

Presaging the Moderns: Demosthenes' Critique of Popular Government

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Modern political theorists, including Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Publius, consider popular government detrimental to the security of the political community, because they see it as being characterized by imprudence, indecisiveness, and indiscretion. It has not been widely acknowledged that this critique of popular government was, in many respects, presaged by the famous Greek orator Demosthenes. This essay retrieves his critique and argues that it reveals that conflict between the norms of democracy on one hand, and the demands of security on the other, cannot be resolved by urging "democratization," as this would only reintroduce the difficulties he brings to our attention.

A basic distinction drawn between ancient and modern democracy is that in the former, the people governed themselves, whereas in the latter, representatives govern on behalf of the people.¹ A number of modern political theorists, including Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Publius, set the stage for this transformation by criticizing popular government as a form detrimental to the security of the political community. This essay argues that their critique was, in many respects, presaged by the famous Greek orator, Demosthenes. He finds popular government to have three adverse consequences in terms of security: first, imprudent decisions are made because citizens lack specialized knowledge; second, indecisiveness tends to be the rule because collective deliberation, and oratorical competition in particular, hinders decision making; and third, indiscretion is endemic, owing to the public nature of collective deliberation. The following sections expand on each of these claims.

This critique is significant from a number of perspectives. It obviously raises the question as to what influence, if any, Demosthenes' orations have had on modern political theorists. It also invites a reconsideration of Athenian political thought, because it constitutes a critique of Athenian democracy that is markedly different from the one offered by the classical critics of democracy, especially Plato and Thucydides. It is interesting, furthermore, because it provides an

early glimpse of the challenge that democracies face in reconciling the demands of security on one hand, with the norms of democracy on the other. Unfortunately, owing to limitations of space, most of these aspects of Demosthenes' critique cannot be investigated here. The bulk of this essay is devoted to retrieving Demosthenes' critique, which provides a foundation for others to build upon. Only one topic is given special attention, namely, the conflict between the need for secrecy as a means to ensure security, and the need for transparency as a prerequisite for informed public deliberation. Here the essay observes that Demosthenes' critique reveals that this conflict cannot be resolved by urging "democratization," as this only reintroduces the problem of indiscretion he brings to our attention, and that modern theorists intended to solve by legitimizing delegation.

The Context: Informal Delegation

The participatory nature of Athenian democracy, according to Mogens H. Hansen (1999), was based on the ideal of *eleutheria*, understood as the freedom or liberty to participate in public life, most notably in the *ecclesia* (Assembly). The freedom to participate was in turn substantiated by two notions of equality: *isonomia* (equal political rights) and *isegoria* (equal

¹Constant 1988, 308–28.

right to address assemblies). The latter did not, however, translate into substantively equal participation in collective deliberation. The evidence suggests that despite significant rates of attendance at the Assembly, no more than perhaps 20 speakers regularly dominated the proceedings at any given time (Hornblower 1993, 13; see also Finley 1991, 140; Hansen 1991, 144–45, 344–45). This statistic has been explained by identifying the role of *demagogues* in late fifth and fourth century Athenian politics. W. Robert Connor (1971) describes these “new politicians” as the “indispensable experts” of the post-Periclean period whose political power derived from eloquence and access to information, rather than from membership in the aristocracy or military leadership. This view is supported by Hansen (1999, chap. 14), who observes that whereas fifth century Athens displayed a preference for democracy over efficiency, the fourth century BC marked a period of growing professionalism in both military and political spheres, thus separating the general who took tactical decisions from the orators who determined strategy. The mastery these orators displayed over public affairs, according to Connor, was “a part of their appeal to the citizenry that recognized its inability to keep fully informed on matters that were often as difficult to understand as they were vital to the city’s welfare” (1971, 125–26). Moses E. Finley emphasizes this dependence when he describes these “professional politicians” as forming a “structural” element of the Athenian political system, and asserts that “the system could not have functioned at all without them” (1985, 69).

However essential it may have been in practice, this leadership was notably *informal* in character. The “recognition of the need for leadership,” Finley observes, “was not accompanied by a surrender of the power of decision” (1985, 25). Furthermore, as A. H. M. Jones (1986, 104–05) points out, increasing professionalization did not change the use of rotation and term limits, which intended to prevent any concentration of powers in the hands of office-bearers. The *boule* (Council) also remained limited in its functions. Its primary source of influence came from the publication of a *probouleumata* (preliminary decree) prior to deliberation, but as this guidance was not binding on the Assembly, its ultimate influence remained ambiguous. Moreover, as Jones notes, “from the fact that it was chosen by lot, with the further provision that no one might serve on it more than two years of his life, it is clear that the Athenians of the fifth and fourth centuries intended that the council should have no chance of developing a corporate

sense, which would enable it to take an independent line, and wished it to be merely a fair sample of the Athenian people, whose views would naturally coincide with those of the people” (1986, 105).

These two distinct facts about Athenian democracy, i.e., the presence of orators on account of the structural pressure for leadership and the retention of formal decision-making power in the *demos* on grounds of equality, explain why *persuasion* was a notable feature of Athenian politics—it served as the means for reconciling leadership by a select few with the sovereignty of the *demos*. This arrangement was not uncontroversial. Plato (1991, 488a–489b), for instance, famously blames it in *The Republic* for encouraging the rule of populists willing to appeal to the baser instincts of their audience. What is less well known is that this arrangement also provoked a second critique of popular government. This critique emerges from the practical viewpoint of Demosthenes, an orator who chose to address the Assembly, rather than from aristocrats such as the ‘Old Oligarch,’ who chose to stay away.² Before turning to consider Demosthenes’ views at length, let’s preempt three objections to our endeavor.

