theories and methodologies

Democracy Is a Tragic Regime

STATHIS GOURGOURIS

IN THIS BRIEF MEDITATION I AM LESS CONCERNED WITH HOW TRAGEDY AS A THEATRICAL FORM RELATES TO DEMOCRACY THAN WITH HOW DEMOCracy entails a tragic politics, in its ancient and contemporary manifestations. My broader argument follows from three presuppositions:

- Philosophically speaking, democracy is a historical manifestation of self-organized politics that rests on no foundation other than self-authorization, which, being occasional and provisional, has no antecedent and is therefore abyssal.
- Politically speaking, democracy requires an imaginary of rule without *archē* or *telos*—an an-archic imaginary that disengages itself from traditional parameters of the command-obedience structure. This isn't to say that democracy entails no rule. On the contrary, it engages in the paradoxical practice of anarchic rule, or rule shared by all (even those in opposition), so that the traditional division of power between rulers and ruled is destabilized.[1]
- Ethically speaking, there is nothing good or bad about democracy; all moral imperatives are foreign, perhaps even contrary, to democracy. Hence, democratic politics operates in an ethical realm without categorical imperatives, a priori principles, or transcendental guarantees and is thereby constitutively perilous and precarious. Democracy involves a tragic imaginary, enacting a politics of tragic life that includes folly without heroic salvation and demands lucidity in conditions of total uncertainty.

The imaginary of this politics exemplifies why, in the words of the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, "democracy is a tragic regime." I quote here two instances of many reiterations of this phrase in Castoriadis's writings:

> Democracy is quite evidently a regime that knows no external norms; it has to posit its own norms, and it has to posit them without being able to lean on another norm for support. In this sense, democracy is certainly a tragic regime, subject to *hubris*, as was known and was seen in the second half of fifth century Athens; it had to confront the issue of its own self-limitation. ("Political Imaginary" 93)

STATHIS GOURGOURIS is a professor at Columbia University, where he directs the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. His Sydney Lectures in Philosophy and Society were published as *Lessons in Secular Criticism* in the Fordham University Press series Thinking Out Loud (2013).

© 2014 STATHIS GOURGOURIS
PMLA 129.4 (2014), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

And, on an earlier occasion:

> In a democracy, people *can* do anything—and must know that they *ought not* to do and say just anything. Democracy is the regime of self-limitation; therefore, it is also the regime of historical risk—another way of saying that it is the regime of freedom—and a tragic regime. . . . *Hubris* does not really presuppose freedom; it presupposes the absence of fixed norms, the essential vagueness of the ultimate bearings of our actions. Transgressing the law is not *hubris*; it is a definite and limited misdemeanor. *Hubris* exists where self-limitation is the only "norm," where transgressed "limits" are nowhere defined. ("Greek *Polis*" 115)

When Castoriadis refers to democracy as a regime, he counteracts the more typical images of democracy as procedure ("Democracy"). He recognizes that democracy, like all political institutions, bears its own constellation of procedures, but he decries the reduction of democracy to its procedures, which is how it is commonly considered. The issue is about democracy not as a form of government, whose procedural character entails a system of government, but as a form of *governance*, which implicates the governing and the governed in an inextricable, complicit, and continuously overturning relation. The Greek word for a regime is *politeia*, a society's political state of things—Plato's very title unfortunately mistranslated as *Republic*.

Democracy cannot be reduced to procedure because whatever is procedural about it is ultimately provisional, in the sense that it must be always subjected to question, reconsideration, and possible revision. The grandest and commonest travesty of democracy is the ritual of interrupting our day-to-day routine to go to the voting booth once a year (or every two or four years) to exercise our electoral right. I say this in full cognizance of the importance of voting, particularly in a country whose constitutive democratic tradition is marred by extraordinary efforts to disenfranchise people of their electoral rights on account of race, sex, poverty, and even ideological leanings. But the electoral ritual is not what democracy is about. At best the electoral ritual is the instrumental act, on a specific and unreproducible occasion, of a lifelong commitment to citizen action. At worst it is a perfunctory ideological act, which could just as well be undertaken by a robot.

