**The City and the Democratic Ideal**

*Part of the series* [*2,500 Years of Democracy*](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/23021)

By [François Hartog](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/22231) | Published in [History Today](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/43) [Volume: 44 Issue: 2](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/507)

François Hartog on how urban living has coincided with the advocacy of popular rule from Plato through to Machiavelli, Rousseau and 20th-century sociologists.

The Greek city will continue to be present at the base of our political existence for as long as the word ‘political’ is on our lips (Hannah Arendt)

'City', the word, comes to us from the Latin (civitas), but the city as an entity was an ancient Greek invention under the name of *polis*. Almost all our political vocabulary, from 'political' on, is rooted therefore in the ancient Greek city, and it was within that very special cultural context that democracy, another Greek political invention, was born.

Historically the *polis* as a new and original political state-form emerged within the Greek world in the course of the eighth century BC. Several factors made its development and spread possible, including a demographic revolution, an extension of settled agriculture, and an increase in the number of landed proprietors. *polis* designated a politically independent community, possessing a properly political territory, within the confines of which peasant proprietors for the first time ever – and indeed for the last time before the modern era – gained recognition as full citizens. The development of the *polis* was inextricably linked, moreover, to a vast movement of colonisation embracing most of the Mediterranean littoral as well as the Black Sea.

Since the nineteenth century, Athens has become the paradigm of the ancient city, taking over that role from Sparta and Rome. But it must not he forgotten that Athens occupied a special place in antiquity by reason of its exceptional size, its radically democratic constitution, and its unique history. The ‘Golden Age' of the *polis* was doubtless the three centuries or so between Solon (floruit 600) and Aristotle (d. 322). Yet the city remained thereafter for the ('reeks a living political form, both as a context for daily life and as a mental framework and spiritual reference- point, even long after they had been made subject to Rome. Plutarch's essay 'Rules for Politicians’, written around 100 AD by a Greek citizen of Rome, is ample proof of that.

For purposes of ethnic self-definition 'the political' served as the fundamental marker of difference between the Greeks and their 'others', the barbarians or non-Greeks. Whereas the Greeks discovered the political life of the city, barbarians knew nothing but the despotism of monarchy. Herodotos was typically Greek in organising his Histories according to this polarised worldview. On the one hand, he could recognise and pay tribute to the great antiquity and the wisdom of the Egyptians, but on the other hand he lumped them in with all the rest of the barbarians because they were congenitally incapable of living without kings.

On the Greek side of the ledger the Histories recounts the creation of the city blessed with isonomia – equality of respect and treatment under the Law. To overthrow a tyranny, or one- man dictatorship, was precisely to place political power 'into the centre', as the Greeks put it: that is, to transfer power from the closed world of the monarchical palace to the open space of the Agora or civic centre. Political power thereby became the property, not of one man, but of all citizens who were relevantly equal or similar. Decisions taken in secret were replaced by public debate, despotic fiat by equal freedom of public speech (isegoria) and persuasion. Isonomia encapsulated the reign of law (nomos). Everyone – of the citizens, that is – was now not merely equal before the law but also equally a maker of law.

The *polis* was conceived as a circular and centripetal space organised by notions of symmetry, parity and reversibility. It was an essential part of the definition of the Greek citizen that he ruled and be ruled turn and turn about. The *polis* therefore marked out and delimited a public and communal space, the Agora, for the purpose of conducting 'communal affairs'. These included both the affairs of the gods and the affairs of mortal men, since relations with the gods were always an integral part of the community's affairs. For the same reason, the Agora was never a purely secular space.

Being an intellectual as well as a material construct, the ancient city gave rise to reflection and theories about it, in the first instance concerning its origins. What was it that had enabled the Greeks to progress from a dispersed life of savagery in the wild to the collective civilised life of the city? The answer given notably by some of the free-thinking Sophists of the Periklean age was that man possessed logos, a unique form of rationality construed as mastery of articulate language and above all the capacity to exert persuasion. Such logos was deemed to lie at the root of the properly political life. The citizen had therefore to be something of a public orator, and the best orator was considered to be the best citizen.