First, critics may question whether Demosthenes’ critical remarks ought to be taken seriously given that they are embedded in orations otherwise known for their rhetorical quality. Admittedly, his claims are not presented systematically. But they recur consistently enough to constitute an identifiable, coherent critique of Athenian democracy. Indeed, there is even a term for them—“Demosthenic commonplaces” (Wooten 1983, 23–24). Moreover, the concerns Demosthenes raises do not appear unfounded. For instance, his concern for decisiveness may well have been motivated by Philip of Macedon’s creation of a standing army capable of unprecedented mobility. Most importantly, it seems appropriate to consider Demosthenes’ views carefully because he played the leading role in Athens’ struggle against Philip (Worthington 2000, 1–3). It behoves us to consider the factors he identifies as being responsible for why the most prominent democracy of the ancient world was subjugated by a nondemocratic regime. Indeed, the Athenians that immediately followed Demosthenes appeared to have taken his role seriously enough when, according to Plutarch (2001, 408), they famously inscribed on the base of their statue of Demosthenes: “Had you for

²More generally see Yunis (1996, 24–26).

Greece been strong, as you were wise/The Macedonian had not conquered her.”³

Even if critics are persuaded to take Demosthenes’ critique seriously, they may still question whether his criticisms are sufficiently original to merit attention. What, for instance, does Demosthenes reveal that Thucydides does not? Arguably, Demosthenes’ critique is unique in a number of respects. For instance, while it is true that Thucydides (1986, 3.43) draws attention to the imprudence of the Athenians, as when Diodotus informs the Assembly that “we orators must make it our business to look a little farther than you who judge offhand,” Demosthenes offers a more nuanced explanation of *why* he considers himself more prudent than his audience. The explanation is not that he is inherently more perceptive than ordinary citizens, but that his perceptions have been refined through devoted study and analysis of Athens’ foreign affairs. In addition to substantiating his criticism of Athenian imprudence, Demosthenes’ critique also offers an original view on the problem of indecisiveness. In contrast to Thucydides’ (1986, 3.36) presentation of the Athenians acting as a mob prone to erratic and hasty decision making, as when they make their decision on the fate of the Mytileneans in “the fury of the moment” and then re-issue instructions the following morning in a fit of repentance, Demosthenes shows the cause of indecisiveness to be less psychological than structural: the Athenians are torn apart by factional disputes over which policy best secures their preservation, and the only means available to resolve these disputes is public debate, which has the unfortunate side effect of delaying execution. Finally, there are Demosthenes’ tantalising observations on the challenge that public deliberation poses for the maintenance of secrecy. Though secrecy regularly features as a tactic in the accounts of ancient historians, these historians typically do not elaborate on its broader political significance. For instance, Diodorus Siculus (1989, 11.42.1–2) depicts Themistocles as successfully obtaining the Assembly’s support to undertake, with the assistance of the Council, a plan of action “it was not in the public interest to state openly,” but does not discuss the general need for secrecy in foreign affairs. In another important example, Thucydides (1986, 6.72) reports Hermocrates as recommending that the Syracusans should leave a small number of elected generals with “full powers” and “the entire discretion in their com-

mand,” so that “their secrets would be better kept, all preparations would be properly made, and there would be no room for excuses.”⁴ But, once again, there is no further discussion on the sustainability of this arrangement from a democratic perspective. Indeed, Thucydides (1986, 2.39) is usually cited in support of a very different view on the topic, because he depicts Pericles as contrasting the openness of Athenian democracy with the secretiveness of the Spartans by saying that, “our city is open to the world, and we have no periodical deportations in order to prevent people observing or finding out secrets which might be of military advantage to the enemy. This is because we rely, not on secret weapons, but on our own real courage and loyalty.” Demosthenes, by contrast, makes it a point to emphasize the adverse consequences of Athenian openness, and there is evidence of his efforts to thwart suspected informants, which suggests that he took the problem seriously enough in practice.⁵ His critique therefore provides an indication of the challenge that the norms of Athenian democracy posed for its leaders in their epic contest with Philip.

Finally, critics may question if Demosthenes’ critique of Athenian democracy is fair. We know from Thucydides (1986, 2.65) that other prominent Athenian politicians, Pericles and Themistocles in particular, were able to convince the Athenians to act prudently, decisively, and discretely in a number of instances. This suggests that the blame for Athens’ failure vis-à-vis Philip lays not so much with Athenian democracy as with Demosthenes, for lacking the political and oratorical skills of his more persuasive predecessors. However, even if this charge has merit, it does not detract from Demosthenes’ critique, but underscores it. Demosthenes views Athenian democracy as flawed precisely because the wisdom of its decisions depended on the ability of a prudent advisor to consistently prevail in public debates that typically were about the character of the speakers rather than the intrinsic merit of their proposals. Consequently, if, for whatever reason, a prudent orator could not win the day, then the Athenians made bad decisions. Hence, on this view, while it may be to Pericles’ great credit that he was able to make Athens act prudently, decisively, and discretely, it is less clear whether it is to Athens’ credit that its leaders had to display a rare Periclean combination of prudence and

³For an overview of Demosthenes’ public career see Sealey (1993).