Democracy, then, is a regime of the provisional—this is what it means not to recognize and inculcate fixed norms. It is anything but normative, which is why one of the most absurd elements of its history is the attempt to export it or impose it on other societies. The ancients were just as guilty of this absurdity as the moderns and through it caused equally catastrophic results, for others as well as themselves. But we misjudge the nature of democracy if we see this attempt as an aberration. While contrary to democratic values of autonomy, it lies nonetheless within the range of democracy's constitutive excess. What might be considered absurd in the language of the moderns qualifies to be called *hubris* in the language of the Greeks. The Melian massacre may be the most infamous instance of Athenian *hubris*, but just as significant were the condemnation and execution of Socrates (though he was undoubtedly hubristic himself), the Sicilian expedition, a number of ostracisms for political expediency, and most of what Alcibiades (Socrates's famous pupil) did in his public life.

As a theatrical form, Athenian tragedy is a profound meditation on *hubris*, not as a formal characteristic according to dramatic convention but as a social condition of the *polis*. This is not to say that tragedy is essentially political: it is also aesthetic, a matter of religious ritual, and a form of mass entertainment. The bibliography on this contested issue is enormous and spans at least two centuries of expert writings, all of them seeking to understand an archaic society about which little is known relative to its complex-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ity. This complexity is the political as such, emerging from the agonistic coexistence of contradictory elements in everyday life that creates the unprecedented form we still call democracy. What transmutes this complexity into society's self-organization is a tragic sense of life. This is what lends democracy its tragedy. With the notable exception of Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, which is explainable historically, tragedy does not stage democracy in any literal sense. Tragic theater *is* political, not because of its content but because, by all the different accounts, it is endemic to this peculiar mode of self-organization that emerged in Athens. Tragedy's political character includes all "nonpolitical" elements that remain essential to it throughout, including its ritualistic and entertainment aspects. Self-interrogation presupposes a performative distance; in the theater, unlike in the *agora*, the *dēmos* is not the actor but the audience.[2]

Although it would be questionable to disavow tragedy's multivalent social significance and even contradictory purposes—and thus be irresponsible to speak of it as an undifferentiated whole (despite its compact historical specificity, its meteoric rise and fall as a classic form)—it is important to underline that the Athenian masterpieces of theater we still celebrate were produced and performed mostly while the city was at war. During war the city was at its most existentially essential (all Greek societies, Athens too, were primarily warrior societies) and yet was most existentially vulnerable. Under such precarious conditions, tragedy seems especially well configured to place before the polity the event of its own *hubris*, even if this was conducted within ritual parameters that were historically endemic and ordinary, including a mode of entertainment eventually cultivated as a social institution.

The Athenian tragedies we have inherited wield their lasting power because they articulate in the same language both the political self-interrogation of the society that enables these plays to exist and the larger anthropological imaginary that enables that society to exist. The two registers are never fully separated, though they denote different domains, because Athenians of this period are a society that exists on the edge of the social imaginary that animates it; they function almost at a zero point of self-occlusion or concealment. What they do and the reasons for doing it, why they act and their sense of action, are out in the open, argued and counterargued, justified and accounted for, to an extent and at a speed impossible to imagine, even in an exhaustively media-driven society like ours (where, of course, secrecy reigns supreme). For this reason the Athenians are a society vulnerable to excessive, hubristic behavior. Thucydides's account of Athenian excess is well known:

