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1 Mass and elite revisited

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When, in the early 1980s, I began work on the book that was first published in 1989 by Princeton University Press, as *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, I had no idea that it would still be read and discussed in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Much less did I dream that it would inspire a major international conference and this volume of essays – most of which are neither about Athens nor about its democracy. But in light of our current knowledge of what has happened in this field over the course of the last quarter century, it may be worthwhile retracing the series of fortuitous accidents that led to my book being written and published in the form it eventually took, and then to the analytic concept of 'mass and elite' being taken up so quickly, persistently, and productively by scholars whose knowledge of other historical times and places, and other aspects of ancient studies, is so much greater than my own.

The original idea for a book concerning depictions of elite and non-elite attributes in Athenian rhetoric of the late fifth and fourth centuries BCE arose when I was doing background reading for my dissertation, which was written under the benevolent and thoughtful direction of Chester Starr at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. My dissertation, on the topic of Athenian defense policy after the Peloponnesian War, had its origins in a seminar paper on views of sea power in the Attic orators, produced for one of Starr's seminars, when I was a second-year graduate student. That paper became my first published article (Ober 1978), appearing in the first issue of a new journal, *The Ancient World*. So I had already gained some experience in working with Greek rhetoric by the time I began working through the corpus of the Attic orators, while doing research for the dissertation. In re-reading a speech by Demosthenes, I was struck by an apparent contradiction. He seemed, in the course of a few sentences, to be contradicting himself: making elitist claims, to the effect that he himself was especially meritorious, and thus especially worthy of leadership as a result of his own privileged background, and anti-elitist claims, to the effect that his opponents were wealthy snobs who considered themselves better than ordinary Athenians. While it was possible that Demosthenes *himself* might believe both things simultaneously (i.e. that he was the right sort of elitist, with a legitimate claim to elite standing and his opponents the wrong sorts of elitists, who lacked the right to that claim), I could not readily explain to myself why he could have expected an

audience of Athenian jurors to follow him in that belief, at least without explaining matters in a lot more detail than he did.

Having noticed the apparent tension (as I thought of it) between elitist and anti-elitist sentiments in Demosthenes, I soon realized that passages expressing similar tensions are common in the Attic orators, and indeed in historical, philosophical, and dramatic texts written in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. I began to collect references to 'elitism and anti-elitism in classical Athenian literature,' with the vague thought that something might come of it someday, once I had completed work on various topics in Greek military history. That day dawned, in spring of 1983, when my request for a permit to undertake an archaeological surface survey in Greece was unexpectedly refused by the Greek Archaeological Service – along with all other such requests that year, as I later discovered: It was a bad year for survey archaeology in Greece. Being an Assistant Professor at the time, with a tenure clock running, I decided that any future career I might have in Greek archaeology would need to be put on hold. I found my 'elitism and anti-elitism' notes, refocused my research program around that topic, and six years later the book was published. Not surprisingly, the project changed dramatically in the course of those years.

As work on the project progressed, it became clear to me that the theoretical underpinning of my project must be political sociology. Indeed, my working title was for a time 'a political sociology of classical Athens.' Political sociology, in the tradition of Max Weber, had been robustly advocated by Moses I. Finley, undoubtedly the most influential interpreter of the Greco-Roman world for those Anglophone ancient historians of my generation who were concerned with the intersection of social and political history.[1] Along with many others, I was strongly attracted to Finley's application of modern social theory to ancient history. I was also influenced by Finley's conviction, expressed most clearly in his book *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (1985) that a proper understanding of the history of ancient Greek democracy could be deployed against both the 'democratic elitism' that was popular among some mid-century political theorists, and against the universality of the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy,' originally developed in a classic of early twentieth-century political sociology, Robert Michels' (1962 [1911]) *Political Parties.* Finley had presented a set of problems clearly enough, and had forcefully argued for their importance, both as topics within ancient history and within social theory more generally. But he had not, or so it seemed to me, made a comprehensive or systematic use of the very substantial literary and documentary evidence for Athenian democracy. The works of the Attic orators appeared to me in particular to be an under-exploited resource for the problems of political sociology to which Finley had drawn attention.

Thanks to discussions with some prominent and intellectually generous social scientists with whom I shared a fellowship year in 1983–84, at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina ('Humanities' was, happily, broadly interpreted there and then) I soon realized that the relevant subfields of social science, including sociology and political communications, had progressed well beyond Weber and Michels. With the resources of this more recent scholarship, and with

further inspiration from Michel Foucault's theory of power and knowledge (1980) which I took very seriously in the mid-1980s, I was able to develop a hypothesis about the relationship between public discourse, political ideology, and democratic stability. I tested the hypothesis – for 'goodness of fit,' rather than in a formal way that would satisfy contemporary standards of proof by causal inference, falsification conditions, and counterfactuals – against the abundant evidence of the Attic orators and other classical texts.