⁴Starr (1974, 16–19) provides a helpful survey of “spasmodic and not very successful” Athenian efforts to maintain secrecy.

⁵See Aeschines (1919, 3.224–225) and Demosthenes (1985b, 18.137, 18.132). More generally see Losada (1972, 5).

persuasiveness to get it to act prudently, decisively, and discretely.

The Problem of Imprudence

The first adverse consequence of the collective exercise of executive power, according to Demosthenes, is the tendency of the Assembly to pursue imprudent policy. This critique comes to the fore with the *First Philippic*, where Demosthenes opens a debate in the Assembly for the very first time. Adopting a strident tone, he asks the Athenians why their festivals take place at the correct time, but their expeditions are always delayed. "The reason," he suggests, "is that the festivals are regulated by law . . . nothing is left unspecified . . . but in the military field and in preparation for it there is no order, no organization, no precise control" (Demosthenes 1985a, 4.35–36). It is not surprising, he concludes, that the Athenians should have to take their marching orders from Philip, because "you have never framed any plan of campaign for yourselves, never foreseen any event, until you learn that something has happened or is happening" (Demosthenes 1985a, 4.41; compare with 9.71). Having identified the need for foresight in interstate politics, as well as the Athenians' lack of it, Demosthenes (1985a, 4.40) proceeds to chide the Assembly, telling it that it is incapable of good government because it behaves like an amateur. It carries on "war with Philip exactly as the barbarian boxes . . . he neither knows nor cares how to parry a blow or how to watch his adversary." The analogy reveals that there is a skill that can be cultivated, because there *is* a discernable difference between the Greek and barbarian boxer. The Athenians, therefore, are not condemned to amateurishness; they could remedy their inexperience by deferring to the advice of an expert such as Demosthenes. This recommendation serves as a basic motif of Demosthenes' orations, starting with his very first one, *On the Navy Boards* in 354 BC, where he distinguishes himself from previous speakers by claiming to know how the Athenians might best prepare for war (Demosthenes 1985a, 14.2; compare with Demosthenes 1985b, 18.102). This bold claim can, of course, be countered with the assertion that ordinary Athenians were *not* in fact uninformed. Finley, for instance, defends the role of mass wisdom by drawing on a range of evidence to show that at any given time nearly half of the Athenian citizenry would have had some degree of exposure to the business of government. This leads him to conclude that "at least

half the Athenian multitude deciding from ignorance on matters of state, a favourite target of Thucydides and Plato and many modern historians, thus melts away on close examination" (Finley 1991, 75). However, Demosthenes' orations challenge this view, since he evidently believes his expertise will be unavailable to ordinary members of the Assembly. To see why, one must investigate his conception of expertise.

Though Demosthenes does not formally theorise on the nature of his expertise, it is evident that it is a form of practical wisdom. Practical wisdom, as Aristotle argues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is knowledge of the minor premise in a deliberative syllogism that leads to action, and in the *Rhetoric* he extends this account by analogy to the determination of the minor premise in public deliberation. Thus, for example, it may be common knowledge that black clouds imply rain, but the statesman must convince his audience that *in this instance* there are black clouds on the horizon in order to coax them into acting a certain way, e.g., to pull the boats onto the shore. The need for practical wisdom in public deliberation helps us make sense of what Demosthenes was doing when he stood up to make his claim for statesmanship on the basis of his analysis of Philip's intentions, capabilities and movements.⁶ There is, however, an important difference between how Demosthenes and Aristotle conceive of practical wisdom coming into being. For Aristotle (2000, 1143b1–1144a1), practical wisdom on *moral* matters arises naturally from human experience, which is why he advises that "one should pay attention to the undemonstrated assertions and opinions of experience and old and prudent men no less than to demonstrations; for they rightly observe because they gained an eye from experience." Practical wisdom on *expedient* matters, however, is treated cursorily. In this case, Aristotle (1975, 1355a11; 1356b1; 1357a12; 1359b40–42; compare with Xenophon 1938, 3.61–15) merely says that "one who divines well in regard to the truth will also be able to divine well in regard to probabilities" and proceeds to list the propositions a statesman should be able to provide, including the power of his own state and that of its neighbors. Demosthenes challenges this notion; on his account, practical wisdom in the domain of expedient actions is produced by *specialization*, rather than by age or nature. His orations exemplify this point when, for example, he opens the debate in *On the Navy Boards* and the *First Philippic* by challenging the advice offered by the elders of the community.

⁶Demosthenes (1985b, 18:192). On probabilistic statements, see Burnyeat (1996).

Demosthenes takes this form of practical wisdom to be developed via two practices: the cultivation of privileged channels of information and the cultivation of a superior perceptiveness through careful study of the available information. With regard to the former of these practices, Demosthenes (1985a, 4.39) provides one of the earliest manifestoes for intelligence when he tells the Athenians that in order “to manage a war properly you must not follow the trend of events but must forestall them, and just as an army looks to its general for guidance, so statesmen must guide circumstances, if they are to carry out their policy and not be forced to follow at the heels of chance.”⁷ He is quick to assert that staying abreast of Philip’s intrigues and policies is quite beyond the capacity of average citizens, who rely on traditional sources of news—rumors and announcements. At his sarcastic best, he states: “I cannot for a moment believe that he [Philip] is deliberately acting in such a way that all the fools of Athens know what he is going to do next” (Demosthenes 1985a, 4.48–50). His own orations, by contrast, reveal frequent access to privileged information about Philip.⁸ Indeed so prominent is Demosthenes’ advantage here that one finds his political opponent, Aeschines, accusing him of undermining Athenian norms by cultivating private sources of information when the laws required that the Council be the first to be informed of news. “You,” Aeschines complains to the Athenians, “lay claim only to the name of democracy, and have surrendered the substance to others” because “[you] go home from the meetings of the Assembly, not as from a deliberative session, but as from some picnic, where you have been given the leavings as your share” (Aeschines 1919, 3.250–251).⁹

