicians to these corporations, and would make any leader anywhere on Earth think twice before protecting his people from corporate predators. On the other hand, to just take Allende's case, there is the murder of a democratically-elected president who believed that poverty was lamentable and that his people should benefit from the natural resources of their country. Admittedly, it takes expertise to recruit, equip, and bribe Chilean and American fascists to successfully carry out a coup. It takes expertise to control information resources in the USA so that Americans are not fully aware of crimes that are being committed in their names. But the decision itself, to depose or not to depose, to meddle in the affairs of other countries or not to meddle, to murder or not to murder, was not a question for experts. It again involved perceived self-interest, morality, and ideology. Those of us who oppose such murders find it hard to see how majority rule would fail to outshine such "experts" as Drs. Kissinger, Brzezinski, or Wolfowitz.

Example 4. Was the Ludlow massacre¹⁰⁸⁴ (see Chapter 5) a question of expertise? In part, yes. John D. Rockefeller cleverly bribed the Colorado state government and media so that they did his bidding. He made sure, long before, that no judge would ever dare find him guilty of murder. He knew how to savagely stop troublesome protests in front of his son's mansion.¹⁰⁸⁵ He knew how to hire competent thugs. But the decision itself, to kill some starving, freezing, miners and their families and to forcibly disperse the rest, was again based on self-interest, immorality, and ideology.

VI. The ship of fools argument is not known for its stellar record.

Plato's own efforts to implement his philosopher-king ideology failed. Plato tried to convert a tyrant into a philosopher-king, teaching him among other things a great deal of geometry. Plato not only failed, but, as a reward for his pedagogy, was sold into slavery. Later, a sincere disciple of Plato ruled Syracuse incompetently and tyrannically, and was assassinated. These events suggest that the notion of godlike sages running a country is thoroughly bereft of insights about human psychology. When you try to implement your ideas twice and fail, maybe your ideas are out of touch with the real world? Maybe your wealth and ivory tower existence prevented you from seeing a reality that was taken for granted by the working Athenians that you so despised?

In more recent times, the incompetence argument was employed to justify slavery and colonization (Kipling's "the white man's burden"). It was also deployed to deprive women and others of the vote. "In practice, each time the group concerned had received voting rights, the argument had turned out to be completely false."¹⁰⁸⁶

VII. Nowadays, most people would reject dictatorships and unabashed, in-your-face, oligarchies or "Animal Farms." Most people would probably want to have a say in their own destiny, be free, own some property, have the basic necessities for secured existence, lead meaningful, healthy, and long lives, and avoid wars and environmental destruction. So in practical terms, I believe, the only respectable competitor to direct democracy is its fake sister, the so-called representative democracy. But, for one thing, any objective observer of contemporary politics would reject the notion that most politicians or judges of such "democracies" enjoy above-average wisdom or competence. Somerset Maugham concurs:

I have known in various countries a good many politicians who have attained high office. I have continued to be puzzled by what seemed to me the mediocrity of their minds. I have found them ill-informed upon the ordinary affairs of life and I have not often discovered in them either subtlety of intellect or liveliness of imagination.¹⁰⁸⁷

So, if there is shrewdness anywhere in Western "democracies," it is less likely to be found in politicians than in a few of their financial sponsors. Regardless, shrewdness is one thing, wisdom another.

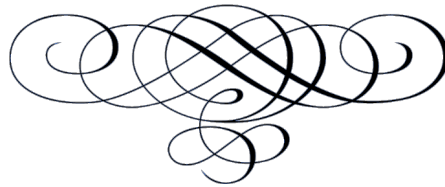
Also, in representative "democracies,"

It is . . . not clear why the citizens are trusted to be able to choose between parties and politicians in elections, but not between issues in referendums. If anything, the former choice seems to be the more difficult one, because electors must form expectations about politicians' actions in the future.¹⁰⁸⁸

So here you have it again. A careful analysis of the ancient competence argument and its many sequels and variations, is actually one more argument for direct democracy.

It's heartbreaking, to know that so many people have had to go to such great lengths for so long to defend the obvious. Equally tragic is the plight of decent people who fell under the spell of totalitarian or oligarchic ideologies, and can no longer extricate themselves.¹⁰⁸⁹

Even so, the case for direct democracy is overwhelming. Who is more likely to stand for your interests and convictions: you, or that fabulously stingy, unwise, uncompassionate, selfish, conniving bunch of trillionaires and billionaires and their puppets? That is, in the final analysis, what they want us to believe: that they can take better care of us than we can. And they, their predecessors throughout the ages, their closed-minded defenders, misguided worshipers, captive intellectuals, and self-seeking lackeys and praetorians, have kept that patronizing mantra going for millennia. They have kept it even though it only brought us such things as catastrophic environmental decline, cancers, autistic children, recurrent economic crises, tyranny, jingoism, racketeering wars, unhappiness, crass materialism, compartmentalization, lies, poverty, starvation, and death.