One Sophist, however, proposed a markedly different myth of the origin of the *polis* – at least if Plato's account of it is to be believed. For Protagoras, men might well he able to master diverse technical skills, but as long as Zeus denied them 'the political art' they were utterly incapable of founding cities and ensuring their survival. Of what, then, did this 'political art', the sine qua non of sociability, consist? Respect and Justice, was Protagoras's reply, echoing the much earlier didactic poet Hesiod (c. '700 BC). Only Respect and Justice, distributed equally among all mankind without exception, could permit the forging of bonds of friendship, and without friendship there could be no community. Conversely, without the sentiment of justice and the mutual recognition of each other's humanity, substituting persuasive discourse for brute force, there could be no community of friendship. Put differently, politics for Protagoras was a technique, and the city was a product not of nature but of culture – a creature of artifice.

By contrast, Aristotle was to theorise the city as a 'natural' phenomenon, defining it as a perfect and self-sufficient organism formed with a view to living the morally good life. For Aristotle, indeed, the *polis* was the end – both the ultimate developed form and the goal – of the earlier forms of association constituted by the family and the village. Since Aristotle identified an entity's end with its nature, it followed that the city existed by nature and that man was a 'political animal' in the specific Aristotelian sense, a living creature designed to achieve its perfection within and only within the Greek *polis*. Man, moreover, was the only living creature endowed with logos, that is the capacity to distinguish and express the just and the unjust. It was this capacity which makes possible both the family and its logical (because the whole necessarily precedes the part) and moral antecedent, the natural and perfect community of the city.

In the context of this history of the Greek city the death of Socrates in 399 BC marks a break between the political and the contemplative life. It was on this rupture that Plato based his philosophical oeuvre. For he was a disciple of Socrates and a diehard adversary of the Athenian democracy that had condemned his mentor to death. Out of a minor historical event Plato fashioned one of the major reference points of Western philosophy.

Beginning in the fourth century BC theoreticians of the political in Greece began to shift the emphasis from the *polis* as such to the politeia, its regime or constitution. This was now perceived to be its very soul or essence. Not only could a city be defined by its politeia but it tended to be identified with it. In conformity with this tendency was the idea that the best regime was the one which somehow 'mixed' monarchy, aristocracy and democracy-. The textbook example was the Spartan constitution. From Plato to Cicero, and from Sparta to Rome, the theme of the mixed constitution played a dominant role, before modern political philosophy rediscovered it only to reject it once more.

It has been noted that the Latin and the Greek linguistic models of the city worked in opposite directions. Whereas the Latin proceeded from the citizen (civis) to the city (civitas), the Greek went from the entity, the *polis*, to the citizen (politês). Politeia seems to have operated as a way of mediating between these two models, on both the historical and the conceptual planes. It was this, surely, that enabled the Greek historian Polybius to explain the rise of Roman power as he did, since in his view Rome owed her conquest of the Mediterranean to the excellence of her ('mixed') politeia.

St Augustine, six centuries later, could not agree. Rome even at the time of the great Scipio Africanus had never been a true republic in the Ciceconian sense of 'the affair of the People'. For it had never known the true justice of the City of God founded by Jesus Christ. The ancient city persisted still even in late antiquity, but it was a city without politics in the original Greek sense.

At the start of the sixteenth century Machiavelli embarked on a voyage of (re) discovery of the Roman Republic, in criticism of the education provided by the church. His Discourses on the First Decade of Livy unarguably rescued the ancients for politics and invited readers to imitate them. The work opens on a note of astonishment: the ancients are more admired than imitated. In the sphere of law or medicine, certainly they were consulted, but when it was a question of the founding or maintenance of a state, the ancients were completely over- looked. Taking Livy for his guide Machiavelli endeavoured to point out a 'new route'. In what was in the process of becoming the ancient world, the world of the ancients could be made to appear as a sort of 'new' world.