Despite the impressiveness of Aeschines’ charge, we should keep in mind that Demosthenes’ authority before the Assembly could not rely solely on the possession of secret information, since he had to share at least some of this information with it. His deeper claim to the status of an expert rested on his ability to perceive the best course of action suggested by the

available intelligence. He does not appear to have been unjustified in claiming a rare degree of skill in this regard. As Chester G. Starr writes, against the background of general information available to the *polis*, only “those who possessed it most fully could interpret a specific piece of intelligence. Such persons would not be the ordinary citizens of the Assembly, but rather it was men like Themistocles, Pericles, Demosthenes, the elders who sat in the Council, and more generally across Greece the aristocrats who held in their minds the information which made intelligence useful” (1974, 37; see also Adcock and Mosley 1975, 167).¹⁰ Demosthenes’ orations support this view. In keeping with the analogy of the boxer, he emphasizes his devotion to Athens’ affairs as the source of his unparalleled insight. He puts it best when he summarises his career by saying that “out of the many spheres of public activity I chose Hellenic affairs as *my province*” (Demosthenes 1985b, 18.62, emphasis added; see also 18.219). This devotion is contrasted with the apparently more lackadaisical approach of his contemporaries, as in the *Fourth Philippic* for example, where he observes that “there is nothing, men of Athens, more vexing at the present time than the way in which you detach your thoughts from affairs, and display an interest only so long as you sit here listening or when some fresh item of news arrives; after that each man goes home, and not only pays no attention to public business, but does not even recall it to mind” (Demosthenes 1985a, 10.1; compare with 18.149). This point is repeated in the *First Olynthiac* when the Athenians—having ignored Demosthenes’ previous recommendations to reform the war-tax system and create a standing expeditionary force—find themselves caught off guard by Philip’s intervention in Olynthus. Standing before the Assembly, Demosthenes asks whether “any one of you in this audience watches and notes the steps by which Philip, weak at first, has grown so powerful?” (1985a, 1.12). The question provides Demosthenes with an opportunity to recite a list of Philip’s achievements, an exercise that serves both as a condemnation of the Athenians’ imprudence and as an indication of Demosthenes’ steady watch.

The full consequence of the division of labor outlined above is depicted most notably in *On the Crown*, where Demosthenes recounts the events following the fall of Elatea. When the marshal put the question “who wishes to speak” before the Assembly, none but he came forward, Demosthenes

⁷For a skeptical view of Demosthenes’ insightfulness with regard to Macedonian intentions see T.T.B. Ryder’s “Demosthenes and Philip II” (Worthington 2000).

⁸For example, see Demosthenes (1985a, 1.21–22, 8.14; 1985b, 14.9, 18.175). Also see Lewis (1996, 102–09).

⁹Aeschines cites Demosthenes’ advance notice of Philip’s death (1919, 3.77), his detailed knowledge of Philip’s movements in Thrace (1919, 3.82), and his knowledge of Alexander’s position before the battle of Issus (1919, 3.164). Also see Lewis (1996, 56–60) and Montgomery (1983, 51). More generally, see Russell (2000).

¹⁰For another example see Thucydides (1986, 6.33–6.40). Also of interest is Gerolymatos (1986, 10–12, 76–77).

says, because “the call of the crisis on the momentous day was . . . for the man who from first to last had closely watched the sequence of events, and had rightly fathomed the purposes and desires of Philip . . .” (1985b, 18.169–79). What is most noteworthy about this “Periclean” account of leadership, as Harvey Yunis (1996, 269–70) terms it, is its compatibility with the democratic principle of equality. It cannot be said to be hostile to formal equality because it does not presume a “natural aristocracy” of higher souls. On this view, it is theoretically possible for any citizen to cultivate prudence, but those that do not take up the opportunity will inevitably find themselves at a disadvantage when compared to the expert, who has fine-tuned his intuitions through continuous observation and experience. Hansen provides the ideal metaphor to describe this condition’s compatibility with Athenian democracy when he writes that in Athens “the equality that mattered was, as in sport, that all must start at the line, not that all were essentially equal” (1999, 84).