Although there was an emerging literature on Athenian political factionalism, which reached a peak with Barry Strauss's (1986) study of Athens after Peloponnesian War, and although some other classical scholars, notably Kenneth Dover (1974), had exploited the evidence of the Attic orators for investigations of Greek popular attitudes, there was, other than Finley, no very obvious model for the book I was writing. But, at Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana, where I was then teaching, I was the only full-time professional classicist or ancient historian within a several-hundred-mile radius. So I had no nearby mentor in the field to warn me that I was drifting into uncharted and shark-infested waters. On the other hand, I was lucky enough to have outstanding historians of the US and Europe as my colleagues at Montana State, and they helped me to see more clearly how political and social history could be conjoined. The book was largely completed in 1986–87, when I was unexpectedly back in Ann Arbor as a visiting assistant professor for a year.[2] Access to a fine and familiar library, and a teaching load much lighter than I had become used to in Montana, made it possible for me to finish research and writing in the course of the year. Conversations with faculty colleagues, notably with Sally Humphreys, a pioneer in the use of contemporary social science to explain the role of kinship in Greek society who had recently joined the Michigan faculty, were helpful in enabling me to pull together the various strands of my argument, and to relate my theories about the ancient Greek world to recent developments in the historical study of other places in other eras.

As it turned out, 1989, a momentous year in the political history of the modern world, was a fortuitous time for the appearance of the sort of book that I had written. The book quickly received much wider and much more positive attention than I had had any reason to expect. Equally unexpectedly, the book has continued to be read and commented upon ever since. According to (the necessarily incomplete and therefore somewhat impressionistic) statistics available through Google Scholar, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* has by now (December 2015) been cited in other works of scholarship more than 1,000 times. Moreover, the rate at which the book is cited has increased markedly since 2008.[3] I assume that at least one part of the continued scholarly interest in the book must be that the underlying issues in political sociology continue to be relevant to the way that scholars (among others) interpret the world. The perceived value of 'mass and elite,' as an analytic concept for social analysis, may be expected to persist for at least the near future, if we are to judge by recent popular interest and academic attention to the question of the political ramifications of economic inequality. The rise of social movements, for example

'Occupy,' which take as their theme large and invidious differences in wealth and power between an elite – 'the one percent' – and everyone else, is exactly the sort of topic that is well addressed by political sociology.

My book was originally motivated, not only by apparent inconsistencies in social attitudes expressed in classical Greek political oratory, but also by a deep puzzle about politics in classical Athens: Why was democratic Athens, with such a complex and seemingly costly system of government 'by the people' so successful over time? Why was Athens such a dynamic cultural powerhouse and so apparently stable for much of the fifth and most of the fourth centuries? How did Athens manage to innovate in so many domains while remaining so robust to severe shocks – plague, military defeat, and brief but sharp interludes of civil strife in the late fifth century? How, ultimately, was the power of the mass of ordinary people, as it was manifest in democracy, reconciled with the power of an elite of wealth, education, and status, so as to produce a high-performing society over an extended period of time? The human cost of a *failure* to reconcile masses with elites – in the form of endemic instability and, potentially, bloody civil strife – was made glaringly obvious by the history of other major classical Greek poleis (e.g. Argos and Syracuse). And civil strife was, of course, a central and recurrent theme in the political writing of Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle, among other classical authors.

My solution to the puzzle of Athenian democratic success was based on the premise that the emergence of a civic ideology and associated practices of reciprocity among citizens gave Athenians reasons to cooperate across the lines of class, status, and education. Athenian civic ideology and practices of citizenship were grounded in, and helped to promote, substantial benefits for elite and ordinary citizens alike. The relevant benefits, in terms of material goods and honors, were produced and consumed in a process of reciprocal exchange between masses and elites.

Practices of reciprocity, expressed in and sustained by public communication, especially in the form of speeches in the Assembly and law courts, resulted in the development of a sophisticated and widely shared civic discourse. An ongoing dialogue between eloquent elite speakers eager for influence and honors on the one hand, and highly vocal and responsive mass audiences concerned with preserving their equal high standing as citizens on the other, served to define and to justify to each side the terms of a fair bargain. That dialogue clarified responsibilities of generosity and public service on the part of elites. On the part of the masses, the bargain emphasized the responsibility to respect the property and educational attainments of those elites who fulfilled their part of the deal. The emergence of reasonably clear rules of appropriate public behavior and speech allowed for violations of the implicit agreement to be identified, and thus for effective monitoring for compliance. Those elites who willfully violated the implied social contract were liable to informal social sanctions, degradation of reputation, and legal punishment.