> Athenians are addicted to innovation, sharp in conceiving their designs and swift in executing them. . . . They are daring beyond their power and court danger against their better judgment, yet in the midst of trouble they remain sanguine. Their determination is unwavering, and they are never at home, for they think that the further they go, the more they will achieve. They are swift to pursue the ground of victory but do not dwell on defeat. . . . If they invent a scheme and do not execute it, they feel they have lost something that belongs to them; if they pursue something and gain it, they consider it a small thing compared to future gains; if they try something and fail, they look elsewhere to mitigate the lack. Only in them does the hope for gain match gain itself, because of the speed with which they execute their decisions. Their sense of peace and quiet is to do what needs to be done; lack of action or overburdened labor is considered misfortune. In short, their nature is to never find rest for themselves and never let anyone else find rest. (bk. 1, ch. 70)[3]

Although imbued with the objectivity of history, this characterization is staged theatrically, as the enemy Corinthians, almost like a

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

chorus, perform it as a warning lesson to the enemy Spartans. The theatricality of the setting parallels the doubleness, the duplicity, of the character performed. Athenian character is exalted, much as it is pronounced exemplary *hubris*, by an other in a theater of others.

Hubris permeates the Greek world until the Hellenistic era as a kind of cosmic principle to which every mortal is subjected, even the Persian king (Herodotus). Even though this condition is commonly thought to pertain only to individuals, democratic Athens can be deemed to stage *hubris* as a condition for an entire society. Here the individual's incapacity to know the limit—this is the problem of *hubris* as cosmic order: there are limits, but we can never know them—is generalized as the crux of how society is organized politically. Athens marks a peculiar historical phenomenon, in a social imaginary organized around this cosmological principle, as a society that pushes itself to such an extent that its entire mode of self-organization works at the precipice of this condition, so that all institutional safeguards are open to question and subversion. We thus confront the constitutive question of whether, in the space of the political that the emergence of the *polis* as a societal form inaugurates, democracy is merely an extension or indeed a radical innovation. If the second, then the translation of *hubris* from a cosmological principle governing individual fate to a political reality permeating the society is perfectly applicable to Athens, at least from the Cleisthenes reforms to the end of the Peloponnesian war.

This instituted invisibility of limits is difficult to understand from the standpoint of a social imaginary trained to perceive limits sanctioned by writing, especially when it comes to economics and law. Even before democracy is instituted, the Greek *polis* is characterized by a peculiar relation to political order that straddles the boundary between the performative and the written. Greeks no doubt learned much from the Phoenicians, including seafaring and shipbuilding, to which they made their own adjustments, but nothing compares with the innovation of introducing signs for vowels to alphabetic writing, and this cannot be brushed aside as mere whim. Some sort of engaging desire to sustain the nuances of oral life in the new reality of inscription has to be supposed. It's difficult to account for the specific motivation behind this innovation, but its symptom says a great deal. Christian Meier makes the daring proposition that "it looks as though they meant to use this new technique primarily to give permanence to their literature" (100–01).[4] If indeed the development of phonetic writing was due to a literary desire to anchor poetry to something more permanent than memorized transmission of performative techniques, we can suppose further that what underlies it is a broader historicizing imaginary that culminates, if Thucydides is to be taken seriously, in Pericles's claim that Athenians are establishing traces for the future. Writing exceeds the mere accounting of social relations in law and economics, common to many archaic societies, in order to document the political order of things. Here, too, Athens is at the most excessive forefront, providing us the most voluminous record of its vicissitudes, including its literary, intellectual, and performative life.[5]

In fifth-century Athens this lack of external norms and guarantees is at a peak; hence, Sophocles and Euripides (even if in different terms) warn about irreverence toward the cosmic order. The stakes of and demands for self-limitation are consistently being raised and challenged, and, since there is nothing intrinsically permanent to act as a final limit, Athenian society commits extraordinarily self-destructive acts in the midst of its most glorious age. This notion of self-limitation has nothing to do with what under liberalism is a series of equally presumed tropes: the self-regulation of the market or civil society, the moral freedom of self-constraint, the self-taming of civilization, the self-discipline