The Problem of Indecisiveness

As seen above, Demosthenes’ response to the imprudence of the Assembly is to offer his own prudent counsel. But this alone proves inadequate, because he sees Athenian decision making as also suffering from a lack of resolve. He traces this problem to two features of Athenian politics. At base, as sovereign power rested in the hands of the Assembly, decisive leadership was contingent on its willingness to act resolutely. In this regard, Demosthenes regularly criticizes the tardiness of the Athenians. For instance, when the pressure from Philip’s incursion in Olynthus is at its peak, he observes that if formal decrees alone could compel the Athenians to do their duty, “you would not have passed such an array of them with little or no result” (Demosthenes 1985a, 3.14). At a deeper level, however, Demosthenes appears to have doubted whether the Assembly was structurally capable of acting decisively, given that its decision making proceeded via collective deliberation, which he saw as prone to contentiousness, and therefore to inertia. The former of these drawbacks owes to the fact that ordinary Athenians, because of their inability to directly judge expertise, chose to instead evaluate the orator’s “character.” They believed, according to Josiah Ober (1989) and Bernard Yack (2006), that confidence in the character of the orator would give them reason to trust that he would use his expertise on behalf of the

common good. It was therefore “only if they played their demotic roles well,” Ober writes, “that the elite political orators were allowed to ‘step out of character’ and assert their claims to special consideration” (1989, 191). In his view, this mechanism allowed the successful reconciliation of democracy and expertise by ensuring that “the Athenians reaped the benefit of having educated men serve in advisory roles of the state” (191). Demosthenes certainly partook in these competitions over character, but the conclusion he seems to have drawn points in the opposite direction from Ober. According to him, if the orator with the best advice always won these contests, then authority and consent could easily be reconciled through speech. But he does *not* view his audience as capable of such fortunate judgment—at least not consistently so—which is why 13 years after his first proposal for naval reform in 354, 10 years after his proposals for a standing force in 351, eight years after his suggestions for the appropriation of the Theoric Fund in 349, and three years after his second warning on Philip’s intentions in 344, we find Demosthenes (1985a, 9.64) berating his audience that their self-complacency was deepened “by hearing none but pleasant speeches” (presumably made by members of the “peace faction” opposed to his policies).¹¹ This too is the reason why three years after the failed Peace of Philocrates, and 10 years after his first speech on Philip, Demosthenes tells the Athenians in the *Third Philippic* of 341 that their losses are above all due “to those who study to win your favour rather than to give you the best advice” (1985a, 9.2).¹²

It is, no doubt, reasonable to question the appropriateness of Demosthenes’ claim that his policies alone were best for Athens. His working assumption seems to be that practical wisdom offers objective answers to complex questions. But it is at least equally plausible that this form of knowledge is vulnerable to genuine differences in perception over the right course of action.¹³ But regardless of what one might make of Demosthenes’ claims regarding the correctness of his

¹¹See also Demosthenes (1985a, 8.52–58). The “war faction” and the “peace faction” each accused the other of profiting from their respective position. For example, compare Aeschines 1919, 2.161 with Demosthenes 1985a, 3.29. More generally see Roisman (2006, 118–45).

¹²This difficulty is witnessed, for example, in Demosthenes’ repeated attempts to requisition the Theoric Fund for military use (Demosthenes 1985a, 1.10, 1.18–20, 1.28, 3.5, 3.10–12).

¹³For a survey of the conflict between Demosthenes and Aeschines see John Buckler’s “Demosthenes and Aeschines” (Worthington 2000); and more generally, Harris (1995).

position, his most striking observation is that contests over character were far from costless. He warns his audience that they cannot afford the luxury of such debates because the necessity of action demands prompt decision:

“You, Athenians, have two struggles before you; one is the same that awaits the rest, but there is another and more serious struggle that comes before it, for you have got to defeat in your debates the faction that deliberately opposes the interests of your city. When, therefore, owing to this opposition, you can get nothing done without a struggle, the natural consequence is that you miss many advantages.” (Demosthenes 1985a, 15.31–32; contrast with 15.1)¹⁴

While it is tempting to dismiss this plea as an example of a cynical use of the “rhetoric of crisis,” Demosthenes’ concern appears to have been a genuine response to Philip’s military innovations, which had revolutionized warfare in the ancient world.¹⁵ To counter Philip’s advantages, Demosthenes argued, the Athenians had to act decisively, proactively checking his endeavors. Thus in *On the Cheronese*, for example, Demosthenes (1985a, 8.11–12; see also 8.51) can be seen urging the Athenians to quickly forge alliances and send out expeditions with the frank warning that “Philip owes his successes to nothing in the world more than to his being first in the field. For the man who always keeps a standing army by him, and who knows beforehand what he wants to do, is ready in an instant for anyone that chooses to attack, while it is only after we have heard of something happening that we begin to bustle about and make our preparations.” In another important passage of the *First Olynthiac*, Philip is depicted as a man of constant and restless action whose person brings the inertial character of the Athenians into sharp relief. As Demosthenes (1985a, 1.3) puts it, “our chief ground for alarm is that this man, so unscrupulous, so quick to seize his opportunity, now yielding a point when it suits his purpose, now threatening . . . now misrepresenting us and our failure to intervene, may divert to his own purpose and wrest from us something of vital importance.” However, lacking any authority to act independently, and

therefore speedily, Demosthenes finds he can only reform Athenian execution through renewed persuasion. He tries his best to spur them along, warning them: “I am sure you have far greater claims than he upon the favour of the gods. Yet, I think that we sit here doing nothing. But one who is himself idle cannot possibly call upon his friends, much less upon the gods, to work for him” (Demosthenes 1985a, 2.22).¹⁶ But these exhortations evidently prove insufficient. The *Second Philippic* finds Demosthenes (1985a, 5.2) noting that the Athenians prove better at equipping themselves with speeches rather than means, and after a series of such setbacks, he can be found scolding the Assembly in *On the Peace*, stating that “while deliberation is naturally a vexatious and difficult task, you Athenians have enhanced its difficulties; for all other people deliberate before the event, but you after the event” (Demosthenes 1985a, 2.23).