There was more than an element of paradox in Machiavelli's writing here, especially as it was done in Florence of all places, which prided itself on being a Roman colonial foundation of the Republican era, and in the veins of whose bourgeoisie there flowed 'Roman' blood as it were. The Florentine humanists had chosen to emphasise continuity and proximity in their construction of Rome as a kind of proto-Florence. Their Rome was a city of concord in which the wisdom of the senate was matched by the discipline of the people and the devotion of all to the common good. It was against this Rome – and so this Florence – that Machiavelli set his face, reading Livy with the aid of Polybius. For it was from the recently rediscovered Polybius that Machiavelli drew the materials to build his 'new' Rome.

In contrast to the once-and-for-all legislation of Lycurgus at Sparta, Rome's perfect 'mixed' constitution was achieved only gradually. Moreover, the prolonged period of profound disharmony between senate and people was in Machiavelli's view very far from being a cause of feebleness but actually what made Rome powerful and free. This conflict was at the heart of its politeia, and Rome, unlike Florence, knew how to turn it to advantage.

By defining history as a comparison of past and present, Machiavelli set up a counterpoint between ancient Rome and contemporary Florence. The one served as a key to understanding the other and vice versa; Polybius helped him comprehend Florence, just as Florence furthered his reading of Polybius. Machiavellian imitation of the ancients was thus never a case of praising the ancients merely in order to castigate the moderns: rather, his aim was to recreate the time of the ancient Romans the better to understand the present and to act upon it. Imitation in no way implied identification.

The coming of the classical age of princes, reason of state and absolutist monarchy caused no diminution of the ancients' importance let alone their effacement. But their image did change and their status was displaced. Instead of serving as political models, they presented rather exemplary instances of individual conduct – heroism, self-mastery, and obedience. Love of country and love of liberty were seen no longer as republican virtues but as moral qualities. Mundane histories of the day aimed no more at helping to form good citizens, but good Christians.

Jean Bodin would have no truck with Machiavelli (nor Polybius) rejecting even the concept of the mixed constitution in his Method of History (1566). For him there were but three forms of constitution; rule by one, by a minority, or by the people. Sovereignty was not susceptible to division. Rome in Polybius' and Cicero's day was a popular government, and the same was true of Lycurgan Sparta. Of the three constitutional types, history proved that royal power was the best because it was 'natural, instituted that is by God himself, the creator of nature'. In short, the historian of princes and the prince of historians of the age was not Machiavelli's Livy, but Tacitus, whose work was read as a breviary of rulers, and who was construed as a theoretician of the reason of state and an advocate of absolute monarchy.

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment in its struggle against absolutism saw fit to abandon again morality for politics and to 'repoliticise' the ancient republics. Rather than models of virtue, the ancients were for Montesquieu, political models. His L'Esprit des lois (1748) was a fundamentally political project. 'Virtue' was the mainspring of republican politics and should not be understood in either an ethical or a religious sense, but a resolutely political one. The Greeks and especially the Romans occupied a privileged place in his thinking, and his writings bear numerous unmistakable traces of their influence. His familiarity with Greek and Latin authors is evident, no less than his admiration for them.

But his method of approach led him to investigate the 'principles' and 'spirit' of the ancient republics, and so to note the differences between them and those of modern states. Whereas they presupposed a limited territory and a restricted population, and luxury for them was fatal, for the absolute monarchies of his: day it was poverty that spelled mortal danger. The ancients moreover knew nothing of representative government, even though the people were incapable of discussing affairs, and had no clear idea of monarchy. This inventory of differences, which lay at the basis of the liberal vision of antiquity, turned antiquity into an unrepeatable experience, grand and coherent but irrevocable.

Montesquieu's tripartition of the forms of government (republic, monarchy, despotism) broke decisively with the typology of ancient political philosophy. Democracy and aristocracy lost their autonomous status and became mere sub-species of republican governments. As for the mixed constitution, Montesquieu accorded that not the slightest place as such, though a trace of it may be detected in his notion of the three powers, executive, legislative and judicial. What interested Montesquieu, however, was their combination, equilibration and moderation, not (as in the British political tradition) their separation. Distance, in short, triumphed utterly over proximity in Montesquieu's scheme: the time of the ancient republics had gone for good. It would be contrary to reason to take them for models.