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of desire, and so on. In Athenian democracy self-limitation takes place in the absence of indications of where limits are, while in liberalism self-limitation as self-constraint means literally to step back, to withdraw, from limits already known or presumed. Liberalism presupposes limits tacitly in the name of protecting the interests of liberty, in the same way that it extends the bounds of inclusion by silencing the markings of exclusion. Ultimately, this is a mechanistic logic of order; the projected ideal is the presumed self-regulation of the market coupled with the self-control of individual desire. In a tragic universe, however, limits are unseen and therefore absent until the moment they appear. And they appear in order to vanish again—they appear to denote a fait accompli, like death, which is the ultimate and unsurpassable limit, whose moment of appearance can never be foretold. In this situation self-limitation is an act of resistance to the alterity of limit, which in that ultimate sense can never be governed. As a response to the danger of *hubris*, self-limitation is therefore an act of resistance against the heteronomy that is always lurking in mere life.

When their historical specificity is observed, Athenian tragedies are exemplary sensors of the city's vulnerability to *hubris*, serving as a sort of last safeguard, even if indirectly (perhaps mysteriously) posed and often failing. Borrowing freely from Jacques Derrida, I would argue that tragedy is an instance of democracy's autoimmunity. This performance of autoimmunity was conducted in an immensely varied, if not contradictory, range of ways, even in the handful of surviving plays. If Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (458 BC) stages the democratic city's autonomous reconciliation of residual tribal strife, his *Prometheus Bound* (430 BC) exposes the problem of defying the last instance of heteronomous authority. Sophocles's *Ajax* (450 BC) dramatizes the repercussions of a new cosmic order where change becomes the measure of the cosmos (Protagoras), while his *Antigone* (442 BC) presses radically on the hubristic potential of autonomy (*monos phronein*), with or against the law. If Aeschylus's *Persians* (472 BC) mirrors to Athenians how victory is measured by the *hubris* of the enemies they defeated, Euripides's *Trojan Women* (415 BC) exposes, as Athens prepares for the Sicilian expedition, what the possible *hubris* of war in the name of the *polis* might mean to the *oikos*, Sicilian or, just as well, Athenian.

The characterization of my examples is partial. No one can know whether these stagings were perceived in this fashion, but also no one can dismiss their *co-incidence* with known historical events and not-fully-known epistemic conditions. What precipitates what? That's the paradox of autoimmunity. Common conceptions of tragedy are insufficient to explain how democracy itself may be tragic. Certainly, if we remain within the Aristotelian view of tragedy, we're bound to a specific perspective. Aristotle, whose distanced view of Athens through the eyes of a metic should not be underestimated, is the great ancient theorist of democracy, but he theorizes from mere experience of its demise, from the standpoint of its remnants, which enables him to say practically everything about how democracy works or doesn't except how a polity envisions itself or thinks of itself *in* and *as* a democracy. More than Aristotle, our master texts here are Thucydides and above all the tragedies. Indeed, Thucydides's history is a tragedy of the first order, where the Athenian *dēmos* is the tragic protagonist, exemplifying the Sophoclean *deinon*, the daring capacity that celebrates human creation in one moment and precipitates destruction in the next. Thucydides shows in what sense the Athenians engage in *hubris*, not as an aberration but precisely because of their way of life, of perilous democratic life.[6]

In Aristotle's time theater had changed, not so much as form but as practice, as communal self-interrogation and critique. Hence, his ruminations are restricted to a formalist

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

comprehension of the existential predicament of the hero. That the tragic hero since Aristotle has been gendered masculine, despite the extraordinary figures of women we see in the surviving tragedies, is enough to raise questions about the legacy of Aristotelian poetics.[7] A common motif in subsequent interpretations of the tragic hero figure is that he stands ultimately speechless before the nonlanguage of fate. This speechlessness in the suspension, interruption, or self-undoing of *logos* before fate may be how the tragic element in the hero figure is manifested in the final instance. Yet, however much he remains an essential literary topos, the hero figure does not encapsulate the meaning of tragic life I isolate here as essential to democracy. On the contrary, a tragic sense of life is indifferent to anything heroic. There is nothing heroic about democracy.