Chapter 9: Tentative Blueprints for Direct Democracy

It is imperative, then, that we reinstate into our modern politics democracy's original meaning as institutionalized decision-making processes in class-divided societies that enable and encourage many of the non-wealthy members of those societies to impose themselves on the political agenda. — Larry Patriquin¹⁰⁹⁰

The citizen who thinks he sees that the commonwealth's political clothes are worn out, and yet holds his peace and does not agitate for a new suit, is disloyal. — Mark Twain¹⁰⁹¹

Chapter Summary. In the extremely improbable event that direct democracy emerges in some country, the question arises: how can a country of many millions follow the tried-and-true Athenian model while avoiding its many pitfalls? A modified Athenian model offers, in my view, the best path forward. One key aspect of this model is decentralization: dividing a country into self-governing Villages, each occupying one contiguous territory and comprising of up to 40,000 adults. Each Village then follows the Athenian system of governance, including a constitution, sortition, pay for service, term limits, audits, assembly, council, law courts, legislative courts, ten-member boards of officials — and even kleroterions. Unlike Athens, all Village constitutions would mandate a universal franchise and limit the wealth gap between the richest and poorest citizen. Additional constitutional provisions would ban information monopolies, sunshine bribery of officials, giant corporations, and privately-owned banks. To protect freedom and autonomy, the power and scope of the central government would be severely curtailed. Thus, this government will be divided into independent departments, each in charge of just one function and governed by an assembly. Members of each central assembly will be selected at random, serve one year, and be subjected to rigorous audits. A simple majority of Villages could override the decision of any central department. Any Village would have veto power over any central decision that specifically affects its own territory. The chapter concludes with a brief description of two other extant models of direct democracy. Both models would far outshine any currently existing system of government, but would fall short of the full promise of direct democracy (as embodied in the Athenian model above). In a radical variation of the referendum model, everyone can vote on every major issue, with a simple majority setting policy for the entire nation. In a radical variation of the sortition model, a randomly-selected panel convenes to study a particular issue, debates, deliberates, consults independent experts, and adopts a policy for the nation as a whole.

* * *

This book showed that even a half-way direct democracy such as Athens, or one-tenth direct democracy such as Switzerland, are structurally superior to dictatorships, oligarchies, “Brave New Worlds,” and representative “democracies.” From this, the reasonable but unproven extrapolation is that a full-fledged direct democracy would yield even more impressive results.

The particular variation of direct democracy would depend on the people themselves. Like the Athenians, they would experiment, learn from their mistakes, and constantly revise. It is also possible that different communities or countries might successfully adopt different models, depending in part on local cultures and circumstances. Regardless of the specific approach chosen, one thing is clear: any move towards majority rule will outshine the tragicomedies in place now.

Given the history of the past 2,345 years, there is no question that the struggle in even one nation is going to be an uphill one. A miracle, system collapse, or revolution seem to provide the only glimmers of hope for direct democracy anywhere on Earth.

In the unlikely event that direct democracy wakes up from its slumber, the first few years would pose formidable challenges. To begin with, if democracy someplace is gained by peaceful means, home-grown oligarchs would still enjoy power and wealth, and would try to undermine it. An even more serious challenge would be posed by foreign oligarchs, who would still control most countries of the world, perceive genuine democracy as the greatest possible threat to their power, and do absolutely anything to destroy it.

If and when a direct democracy is first established, the people would need time to appreciate its excellence and become engaged. They would have to change their attitudes towards their neighbors, their local community, their nation, and the world. They would have to meet the challenges of self-rule and a radically different system. Before, the system only required of them passivity, conformity, obedience, an infinite appetite for distractions, and the worship of celebrities, tycoons, queens, presidents, ayatollahs, and popes. Now it might be looking for civic engagement, belief in oneself, faith in humanity, creativity, and critical thinking.

In the very unlikely event that humanity survives and that direct democracy emerges and triumphs, the questions arise: what kind of blueprints should it follow? What lessons can we learn from the Athenians, Swiss, and contemporary sub-national direct democracies? What precautions can be taken against the re-emergence of oligarchies, dictatorships, totalitarianism, and fake democracies?

This chapter touches upon these questions.