Rousseau, as ever, took an opposing view. With the writing of a. history of Sparta in prospect, he was minded to 'gather up these precious monuments which teach us what men can be by showing us what they have been'. With this famous phrase he indicated a quite different relationship to the past and usage of ancient reference. In opposition to the depravity of the present an appeal is made to the past (what men have been) in order to bring about – or at least sketch preliminarily – what men could be in the future. In a spirit ranging from nostalgia to utopia, Sparta, Rome and their great men were summoned up as means to denounce the present state of society and to carry on a polemic.

Within this perspective Rousseau opted unambiguously for the ancients in preference to the moderns. At a more profound level there were similarities between the *polis* of Aristotle and the city of Rousseau's Social Contract. Where Aristotle spoke of nature and 'end', Rousseau spoke of 'good' and the 'general will'; but they meant essentially the same. Yet it would be quite wrong to infer that Rousseau therefore regarded the ancient republics as models. As a citizen of Geneva, Rousseau was well aware of the objection regarding scale (a republic can only be small). He knew too that in antiquity the liberty of one group, the citizens, was premissed on the servitude of others, as with the Helots in Sparta. So if he did believe it was possible for men to progress from what they had been to what they could be, still he was conscious that they could never again be exactly the same as before. The citizens of Geneva were neither Romans nor Athenians, but simply merchants for whom liberty itself was 'but a means to unimpeded acquisition and secure possession'. That heralded a theme that would soon be a major one, the comparison of the liberty of the ancients with that of the moderns.

The resort to antiquity, or the antique scene, helped in the construction of a political space within which right up to the 1789 Revolution there was room for an essential figure: the lawgiver. Such figures as Lycurgus or Numa were more than simply human beings who undertook nothing less than to create a people anew. Their intervention marked a break with the past, but at the same time a fresh beginning which yet did not drive an unbridgeable gulf between creator and created, this myth of the lawgiver, reassuring no less than fascinating, did not survive the Revolution.

In 1819, in his address 'On the Liberty of the Ancients compared to that of the Moderns', Benjamin Constant exclaimed 'No more Lycurgus, no more Numa!'. That was his protest against the pernicious (as he saw it) use made of antiquity by the revolutionaries. Modern societies, he thought, should have nothing to do with these burdensome personalities and their modern imitators. For Constant and other liberals the Revolution was a moment of excessive and bloody identification with the ancients, when national 'regeneration' had been sought by turning France into a new Sparta. This illusion – about the past as well as the present – inevitably proved fatal to the Revolution. The situations were incommensurably different, France not exactly being a small republic; and the revolutionaries had anyway got their ancient history wrong, since Spartan 'equality' was actually the height of inequality.

Constant's prescription for preventing the recurrence of similar, primarily intellectual confusions was to establish clearly that between the ancients and us there lay an unbridgeable gulf: their liberty was not of the same type as ours. Theirs was wholly a matter of the freedom to participate politically by the effective exercise of sovereignty, and had nothing to do with the rights of the individual; for them the state was all. Our modern liberty, by contrast, was civil liberty, the freedom of 'private enjoyment', and that was impossible without a system of representation.

Constant's version of this thesis won the day in the nineteenth century, even if his claim that the Jacobins seriously intended to recreate their ancient republican models is highly dubious. As late as 1864 in the opening pages of his La Cite Antique Fustel de Coulanges thought it worthwhile to rehearse the dangers posed to modern liberty by confusing it with the ancient. Straightaway however, he transferred the debate from the political to the religious plane, demonstrating as he thought that the foundation of all social relationship is religion in the shape of the cult of the dead. The 'ancient city' of Fustel's conception is at bottom a religious, before it is a political, entity. Within its confines the individual, caught between family and state, had no separate existence. For that he had to wait for the arrival of a new faith, Christianity. But its arrival marked the demise of the ancient city. Fustel thus underlined the distance separating ancients and moderns, and reinforced the otherness of the former by approaching them (to put it anachronistically) as if they were an anthropologist's alien tribe.