My account of the relationship between mass and elite in Athens rested on several premises. First was the assumption that the social categories of 'mass'

and 'elite,' although never precisely defined (an impossibility given the only partially overlapping characteristics of education, wealth, and status), were nonetheless quite clear both to the original participants in the bargain and to us, as observers. The tendency of the relevant Greek social vocabulary to divide society into binary categories (*polloi* v *oligoi*, *plousioi*/*euporoi* v *aporoi*/*penetes*/*ptochoi*, *gnorimoi*/*charientes* v *plethos*/*ochlos* and so on) seemed to point to an adequately clear bifurcation of Athenian society along lines of mass and elite, at least within the citizen population of the democratic state.

My second primary assumption was that the citizen masses had the capacity and the tendency to act (e.g. in response to elite rhetoric in assembly or law court) as a reasonably coherent and consistent 'collective agent.' As a collective agent the mass of citizens that gathered, for example, in Assembly or as the jury of a law court, must, collectively, be able to form and act upon a judgment on elite individuals and their rhetorical performances. The mass of citizens must, therefore, be both willing and capable of judging, and subsequently rewarding or punishing, elite contestants seeking honor and influence. Those collective judgments and their consequences must, moreover, be reasonably consistent over time. Elites, for their part, must be in a position to understand the implicit rules of the game they were playing, and thereby to act under a reasonable presumption that following the rules – conforming to a given set of behaviors and a given protocol of rhetorical self-presentation – would (all things being equal) evoke a positive response from the mass audience/judge. The mass judgment was, therefore, expressed by collectively responding appropriately and more or less clearly to the rhetorical performances (and other forms of public display) of individual elites.

My assumption about the possibility and relevant processes of collective judgment and agency did not, at the time of writing, have any very deep roots in the analytic philosophy of knowledge and action.[4] That assumption was, at the time of the writing of the book, taken over from background premises about the formation and behavior of social groups that were commonly held by modern political sociologists. The assumption seemed, moreover, to be confirmed by the evidence of the content of elite Athenian discourse, as manifest especially in assembly and courtroom rhetoric. That discourse makes more sense – that is, the contradictions that had initially puzzled me in speeches by Demosthenes and others, no longer appeared inexplicable – when we assume that elite speakers were consistently conforming to unwritten but quite clear social rules that were devised and publicized by a collective 'lawmaker.' The unwritten rules of discourse and social behavior were related to, and continuous with, the more formal rules of the game of Athenian politics, as manifest in the procedural rules governing Athenian legislative bodies and legal institutions. Part of the burden of my book, expressed in terms that were more polemical than I would now use, was that institutions, understood only as sets of formal procedural rules, were insufficient to explain Athenian democracy.

The mass/elite binary is not, of course, the only way to conceive of ancient Athenian society – or of any other historical society. One obvious alternative

is to model society as divided into three categories, with lower, middle, and upper strata. Modern societies are, for example, often described in this tripartite scheme; the creation and maintenance of a substantial middle class is typically regarded as a sign of advanced economic development. Greek evaluative social vocabulary, both that employed by political and moral philosophy (notably by Aristotle) and Athenian public rhetoric (notably by Aeschines) certainly recognized and valorized the category of the middle (*mesos*, *metriotes*). And some Greek social historians (notably Morris 1996) have urged greater attention to the role of a middling social group (sometimes associated with the hoplites) and the ideology of the 'middling citizen.'

In reality the population of Athens (or any other ancient society) – whether measured in terms of distribution of income, wealth, education, or any other readily quantifiable attribute – was not neatly divided into two or three (or more) discrete categories, but was distributed over a range. Most readers will be familiar with 'bell curve' graphs that visually represent the distribution of individuals in a population (say, adult males living in North America) over a range, according to some measurable attribute (say, height in centimeters). A 'standard distribution' has relatively fewer individuals at the left and right 'tails' of the distribution curve, with most clustered near the middle. If we suppose that what is being measured is income, no society that can plausibly be described in the terms of mass and elite could be represented as a 'standard distribution' bell curve. Income distributions do not, however, often take the form of a symmetrical bell curve. Take for example, a society in which most people are very poor, that is, living near the margin of bare subsistence and consuming little more than they require to stay alive. In the same society a few are able to consume vastly more; these range from very rich to extraordinarily rich. This society will have a very short or no left (low income) tail and a long right (high income) tail. Even though this society still features a distribution of incomes over a range (i.e. per capita income is not divided in a binary fashion, with one income for every poor individual and second income for every rich individual), this society would be quite readily be described in 'mass and elite' terms in respect to income.