The Athenian Model for Future Direct Democracies

Athens provides almost a laboratory experiment in popular government: except that it all happened so long ago, and so far away, and in a language which is so very dead, it might almost be worth our while today to pay it some attention. — H.D.F. Kitto¹⁰⁹²

Athens brought freedom, prosperity, culture, and a sense of well-being to its male citizens. It did so not merely because it practiced direct democracy, but because it gradually developed a sophisticated institutional framework to support that democracy. In my view, we can do no better than wholeheartedly embrace that basic framework while, at the same time, avoid its many

pitfalls. How then can a country of millions adopt the political system of a country of tens of thousands?

One key to the successful implementation of the Athenian model is decentralization, of a far more radical nature than either the Athenian or Swiss systems. In this tentative scheme, the basic self-governing unit — we can arbitrarily call it a Village — of any country would consist of one contiguous geographical area inhabited by up to 40,000 adults. A populous country like the USA, with an adult population of some 250 million, can be divided into some 6,250 Villages each consisting of some 40,000 adults. A small country like Iceland, with an adult population of some 260,000, could be divided into 13 Villages each consisting of some 20,000 adults. In either case, the small scale of Villages allows each country to adopt an Athenian-style direct democracy.

This basic division into Villages would be subject to geographic constraints. For instance, far fewer residents of a small, remote island might constitute a Village. Likewise, periodically, owing to population growth or decline, Villages would have to be subdivided or consolidated.

As in Athens, the assembly, open to all adults, would be the supreme authority of the Village and might meet some 40 times a year. A council and board of officials would be in charge of day-to-day operations. Most or all paid positions would be for one year only, selected by lot from qualified persons who presented themselves as candidates.

Each Village would be autonomous, in charge of education, environment, infrastructure, and other basic functions. Taxes would only be raised at the Village level, not by the central government. Such taxes would fund local projects, with only a portion going to inter-Village joint projects and to the central government. Citizenship could be decided on the Village level too, often based on face-to-face interactions. A Village would have its own ever-changing constitution, people's courts, legislative courts, ten-member boards of officials, arbitrators, a public bank (banks would become public utilities — see below), TV station, newspaper, radio station, and even kleroterions (mechanical randomization contraptions — as opposed to easily rigged computerized voting machines). In fact, the people of every Village would control every aspect of life, save those very few functions that must be delegated to inter-Village councils and the central government (see below).

Decentralization of this type enjoys several advantages, besides allowing us to readily implement the Athenian model. First, as in Swiss communities or Greek city-states, citizens of a small Village might feel that they are in charge of their own lives and destinies, and would be more inclined to take an active part in politics. Another advantage is diversity, which would in turn enhance the nation's overall resilience and creativity; even a small country like Iceland might have 13 or so distinct experiments with direct democracy.

The most severe handicap of an updated Athenian model is its radical nature. Unlike other direct democracy proposals, it does not attempt to merely reform existing systems, but to radically reconstruct them, and would demand a psychological adjustment. Also, powerful oligarchs will

fight any such attempt and will do everything they can to convince people that slavery is, after all, better than liberty.

The Proposal to Adopt the Athenian Model is Supported by Some Scholars

Most historians, political scientists, and even classicists, would reject out of hand the adoption of a modified version of the Athenian Constitution. There are some partial exceptions, however, including:

What strikes a modern as most alien and remarkable about Athenian democracy is precisely that it was a democracy: the people ruled. And it is worth considering whether it may be possible to adapt this core commitment, and the institutional contrivances that sustained it, to reorient our own rather different system of governance.¹⁰⁹³

[Athenian democracy reproduced] a more accurate cross-section of societal interests. . . . The Athenians weren't perfect, but they did manage to create a stable system of government that delivered far more power to its citizens than does ours; a system that did not suffer from the rampant fraud, demagoguery and creeping oligarchy that is so prevalent in modern "democracy." Using this template to correct some of the problems we are experiencing is certainly more likely to lead to success than simply casting about wildly for solutions that don't have any functioning precedent.¹⁰⁹⁴

Modifications and Improvements of the Athenian System

Any contemporary Athenian model of direct democracy would diverge from Athenian practices in some crucial aspects.

Universal Franchise.

Perhaps the most odious feature of Athenian democracy involved the treatment of the majority — women, people of foreign extraction, slaves, and many others (see Chapter 4). It goes without saying that any civilized community, let alone a genuine democracy, would extend the full franchise to all adult members.

Peace.

The Greeks took war among city-states for granted. And yet war blighted their lives, and, at the end, deprived them of their freedom, independence, and prosperity. While fully capable of defending themselves from external wars of aggression, future direct democracies are perhaps more likely to see that "it no longer has to be you or me. Selfishness is unnecessary and henceforth unrationalizable as mandated by survival. War is obsolete."¹⁰⁹⁵

Minimizing the Gap between Rich and Poor.