In the face of such conflict between debate and decision, one should not be surprised to find Demosthenes eventually questioning some of the fundamental aspects of Athenian democracy. “An impartial investigation,” he observes, “would trace the source of Philip’s greatness not to himself, but to this very platform [i.e. the rostrum]” (Demosthenes 1985a, 2.4). In a subsequent oration, he pleads, “in order of time action is subsequent to speaking and voting, but in importance it comes first and ranks higher. It is action, then, that must be added: of all else, we have enough” (Demosthenes 1985a, 3.15). The address of this demand to the members of a sovereign assembly operating through public deliberation reveals the paradoxical nature of Demosthenes’ position as an expert standing before an audience of amateurs. The frustration this remark summarises eventually turns to dismay. One subsequently finds Demosthenes (1985a, 4.11) inferring from the adverse outcomes produced by the Athenians’ haphazard decision making that their problems owed less to Philip than to themselves, such that “even if something happens to him, you will soon raise up a second Philip, if that is the way you attend to your affairs; for even this Philip has not grown great through his own unaided strength so much as through our carelessness.”

Despite the tenor of these remarks, Demosthenes does not offer any systematic solution to the lack of a powerful and decisive central authority. Aeschines (1919) certainly gives evidence of Demosthenes’ efforts to stretch the exercise of magisterial power,

¹⁴Also see Adcock and Mosley (1975, 180) and Starr (1974, 43).

¹⁵See Ferrill (1997, 182–84) and Gabriel (2002, 76–78, 189). They credit Philip with creating a disciplined professional military corps, adapting the Persian system of logistics, and designing innovative siege equipment, which together laid the foundation for the renowned marching speed and strike capabilities of the Macedonian army.

¹⁶Also see Jaeger (1963, 131).

but the details are limited.¹⁷ This means that the primary cure Demosthenes ultimately offered the Athenians in response to their indecisiveness was his own person, i.e., the expert who could best identify the collective interest, and therefore remove the need for extensive debate, an approach consonant with the 'first citizen' role granted to figures such as Themistocles and Pericles. But of course these historical examples would only apply *if* the Athenians had similarly trusted Demosthenes to determine what was best for them as a whole. However, Demosthenes evidently was unable to obtain an equivalent level of support. Consequently, we find him reduced to arguing that the primary change required was for the audience to behave more responsibly:

“[W]here either side devotes its time and energy, there it succeeds the better—Philip in action, but you in argument. So if you still think it enough to employ the sounder arguments, that is easy; your task entails no trouble. But if you have to devise means whereby our present fortunes shall be repaired, and their further decline shall not take us completely by surprise, and we shall not be confronted by a mighty power which we shall be unable even to withstand, then our method of deliberation must be changed, and all who speak and all who listen must choose the best and safest policy instead of the easiest and most agreeable.” (Demosthenes 1985a, 6.4–6; compare with 5.12)

The Problem of Indiscretion

Demosthenes' third criticism of Athenian decision making concerns the indiscretion associated with collective deliberation.¹⁸ It is difficult to be precise about his views because his orations address the issue obliquely. He broaches the topic by referring in the *First Olynthiac* to the advantages that Philip derives

¹⁷Aeschines' charges include Demosthenes' calling for an assembly on a sacred day in order to speedily address business with Philip (1919, 3.67), his implicit participation in secret negotiations to finance the war against Philip (1919, 3.96), a more general charge of dictatorial conduct prior to the battle of Charonea (1919, 3.145–146) and of having played a leading role in organising the revolt against Alexander (1919, 3.166–167). Associated with the last of these accusations is J. F. Dobson's (1919, 227) speculation that Demosthenes intended to spend on espionage the money that he is reported to have accepted from Alexander's renegade treasurer, Harpalus. Dobson's speculation appears to derive from Hyperides (1968, 5.13). More generally, see Montgomery (1983, 76–77).

¹⁸On indiscretion see Starr (1974, 40); Russell (2000, chap. 5); Lewis (1996, 115–18).

from secrecy. “[I]t is reasonable to suggest,” Demosthenes (1985a, 1.4) says, “that the very thing which makes Philip's position most redoubtable is [that] in the swift and opportune movements of war he has the immense advantage over us in the fact that he is the sole director of his own policy, open or secret, that he unites the functions of a general, a ruler and a treasurer . . .” Initially, this indirect acknowledgment of the cost of public deliberation does not lead Demosthenes to actively recommend that the Athenians consider using secrecy. Instead, he asserts that the advantages Philip obtains from his kingly position would be counterbalanced by weaknesses endemic to nondemocratic regimes. However, following Athens' defeat, Demosthenes is far more negative in his assessment of the costs of deliberating in public. Now it is the Athenian form of government that appears, on balance, to be the weaker of the two.¹⁹ As Demosthenes summarizes in *On the Crown*:

“[Philip] did whatever he chose, without giving notice by publishing decrees, or deliberating in public, without fear of prosecution by informers or indictment for illegal measures. He was responsible to nobody: he was the absolute autocrat, commander, and master of everybody and everything. And I, his chosen adversary—it is a fair inquiry—of what was I master? Of nothing at all! Public speaking was my only privilege: and that you permitted to Philip's hired servants on the same terms as to me.” (Demosthenes 1985b, 18.234–35)

It is no doubt tempting to assume that this late reference to the advantage that secrecy provided Philip was only a ploy to divert attention from the outcome of Demosthenes' policies. But there are at least two reasons to think otherwise. As noted above, Demosthenes did in fact acknowledge early in his public career the advantage that secrecy gave Philip. Though he did not recommend a corresponding use of secrecy on the Athenian side, he nevertheless attempted to counter Philip's advantage by reminding the Athenians that *their* relative disadvantage on this count made it vital to quicken their responses. Moreover, his reference to “Philip's hired servants” admits the threat posed by disaffected citizens witnessing public deliberation, and though he does not address this issue beyond calling for the punishment of treason, in practice, he is reputed to have undertaken his own private initiatives to counter Philip's purported informants.²⁰ Nonetheless, these instances aside, Demosthenes'

¹⁹For example see Demosthenes (1985a, 1.6, 2.6, 2.8, 2.10, 2.15–16, 2.19).