In as-yet unpublished work, I have recently modeled Athenian society in the late fourth century (NB it is *only* a model, based on relatively few empirical data points, and it will probably be tweaked as I continue to work on it) as sliced into 34 income categories (15 categories of citizens, the others are metics and slaves). Annual per capita incomes in this model range from a low of ca. 67 drachmas to a high of nearly 9,000. According to the model, which I believe to be plausible as a very rough picture of Athenian income distribution, the majority (about 60 percent) of Athens' total population falls into what modern economists define as 'middle class' (that is, 60 percent of Athenians had an income that was between 0.75 and 1.25 times the income of the median individual). This Athenian 'middle class' lived quite well by premodern standards – the median individual had an income that allowed for consumption at a level of over 3 times bare subsistence. This compares very favorably to the premodern normal median of about 1.6 times subsistence, as defined by recent

work by Walter Scheidel and Steven Friesen (2009). This suggests that the majority of people within the Athenian 'mass' were far from impoverished by historical standards. My model suggests, however, that there was an Athenian wealth elite (or more precisely, income elite). That elite could be defined variously. It might be considered as the ca. 15 percent of Athenians who consumed (according to the model) at a level above that of the middle class (i.e. had incomes that were greater than 1.25 times the median). Alternatively, and certainly closer to ancient conceptions of mass and elite, the elite could be defined as the 1 percent of the population that reaped (according to the model) about 16 percent of total Athenian annual income. This Athenian '1 percent elite' constituted the upper echelons of the liturgy-paying class and was obviously much richer than most Athenians. Yet on the other hand, the Athenian 1 percent controlled substantially less of the total social income than was the case in other premodern societies. Athenian income inequality was substantially lower than estimates of inequality in ancient Rome, and low compared to other well-documented premodern societies.[5]

None of these considerations requires, however, that we throw out the framework of mass and elite when seeking to understand the social dynamics of ancient, or indeed of modern, societies. My ultimate goal in the 1989 book was to gain a better understanding of social power. The question was not what percentage of total income or wealth was owned by an elite, but whether a few people or families dominated Athenian society in terms of controlling political ideology and social behavior – *Did the Athenian elite actually rule*? The question was, at the time I was writing, impertinent if not scandalous, which may perhaps account for some of the attention that the book received. By even asking that question, much less answering it in the negative, I took on not only an influential theory within political sociology, one that was embraced (if for different reasons) by both left-leaning and right-leaning students of social organization, but also a highly influential approach to ancient history, one that was embraced by historians who were avowedly hostile to social theory in any form.

To the question of 'did the Athenian elite rule?' the political sociologist Robert Michels' answer (although he did not address antiquity) would be, 'of course – because in every society the elite must rule, due to the Iron Law of Oligarchy.' Michels had a worked out theory of bureaucracy and power dynamics to support his Iron Law, but a similar answer had been given by ancient historians of the second half of the twentieth century (e.g. Fornara and Samons 1991), who rejected or ignored the very idea that social theory could have any predictive force at all. These ancient historians had, I believe, been influenced, directly or indirectly, by the work of Ronald Syme, who (without citing Michels or the other elitist social theorists of the early twentieth century), had bluntly stated in the preface to his hugely influential book, *The Roman Revolution* (1939), that in every society, no matter what its ostensible constitutional form, an elite necessarily ruled.[6]

Perhaps because Syme's law-like pronouncement was asserted almost casually, as a matter of common sense, rather than as the result of social theorizing, it was

often taken to be a pre-theoretical fact about the world. For those who accepted Syme's dictum as a fact, the job of any historian concerned with the relationship between society and political power was not to ask *whether* there was a ruling elite – rather, it was to identify the social origins and mode of perpetuation of the ruling elite whose existence was already taken for granted, which was the subject of Syme's book. Syme's dictum is a notable example of an aprioristic use of a social theory by a historian: it is aprioristic in that the theory is taken as a premise of the argument rather than a hypothesis to be tested. The result, in the terms of modern social science, is systematically 'selecting (evidence) on the dependent variable' or 'confirmation bias' – that is, seeking only for evidence that confirms what one expects to find and systematically ignoring all apparently contradictory evidence as nothing more than noise. This aprioristic approach, more reminiscent of religious theology than social or natural science, shaped much of the scholarship in ancient political history over the course of a long generation. By the late 1980s, there was, I think, a pent-up frustration with that way of doing history, which perhaps explains in part why my book was greeted with more enthusiasm than might otherwise have been the case.