It is a political axiom that power follows property. But it is now a historical fact that the means of production are fast becoming the monopolistic property of Big Business and Big

Government. Therefore, if you believe in democracy, make arrangements to distribute property as widely as possible. — Aldous Huxley¹⁰⁹⁶

If Athenian democracy teaches anything it is that struggle for relative equality on the “material plane” is essential if we are to move beyond forms of public decision-making that disproportionately benefit society’s elite. In short, economic democracy is a necessary prerequisite of political democracy. Without the former, the latter cannot exist. — Larry Patriquin¹⁰⁹⁷

Apart from war, the one mistake that, above all, led to the demise of Greek democracies and broke the spirit of Greece, involved wealth inequalities. Although wealth in Athens was distributed far more equally than in almost all countries today, and although the condition of the poorer citizens gradually improved, there existed “a heavy concentration of wealth at the extreme top of Athenian society, in a small group of approximately 300 families.”¹⁰⁹⁸ Because the rich enjoyed more leisure and better education, nutrition, and physical training, and because most Athenians bought the myth that the rich were somehow superior, almost all influential politicians were well-off.¹⁰⁹⁹ This often allowed these rich people to implement the oligarchic oath of carrying out “whatever evil” they could against the not-so-rich majority. If that took conspiring against and toppling the democracy, so be it. If that took mass murders or treason, so be it.

Moreover, in Athens, wealth disparities often undermined the democratic ideals of equality and the rule of law. In one telling instance, a wealthy Athenian aristocrat relates how he was awarded a prize for bravery thanks to his wealth and connections, even though the prize rightfully belonged to Socrates, a commoner.¹¹⁰⁰ The speeches of Demosthenes likewise point to the corrosive effects of excessive wealth. The very rich at times ignored decisions of the law courts, enticed poor people to provide false testimony, or paid lackeys to file harassment suits against innocents. Also, ordinary citizens were unlikely to sue the very rich, regardless of the justice of their case.¹¹⁰¹ Thus the unscrupulous rich could diminish democracy and justice because they could use their money to intimidate, coerce, and even physically harm anyone who dared bring them to account.

Apart from the laws, what made a semblance of democracy possible under such circumstances was the fact that

a huge percentage of male citizens — perhaps seven out of ten — held enough land to remain relatively free from the clutches of a class of potentially predatory aristocrats, the most well-off members of the community. . . . After Solon’s reforms, Athenian peasants found themselves closer to the independent end of the social spectrum and further away from the dependent side than perhaps any non-elite class in history.¹¹⁰²

We have seen earlier that oligarchic treachery is a recurring feature of history. For instance, some influential French oligarchs preferred conquest of their country by Nazis to being ruled by a democratically-elected socialist government; they acted accordingly, and this provides one explanation for the shockingly swift defeat of France in 1940.¹¹⁰³ Likewise, many Latin American oligarchs serve their interests and those of their Anglo-Saxon sponsors — not the interests of their own people. The only difference between Greek city-states and contemporary oligarchies is that

Greek commoners knew perfectly well who they were up against, while most people today are not fully aware of the reality of the war that is being waged against them.

The truth, as Harold Laski observed, is that “a State divided into a small number of rich and a large number of poor will always develop a government manipulated by the rich to protect the amenities represented by their property.” Nowadays, the menace that vast wealth poses to democracy is even graver and more multifaceted than it was in the past. A vast fortune allows oligarchs to launch genocides, wars of aggression, and brinkmanship against nuclear states — paid for in money, blood, tears, and liberties, by the vast majority. Their wealth enables them to corrupt the political process by bribing, smearing, and murdering politicians, judges and anyone else who impedes their quest for ever more wealth and power. Wealth permits them to control the educational, informational, and legal systems, rig elections, and corrupt physicians, opinion-makers, and intellectuals. It enables them to maltreat and exploit the people around them and break the law with impunity. Worst of all, vast fortunes allow them to risk the future existence of humanity.

On the other side of the coin, “the enjoyment of property,” seems to be in accord with human proclivities: “Give a man the secure possession of a bleak rock, and he will turn it into a garden; give him a nine years' lease of a garden, and he will convert it into a desert. . . . The magic of property turns sands into gold.”¹¹⁰⁴

Real democracy, if it ever gets established anywhere and if it seeks permanence, will have to solve the wealth gap dilemma. One way out is to limit wealth disparities between the richest and the poorest to a ratio of, say, 100:1, with any amount exceeding that ratio automatically going to the public coffers.