In France it was not before the Third Republic that the ancients could again be treated politically, and the paradigm of the two liberties called into question. The issue of the day was now democracy. The upshot was the triumph of what was called the 'Athenian Republic', which had for long been rejected on the grounds of its seeming lack of good order. This did not become a model exactly, but rather a privileged point of reference, an original ancestor, a cautionary tale, an emblematic figure of democratic rhetoric.

In his Cite Grecque (1928), for example, Gustave Glotz sought to show that the rise of individualism and the development of the state so far from being opposed actually proceeded in tandem. So there was no antinomy between the ancient city and individual liberty. Within the humanist movement of the Third Republic the so-called 'Greek miracle', originally an aesthetic concept, acquired political, that is democratic, content. But it also became identified as a peculiarly. Athenian phenomenon, especially as the spectacle of a new (fascist) Sparta could be witnessed arising on the far, eastern side of the Rhine. This special relationship with Athens, or at any rate Athens of the 'Periklean age', often went together with denunciation of the 'excesses' of democracy, meaning the antics of the 'demagogues' and the supposed 'tyranny' of the people.

In short, between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries we find the ancient republic (Montesquieu) being replaced by the ancient city (Fustel) and that in turn being succeeded by the Greek city (Glotz). In (he treatment of the ancients, there are phases of 'politicisation', 'depoliticisation', and 'repoliticisation', variously modulated according to different agendas. Almost always imitation excluded identification, except in the case of a few individuals. When the ancients did serve as political models, that was within the perspective of a (Machiavelli-style) comparison between the past and the present, the last word always going to the latter.

Today these two longstanding interpretative approaches co-exist. On the one hand, the development of the social sciences by such as Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, the breaking of the last links with classical culture, and the failure to renew radically the humanist tradition have led to the 'anthropologising’ of the ancient Greek world. The Greeks, too, were 'savages'. But no more, either: there is a risk of carrying exoticism too far, and to anthropologise the Greeks is not necessarily to deprive them of their peculiar political contribution. On the other hand, there are those who see Greece as occupying a unique generative position in our political tradition, especially through its invention of democracy. This Greece was neither a model, nor just one historical specimen among others, but the 'seedbed' of Western democracy. The emergence of the *polis* marked the transition from heteronomy to autonomy, from the idea that law is something imposed from the outside to society's self-conscious awareness of being its own source of law. For the first time a society existed that was capable of introspection, and with that capacity came the ability to constitute itself eventually as a democracy. The particular form that democracy took at Athens was expressed in essence (albeit with aristocratic overtones) by Perikles in the Funeral Oration: the creation of human beings who love what is beautiful and the things of the mind, and who are interested not only in their own affairs but in the affairs of the community as well (Thucydides Book II ch. 40).

Hannah Arendt's attention was caught by that passage of Thucydides, and from it she drew her definition of Greek culture as love of beauty and wisdom 'within the limits imposed by the institutions of the *polis*'. Arendt provides a suitable stopping point, since among contemporary political thinkers she is undoubtedly the one for whom experience of the ancients has been the most immediate and direct. Arendt's culture was German and she dated her interest in contemporary politics from the burning of the Reichstag in 1933. Alongside the American and French Revolutions, the Greek city was for her not a model, but a specially privileged point of reference, since it was there that the type of politics had arisen which the modern era was threatening to obliterate.

For Arendt the *polis* was everything that totalitarianism was not. With Aristotle's definitions for guidance she saw it as a forum for the pooling of speech and action:

the disposition of a public space in which, removed from the private affairs of their households ..., men could recognise each other as equals, discussing and deciding in common.

For modern man, however, deprived as we are of a world in common, there remains only the linguistic trace. In language what happened long ago may retain its place unshakeably: hence our word 'political', the survivor from the passing of the ancient Greek *polis*.