²⁰For example see Demosthenes (1985a, 8.61, 9.54–55). Also see Russell (2000, 207–09).

surviving orations do not discuss the topic of secrecy again until *On the Crown*. It is hard to know what to make of this silence. One could argue that perhaps Demosthenes did not consider secrecy particularly a valuable resource in the conflict with Philip. But this view conflicts with Aeschines' charges that Demosthenes was involved in a variety of (apparently not entirely) covert endeavors, including conducting a secret session of the Council and participating in secret negotiations to finance the war against Philip (Aeschines 1919, 3.125; 3.96).²¹ If true, this suggests that Demosthenes simply chose to do what he considered necessary without offering a principled defense of his actions (in contrast to, say, Themistocles' example, who, as noted previously, sought the Assembly's permission to act in secret, but only in a particular, limited instance). Though one is reduced to speculation here, it seems that Demosthenes' silence may be explicable, in part at least, by the very nature of the subject. It is difficult to imagine how Demosthenes could have publicly argued in favor of *ongoing* secrecy before a polity founded on the idea of public deliberation and collective decision making. Such an approach would have been viewed as a direct challenge to the basis of Athenian democracy, and it would have brought Demosthenes seemingly close to the position of the oligarchs whom Andocides (1968, 3.33–234) refers to in his oration of 391 BC as holding the view that no one “has ever yet saved the Athenian people by open persuasion: measures for its good must be secret or disguised.” This association would have been specious of course, because Demosthenes' recognition of the utility of secrecy is apparently prudential rather than cognitive—the distinction being that in the former case secrecy is maintained from a concern for the safety of citizens, whereas in the latter case secrecy is maintained in order to enact a decision that, were it made public, would be opposed by citizens. But it is not likely that critics such as Aeschines would have respected this distinction even if Demosthenes had elucidated it, which of course he did not.

Presaging the Moderns

The retrieval of Demosthenes' critique undertaken in the preceding sections reveals a disposition and a set

of concerns that bear resemblance to what one finds in the work of prominent modern political theorists. The disposition in question is prudential in nature; it evaluates political arrangements based on their capacity to first and foremost secure preservation, rather than to bring about a more normatively perfect existence. This disposition can be witnessed, for instance, in Machiavelli's (2005, Preface: 4) praise for Roman example over Greek philosophy, as when he writes in the *Art of War* that cities which cherish arts over military virtue are no different “than the rooms of a proud and regal place when, by being uncovered, they have nothing that might defend them against the rain.” It can also be seen in Hobbes' political theory, which premises the creation and operation of government on fulfilling the universal desire for self-preservation. “All the duties of the sovereign,” he writes, “are implicit in this one phrase: the safety of the people is the supreme law” (Hobbes 1998, XIII.4). The same disposition is also evident in the concern the authors of the *Federalist Papers* have to ensure that the federation they intend to construct is one capable of holding its own in a world where “nations in general will make war when they have a prospect of getting anything by it” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 2003, 12–13).

The theorists referred to above also share Demosthenes' concern about the capacity of popular government to act in the manner required to ensure the security of the political community. Machiavelli (1996, 1.53.1), for instance, frequently highlights the problem of imprudence, observing that the inexperience of ordinary men often leads them to pursue incorrect policies, because they are taken in by the appearance of gain, whereas the actual consequences of such policies might be quite the opposite. He also criticizes the “customarily slow motion” of collective decision making, which he attributes to the desire of the participants to seem knowledgeable and important (Machiavelli 1996, II.33, also see II.34.3). Hobbes (1998, X.10) too emphasizes the importance of experience to the cultivation of prudence and assumes that ordinary citizens will lack such knowledge. Moreover, he notes that prudence may not always provide conclusive answers, which to him implies a need for decisiveness. But he finds democracies ill-equipped on this front, because he assumes that their use of collective deliberation makes it difficult to garner the requisite consensus, a point he illustrates with his famous analogy about the use of seconds in “Tennis Play” (Hobbes 1996, 132). He (1998, X.9; see also X.14) also emphasizes the threat of indiscretion associated with the public nature of

²¹For a helpful discussion on tensions surrounding the Council's efforts to control information, see Lewis (1996, 115–18).

collective deliberation, which forces us “to reveal our plans and wishes when there is no need to and to get nothing by it.” Both these concerns about indecisiveness and indiscretion are revisited in the *Federalist Papers*, where Alexander Hamilton, in particular, emphasizes that increasing the number of persons involved in deliberation undermines decisiveness and discretion, because group interactions tend to be characterized by pride, jealousy and contests of will. Hence, Hamilton concludes, “decision, activity, secrecy and dispatch will generally characterize the proceedings of one man, in a much more eminent degree, than the proceedings of any greater number” (2003, 342; see also 170–71).