In such a system, a rich woman can get richer — but only by carrying along her poorer fellow citizens. Such a system would incentivize people to pursue more worthwhile goals than the undignified pursuit of money. Such a system would also constitute a major step towards the egalitarian societies that existed throughout most of human existence, and would eliminate the scourge of needless poverty, homelessness, hunger, infirmities, deaths, and cultural disadvantages engendered by poverty. At the same time, such limits would satisfy the apparent conception of most people of distributive justice¹¹⁰⁵ as well as a craving for a place of their own.

In any contemporary variant of Athenian democracy, Demosthenes says, the people would compel “the rich to do what was equitable,” and stop “injustice being done to the poor.”¹¹⁰⁶ In the twenty-first century, in “capitalist” “democracies,” however

the rallying cry is virtually the opposite, as the rich engage in one of the most obscene wealth-grabs in the history of humanity, while the poor — and even substantial sections of the middle class — find themselves “downwardly mobile,” increasingly marginalized, and subject to frequent physical and psychological violence, often at the hands of what is supposed to be “their” state. The ability of affluent entrepreneurs to minimize their tax obligations while ensuring that governments collect revenues via regressive taxation

(which harms the poorest most) illustrates perfectly the distinction between democracy then and “democracy” now.¹¹⁰⁷

The argument that people would not innovate because they can only be 100 times richer than their poorest compatriots is flawed. First, many potential innovators would almost certainly fall below the maximum tier of wealth, and would have a financial incentive to reach the top. Also, while some innovators are driven by greed, many others are driven by curiosity, idealism, the desire to see their brainchildren flourish, or a desire for recognition. If the experiences of Greece and the history of the natural sciences are any indication, the creative impulse would suffer little or nothing in a land where the wealth gap between rich and poor is substantial — but not substantial enough to undermine freedom, justice, peace, and survival.

Correcting Other Flaws of Athenian Democracy.

Future direct democracies, if they come into being, would probably shun the Athenians’ frequent recourse to infanticide and to capital punishment. They might likewise embrace freedom to practice — or not to practice — any religion.

Making Democracy Work Today

The world has changed since Athens ruled the seas, and so any future direct democracy would need to take a few additional precautions.

Information

Even if you changed everything else that is wrong with the current system, nothing would change if the plutocratic class retained its ability to manipulate the way people think and vote. — Caitlin Johnstone¹¹⁰⁸

The clever manipulation of the mass media is creating a concentration camp of the mind that promises to be far more effective in keeping the populace in line. . . . What happens to the individual who dissents? In Nazi Germany, he was physically destroyed; here, the process is more subtle, but the end results can be the same. — Jim Garrison¹¹⁰⁹

Democratic institutions can be made to work only if all concerned do their best to impart knowledge. — Aldous Huxley¹¹¹⁰

“One of the distinguishing features of liberal Athenian democracy is freedom of information.”¹¹¹¹ By contrast, in most countries today, Plato’s and Hitler’s dream of total control of the majority’s belief system through lies and propaganda has been realized. Information monopolies, standardization of education and research under oligarchic control, modern mind control technologies, political propaganda and advertising, and chemical attacks on the nervous system, pose a threat to our most precious possession — the freedom to think for ourselves and to act rationally and compassionately. In the late 20th century, the internet provided a brief spell of a less restricted flow of information, but only few availed themselves of this treasure and now that freedom is vanishing too.

Worthwhile direct democracy initiatives in such places as Switzerland and California often fail and people end up voting and behaving against their convictions and interests, because oligarchs control the spigots of information and far outspend their opponents.

If decisions are ultimately to be made by the people, then the people must be informed . . . If the state monopolizes information, keeps it from its citizenry, the people will be effectively removed from taking any meaningful part in the decision-making process.¹¹¹²

The remedy is clear:

There can be preventive legislation — an outlawing of the psychological slave trade, a statute for the protection of minds against the unscrupulous purveyors of poisonous propaganda, modeled on the statutes for the protection of bodies against the unscrupulous purveyors of adulterated food and dangerous drugs.¹¹¹³

Democracy and a free marketplace of ideas are conjoined twins: neither one can exist without the other. For a direct democracy to exist, the power of oligarchs over our minds must be splintered in a thousand pieces and scattered to the winds.

Sunshine Bribery

Even after we reform the system, significant wealth disparities might remain. Also, when direct democracy launches its first tentative steps, the billionaires would surely spend many a sleepless night figuring out how to retain their lopsided wealth and power. To survive, starting on day one, a direct democracy must ban private money from the political process.