But back to the question of whether an elite actually ruled Athens in the classical period: My own answer, of course, was no: in the fifth and fourth centuries, during the era of the democracy, there was an identifiable Athenian elite of wealth, education, and birth, but that elite did not rule. I took (and still take) Michels' theory very seriously. It is certainly not tendentious to claim that, through most of the recorded history of complex societies elites have *usually ruled*.[7] And that means that any premodern society in which elites do *not* rule is bucking a strong historical trend. Historians who suppose that they have found a complex premodern society in which the elite does *not* rule will need to explain *why not*. This means, in turn, that we must identify mechanisms (institutions, ideologies, practices) that served to block the historically familiar processes by which elites typically 'capture' (in the language of modern political science) a social-political system.

My answer in *Mass and Elite*, as sketched above, was 'reciprocity achieved through discourse.' In order to get what they wanted from the social system, notably honor and positions of leadership and influence, Athenian elites were made to conform, in their public speech, to an ideological norm that valorized and legitimated the standing and the ultimate political authority of the ordinary people, the *demos*. I still think that is right, as far as it goes. But my solution was, as I realized even before the book was published, incomplete. In the event, it took me another twenty years and two more big books (Ober 1998, 2008) and a lot of articles and chapters along the way to answer, to my own satisfaction, the question of how Athenian democracy really worked – how it managed to deliver the goods of relatively high levels of prosperity and stability without autocracy.

I was hardly the only classicist to feel, in 1989 and thereafter, that my original presentation of Athenian political sociology and the operation of ideology and discourse were incomplete (if not simply wrong) as an account of Athenian politics

and society. My own attempts to fill out the picture were written in the context of a large and increasingly sophisticated historical literature on Athenian social and political life. Among the many advances that have helped to improve my original model have been those in the areas of collective agency, social epistemology, law and informal rule enforcement, institutional economics, and explorations of the complex associations that interwove the lives of citizens with other polis residents. Matthew Trundle's chapter on coinage and redistribution is an example of this sort of deepening of our understanding of what was really going on in democratic Athens.

Meanwhile, in a series of parallel developments, the mass and elite approach to thinking about discourse and ideology as key elements in a complex process of social negotiation proved to be productive beyond the domain of classical Athenian social and political history. It helped to fuel a large and still growing literature on ancient literature, art, performance, and philosophical thought – Philip Bosman's exploration in Chapter 4 of high and low (mass and elite) in Cynicism complements and extends other work in this line. The mass and elite model can be retrojected into the archaic period, as it is in Luca Sansone di Campobiano's chapter on *eutaxia* at Sparta. It can also be projected forward into the long Hellenistic era, as with Richard Evans' chapter on Syracuse at the end of the third century BCE. It has been creatively adapted to quite different social and rhetorical circumstances to help explain some aspects of the Roman republican political culture, as Loonis Logghe's chapter demonstrates in detail. And, as the other chapters in this volume show, that is just the beginning. Suzanne Sharland conjoins the analysis of elite literature with the re-situation of the model in Rome to re-read a satire by Horace. Lisa Marie Mignone and Clifford Ando demonstrate how human geography, urban and rural, does – and sometimes does not – track mass/elite power relations. John Hilton, Harmut Ziche, and Nicholas Baker-Brian each break new ground in chapters demonstrating how the mass and elite model can be creatively redeployed to better understand aspects of social relationships and religious communities in late antiquity.

The great excitement of this volume, in addition to the excellence of individual chapters, is to show the ways in which some aspect of the mass and elite model is, and in some cases is *not*, adaptable to different domains – genres, times, and places, within the ancient world. It goes far beyond anything I had envisioned, and augurs well for the future of the productive role of social theory in writing highly professional history that remains deeply grounded in the original sources.

Notes

1 I met Finley only once, in spring 1978, through a letter of introduction from Starr, for coffee at Darwin College, Cambridge, where he was then Master. He was decidedly underwhelmed by my thoughts about Athenian defense policy.

2 I was called back to Michigan to teach several courses when John Eadie, the senior Roman historian, took an administrative position elsewhere. I am grateful to Montana State University for allowing me to take up this one-year position on very short notice.

3 I am presuming, of course, that the relevant numbers are not entirely an artifact of the way that Google Scholar collects its data.
4 See, now, by contrast, Bratman (2014); List and Pettit (2011); and discussion in Ober (2008) chapter 1 and (2013).
5 For a preliminary version of the modeling discussed here, and comparisons of Athens with other societies see Ober (2015) chapter 4.
6 See discussion in Ober (2008) chapter 1.
7 See, for example, North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) and Turchin (2015).