The similarities outlined above obviously raise the question as to whether, and if so, to what extent, Demosthenes' critique might have influenced the development of modern political theory. This question will not be taken up here, but it is not an implausible line of enquiry to pursue. Hobbes, for instance, explicitly references Demosthenes' analogy of the boxer, writing that to not be forearmed is to “behave like the clowns in Demosthenes, who know nothing about sword fighting and shift the shield from one part of the body to another wherever the blow falls” (1998, XIII.8). Indeed, Hobbes' confident empirical assumptions about the problem of indiscretion in public assemblies could well have been informed by Demosthenes' critique. But even assuming that Demosthenes had no influence on modern political theorists such as Hobbes, the parallels outlined above are still deeply interesting for two reasons.

In the first place, they suggest that conflict between democratic norms and the measures necessary to ensure the security of the political community is a timeless problem. Demosthenes recognizes one part of this problem early in his career, namely, that public deliberation can challenge the capacity of a political community to maintain discretion. This negative observation presages the modern concern for state secrecy seen in Hobbes and Publius. It therefore reveals that the utility of secrecy was appreciated long before the modern administrative state came into existence and so serves to caution any theory that would view state secrecy as an aberration that can be explained solely in terms of the interests of the state's administrators. It also provides some evidence in support of the criticism that Hobbes and Publius direct at public deliberation, by showing how acting on this norm can in fact prove harmful.

What is *not* paralleled between Demosthenes' critique and modern political theory is also deeply revealing. In contrast to Demosthenes, who does not

discuss the possibility of reforming the institutions of Athenian democracy, modern theorists such as Hobbes recommend delegation as a means to overcome the problems associated with collective decision making. This development creates an authority that can exercise power prudently, speedily and secretly, thus addressing Demosthenes' critique. Yet by doing so, Hobbes and his many followers open up the second part of the problem—i.e., the challenge of reconciling secrecy with the norm of accountability. The difficulty here is that once citizens authorize secret decision-making by representatives, holding those representatives accountable becomes that much harder since *they* now control the information citizens require to gauge their honesty and efficacy in office. The Athenians did not encounter this challenge. The retention of decision-making power in the Assembly motivated a structure of oratorical competition that provided citizens an opportunity to maintain control over their leaders by requiring them to share privileged information with their audience (an audience, moreover, that included rival orators who could offer their own interpretations and objections). This meant that in Athens, deliberation and retrospection worked together in a pincer-like fashion to challenge potential uses of power *ex-ante*, and to investigate suspected abuses *ex-post*.²² In comparison, the presence of state secrecy makes it difficult, if not impossible, for modern democracies to replicate this structure of competition, except in those rare and unpredictable instances when “information leaks” make informed public deliberation a genuine possibility. As a result, contemporary theorists have sought to secure accountability by focusing on designing institutions of oversight that could mimic a competitive public sphere. In practice, this has typically meant requiring the legislature to oversee the executive branch's use of state secrecy. However, these efforts have repeatedly run up against a simple but pernicious obstacle: since the legislature's oversight of state secrets is itself conducted in secret (which is necessary to prevent the premature publication of information), it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for citizens to gauge whether the overseers have performed *their* responsibilities adequately, especially in instances where the same political party controls the executive and legislative branches.²³ Athenian

²²For a survey of retrospection in Athens, see Elster (1999); Roberts (1982); Sinclair (1988, chap. 6).

²³For example, see Born and Leigh (2005) and Sagar (2007, 4–14).

democracy, by contrast, did not face this dilemma, because when orators or factions clashed, they did so in public, thus affording citizens a more visible estimate of the creditability of the disputants. Whether, and if so how, contemporary democracies can ensure accountability under conditions of state secrecy, e.g., by developing institutions that better mimic the competitiveness of the Athenian public sphere, cannot be addressed here. However, Demosthenes' critique reminds us that the answer cannot lie in idealizing the past. The conflict between secrecy and democracy cannot be solved by hoping to "democratize" decision making, since this move would only reintroduce the problem of indiscretion that he brings to our attention, and that modern theorists intended to solve by legitimizing delegation. Hence, if Athens' fate, and Demosthenes' observations on it, as well as the supporting conclusions drawn by modern political theory, are to guide contemporary theory, the conflict between secrecy and democracy will have to be resolved in an entirely new way—one that secures accountability without sacrificing discretion. This is the elusive outcome required to immunize democratic theory against the fullest consequences of Demosthenes' critique.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that an examination of Demosthenes' orations reveals a critique focused on three adverse consequences of the collective exercise of sovereign power: the imprudent decisions of poorly informed citizens; the indecisiveness provoked by oratorical competition; and the indiscretion associated with the public conduct of deliberation. This essay has also briefly touched upon the implications of Demosthenes' critique for democratic theory more generally. His critique invites a reconsideration of Athenian political thought, especially the notion that criticism of the participatory nature of Athenian democracy was motivated primarily by class differences. It also invites us to consider the influence Demosthenes may have had on the development of modern political thought, particularly on Hobbes' arguments in favor of delegation. Finally, Demosthenes' critique provides a sharp reminder of the risks associated with public deliberation, even as its silence on the alternative hints at a conundrum that continues to bedevil theorists today: how can we ensure secrecy without endangering democratic accountability?

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