Banking and Money Creation

Of all betrayals of ‘the people’ made by elected representatives, allowing banks to create the money supply has been the greatest . . . control of the money supply is fundamental to all power. — Ivo Mosley¹¹¹⁴

Top private bankers pose a grave risk to democracy, leading, as we have seen, John Acton to his famous aphorism: “The issue which has swept down the centuries and which will have to be fought sooner or later is the people versus the banks.” The time for this fight is at the dawn of direct democracy. All banks must be public utilities, controlled by the people themselves. Ideally, each Village would have its own public bank. Mergers and collusion with any other bank, foreign or domestic, would be banned. Otherwise, a few private bankers — the producers of nothing — will become the defilers of everything.

The type of currency chosen is crucially important too. A precious metal like silver has the advantage of being under Village control, and yet accepted everywhere. Paper or blockchain currencies enjoy many advantages, but these advantages are overshadowed by the fact that they would probably be issued by a more corruptible and less accountable agency of the central government.¹¹¹⁵

Trusts and Oligopolies

As in the case of extremely rich individuals, gigantic corporations are incompatible with democracy and with either socialism or the free enterprise system. A real democracy would therefore set an upper limit to the size of corporations and splinter the ones that exceed that limit.

The Central Government

An oversized and remote central government can be more readily corrupted than town-sized autonomous Villages. The central government's very existence is a menace to individual liberties and autonomy. It is also much harder to practice direct democracy with millions of citizens. For all these reasons, whenever possible, projects involving several Villages should be coordinated among the Villages themselves, without intervention from the central government. The remaining power and scope of the central government should be limited and partitioned.

One way of addressing the problem is breaking up the central government into independent departments, each one in charge of just one function. For instance, a central transportation department might be established, responsible for such things as flight control, sea navigation, construction and maintenance of highways, railroads, and bridges. The supreme authority of that agency could be an assembly, which could consist of one or more representatives from one or several Villages, serving just one year, paid for their temporary service, and chosen at random from all those who expressed interest in serving. Additionally, one or more person from each Village or a group of Villages might serve in one of the various ten-member boards of officials of that agency. The vetting and auditing process at the Village level should apply, with even more vigor, to members of the transportation agency and its boards of officials.

Other central functions could be delegated to other self-contained departments which would be, preferably, located in different parts of the country and which would again be ruled by different assemblies and officials selected as before. There thus could be independent departments dedicated to war (as long as war is necessary), foreign relations, and resolving inter-Village disputes. Another department might set national limits on wealth gaps between the richest and poorest citizens of the whole country (to avoid flights of rich citizens from one Village to another).

All these independent departments should depend on Villages for funding, and should not, under any circumstances, be granted the powers of taxation and money creation.

To further forestall power encroachments by the central government, every major decision made by any central department — e.g., building a high-speed railway across the nation, declaring war, building a nuclear power plant, signing a major international treaty, establishing a colony on Mars at public expense — would have to be approved by over 50% of Village assemblies. If the decision is urgent, a special session of those assemblies can be called. Besides, any Village should have a right to veto any central decision that specifically affects its people or territory, e.g., storing nuclear wastes, fracking, or constructing a military base, on Village land.

Some central departments could be short-lived and designed to address a particular issue.

A simple majority of Villages could be empowered to abolish an existing agency or create a new one.

The Referendum Model of Direct Democracy

Besides the above updated Athenian model, other ways of implementing direct democracy have been put forward, including the referendum and sortition models. Both will be a vast improvement on anything that is available on Earth right now, but neither one will, by itself, fulfill the promises of direct democracy.

However, to succeed, both models must recall that the world has changed since the days of ancient Athenian democracy. At the very least, both will have to embrace the following steps (see the Athenian model above, see also Chapter 5):

1. Minimize the gap between rich and poor.
2. Wrest information monopolies from oligarchs.
3. Apply severe criminal sanctions on sunshine bribery.
4. Mandate total public control of banking and money creation.
5. Eliminate private trusts and oligopolies.
6. Maximally enfeeble the central government through decentralization and other safeguards.

In the most democratic version of the referendum model, all citizens vote directly on all key issues, taking advantage of the internet. A simple majority determines the outcome, with no possibility of appealing the people's verdict.¹¹¹⁶

Here is one variation of this process:

With adequate time to get the world informed . . . readouts will be broadcast reporting the world majority's disposition toward any one proposed solution . . . After . . . a 75-percent majority is attained, the professional-management world committee will be authorized to put the proposition into the world. . . . Thus will begin the world's first real tamper- and corruption-proof democracy. Humanity will make mistakes, but the minority, knowing that this is the first true democracy, will often go along spontaneously with the majority, knowing that if it develops that the majority has made a bad judgment, negative readings will swiftly occur as society discovers that it has chosen the wrong course. . . . When a 51-percent majority shows that humanity now regrets the previous decision, the world management committee will propose a means of correcting the course, and the foregoing processes will be repeated.¹¹¹⁷

This variation could, if followed and supplemented by the six steps above, transform the world, despite the following drawbacks. It is far less democratic, decentralized, comprehensive, and specific than the updated Athenian model (presented above). It is hard for a citizen to feel that she is making a difference when there are millions of decision makers. Also, this model, which involves everyone, makes it harder for voters to carefully study the issues and take part in face-to-face deliberations — a crucial aspect of the democratic process. Finally, voting machines can be rigged and their operators bribed.

The Polling Principle (= Sortition, Demarchy, or Lottocracy)

The appointment of magistrates by lot is thought to be democratic, and the election of them oligarchic. — Aristotle¹¹¹⁸

We have seen in Chapter 4 that decisions in Athens — even in the assembly — were made by a small fraction of rotating, randomly-selected, people. The tacit underlying premise was that a large enough representative sample of the entire population, drawn proportionately from different locations, social backgrounds, and economic strata, approximates the informed views of the citizenry as a whole.

Applied to the modern world, the most democratic version of this principle replaces elected or non-elected decision-makers with panels of randomly selected people. These people serve a limited time, get fully paid for their efforts, and are charged with resolving a particular issue. Unlike the referendum-based vote of the entire population, the panelists in this case can follow the Athenian model: meet, debate, deliberate, listen to experts, and then vote. That vote would almost certainly be identical to the vote of all citizens — if they too could carefully study the issue (see Chapter 4).

One variation of this model involves three distinctive features:

- (1) The legislative function is fulfilled by many different single-issue legislatures (each one focusing just on, for example, Agriculture or Health Care), rather than by a single, generalist legislature;
- (2) The members of these single-issue legislatures are chosen by lottery from the relevant political jurisdiction; and
- (3) The members of the single-issue legislatures hear from a variety of experts on the relevant topic at the beginning of each legislative session.¹¹¹⁹

Another variation:

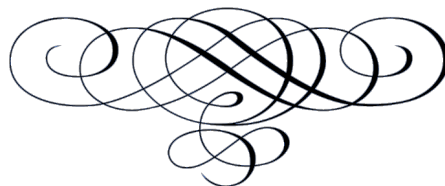
In order to have democracy we must abandon elections, and in most cases referendums, and revert to the ancient principle of choosing by lot those who are to hold various public offices. Decision-making bodies should be statistically representative of those affected by their decisions. . . . Elections . . . inherently breed oligarchies. Democracy is possible only if the decision-makers are a representative sample of the people concerned. . . . Until about two hundred years ago it was widely assumed that the principle of rotation of offices by lot was the characteristic procedure of democracy. . . .

It is very hard to believe [for most people] that the answer to our most pressing problems is so simple and so bland.¹¹²⁰

This model too, if joined by the six supplementary steps outlined above, could transform the world. It does, however, have its fair share of drawbacks. With this model most citizens would never take part in the political process, and thus might become alienated from it. Indeed, in Athens, a significant fraction of the people governed; with this model, an infinitesimally smaller minority would, at any given moment, navigate the ship of state. This model will certainly be a far cry from vibrant Greek democracies, and thus fall far short of their accomplishments. Also this model fails to acknowledge that there is a lot more to direct democracy than sortition (see the Athenian model, above). And, a panel comprised of a thousand or so citizens runs the risk of being corrupted by big money and bamboozled by biased experts.¹¹²¹

We should perhaps close this section by mentioning that Roslyn Fuller, one of the ablest contemporary champions of direct democracy, favors referendums and the mass participation they afford over sortition. Sortition, in her view, should only play a secondary role in future direct democracies:

When they are really pushed to the wall, nearly all anti-democrats, regardless of their ideology, tend to fall back on one particular plan: adopting sortition as a model of governance. Sortition is, as it were, their final offer; the most palatable option for pushing the anti-democrat agenda under the deceptive guise of equality. . . . Thus, for sortitionists, the answer is to shrink the size of the deliberating or decision-making body to a more manageable level where participants can be hammered by experts until they realize the error of their ways. . . . [Sortition however] still has an important role to play in democracy. . . It could, for example, be used to perform executive tasks. . . . The second potential use for sortition is as a means of local government for small towns and villages . . . The third potential use . . . is to support decision-making in much the same way as the [Athenian Council] supported the Assembly.¹¹²²



Epilogue

Once an oligarchy seizes power, deforming governing institutions to exclusively serve its narrow interests and turning the citizenry into serfs, there are only two options, as Aristotle pointed out — tyranny or revolution. — Chris Hedges¹¹²³

It is no accident that no people has ever accomplished half as much as the Athenians. It is no accident that, when given a choice, Italians spurned nuclear power, despite massive false advertising by the moneylenders. It is no accident that, so far, Iceland — the only western country that managed to escape the oligarchs' maneuver of sucking the lifeblood out of people — was able to escape through a referendum. It is no accident that the Berlin Philharmonic is, perhaps, the world's leading orchestra. What worked so well for the Ancient Athenians and for most of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, is sure to work just as well for any country or organization choosing to give real democracy a chance. Moreover, the demonstrable superiority of real democracy to all other political systems tells us that, when not subjected to indoctrination, most of us are fundamentally decent and rational.

It is heart-breaking then, to know that in real democracy is the salvation of the world, and yet to suspect that real democracy is a pipe dream.

Regardless of the minuscule odds, lovers of freedom, life, and rationality have no choice but to cross their fingers, give their all for direct democracy, and recall that what appears impossible in one age can become everyday reality in another age. For them, the key question then becomes: how do they maximize their admittedly slim chances of getting there? The answer is threefold.

First, their own organizations must follow a variation of Athenian democracy.

Second, when it comes to nations like Iceland or Switzerland, the transition might be achieved peacefully. Such a transition would involve educational and political campaigns, as well as tactical moves against subversion, economic blackmail, assassinations, media campaigns, and foreign invasions. An optimist might then argue that, once real democracy is established in one country, it might serve as an inspiration for democrats elsewhere.

Third, when it comes to oligarchies like Australia, France, or Qatar, a revolution seems to provide the only way out. A question then arises: Might a popular uprising succeed, given the extraordinary power of contemporary oligarchs and their expertise in impoverishing and brainwashing the vast majority and in smearing, incarcerating, and killing their influential opponents?¹¹²⁴

History shows that it might. In particular, ancient Greece tells us that, with courage, dedication, and ingenious strategy, tortoises can outrun hares. The Marathon and Salamis victories provide two examples of impossible victories against a foreign foe (see Chapter 4). The survival for almost two centuries of the Nizari Ismaili state provides yet another example.¹¹²⁵ Two more paragons of victories against the enemies within are provided by the restoration of democracy in Athens and Thebes.¹¹²⁶

Notes and References

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- 3 I first planned to replace the term “direct democracy” with “real democracy.” Eventually, I decided that this would only add confusion to an already confused subject, and to use “real democracy” only sparingly. So here I would like to explain my discomfort with the term “direct democracy.” This term implies that there are two legitimate variants of democracy: indirect (representative) and direct. But to our hunter-gatherer ancestors and to the Greeks, indirect democracy would be equivalent to arrow-less archery. This obvious point, that even the freest representative democracies are oligarchies masquerading as democracies, that their entire *raison d'être* is to prevent the people from ruling by falsely claiming that they do rule, is noted by many: “The moment a people allows itself to be represented, it is no longer free” (Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 1762, *The Social Contract*). “They tell us that we live in a great free republic [USA]; that our institutions are democratic; that we are a free and self-governing people. This is too much, even for a joke” (Debs, Eugene V., *Works of Eugene Victor Debs*). Here is just one example showing that calling two radically distinct entities — direct and representative democracies — by the same name can lead even exceptional minds astray. One of the best 20th century defenses of democracy known to me is Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Yet, throughout that book, Popper fails to notice the fundamental, unbridgeable, gap between contemporary “democracies” and genuine Greek democracies. From the acknowledged fact that Athenian democracy was indeed spectacular, he assumes that contemporary “democracies” are likewise spectacular. This oversight is evident, for instance, in the preface to the second edition of his book, where Popper writes: “Most of my positive suggestions and, above all, the strong feeling of optimism which pervades the whole book struck me more and more as naive . . . but my mood of depression has passed, largely as the result of a visit to the United States.” For more details, see chapter 5 of this book. Thus, the fallacy of believing that a country like France is a democracy or, even worse, that it is as democratic as ancient Athens, is traceable in part to the sleight of hand of calling two radically different systems of government by the same name.
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- denounces as public enemies all who question its methods or throw light upon its crimes. I have two great enemies, the Southern Army in front of me and the bankers in the rear. Of the two, the one at my rear is my greatest foe." Franklin Delano Roosevelt remarked that "a financial element in the large centers has owned the government ever since the days of Andrew Jackson." See also: Sinclair, Upton, 1919, *The Brass Check*; Page, Benjamin I. & Gilens, Martin, 2017. *Democracy In America?: What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do about It*, Fuller, Roslyn, 2015, *Beasts and Gods: How Democracy Changed Its Meaning and Lost its Purpose*.
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