In Plato's ears this phrase would certify his conviction that democracy exemplifies a polity's illness—much as tragedy (and, more substantially, poetry) leads a city astray from its heroic values. In his famous condemnation of democracy in the *Republic*, Plato is succinct: there is nothing heroic about democracy because it is a regime of self-undoing violence. It emerges out of a revolutionary desire for whatever is new; Plato echoes Thucydides: democracy's advocates are "in love with innovation" ("νεωτερισμοῦ ἐρῶντες" [bk. 8, pt. 555d]). Worse yet, democracy feeds on the sick body ("σῶμα νοσῶδες") of the *polis* in order to produce internal strife, civil war, and stasis ("στασιάζει αὐτό αὐτῷ" [pt. 556e]). Therefore, since it precipitates self-undoing, democracy is against the natural order of the *polis* (whose safeguard is the aristocratic privilege of autochthonous Athenians), which is also to say that democracy is the fatal undoing of politics. What Aristotle signifies as the attributes of freedom (the desire not to be ruled by anyone, which leads to the epistemic *co-incidence* of ruler and ruled) is for Plato the most damning element of democracy. In a democratic city "there is no requirement to rule, even if you are capable of it, or to be ruled if you do not want to be" ("μηδεμίαν ἀνάγκην εἶναι ἄρχειν ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ πόλει, μηδ' ἂν ης ἱκανός ἄρχειν, μηδέ αὐ ἄρχεσθαι, ἐάν μή βούλει" [pt. 557e]). The Platonic sense of democratic sensibility is that it breeds the desire to abstain from the responsibility of politics altogether; in Plato's framework the behavior of Otanis in Herodotus's tale of the three Persian princes is an example of the decadence of a democratic mind. The perspective is skewed, of course, and the charge unwarranted. If anything, the problem is that Athenians are ever too eager to rule, and they are susceptible to reckless rule. But Plato does not respond to the contradictions of Athenian democracy. He sees the contradictions as failures, and he responds with abhorrence and contempt.

But to rehearse Plato's explicit antidemocratic sentiment isn't to say much. What is worth noting is the tropology of this sentiment, his strategy of logical reversal. His argument is consistent in that the very things that make democracy radical make it reprehensible. In this respect he demonstrates that the greatest enemy of democracy is democracy itself; because he does not accept this paradox, he becomes democracy's enemy. Plato's analysis is not so much a formal definition of democracy (as may be said of Aristotle's) but an account of the preconditions of its emergence and the conditions of its certain, self-determined destruction. Plato is the first to stipulate that democracy always emerges by revolution: the radical alteration of the status quo, a novelty in which violence always inheres. After all, he argues, the first target of democratic politics is the traditional privilege of ruling elites, which surely invites the question of whether there can ever be a democratic politics that does not threaten the wealth and privilege of ruling elites. As traditional elites face the decision either to submit to the new regime and participate in it or to

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

face exile, the ultimate target of this violence is the polity. Even participation becomes a sham, as democratic politics is determined by the arbitrary equalization of governing by lot.

There is nothing more reprehensible to Plato than governing by lot; the notion goes against all the laws in the universe. The gravity of this realization shows the radical magnitude of the social imaginary at work in Athenian society.[8] Yet for Platonic philosophy, with its hierarchical demands, this imaginary signifies self-enslavement, for it lays one open to indiscriminate desire, to "surrendering rule over oneself to whatever desire comes along, as if it were chosen by lot" ("λαχούση τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀρχήν" [pt. 561b])—literally, as if one's own rule (rule over oneself, autonomy) were a matter of chance. Democracy is indeed indiscriminate in that it fosters *isonomia* and *parrhēsia*: abolishing hierarchy in the law and enabling the freedom to say anything. Plato derides this indiscriminate attitude as "supermarket politics" ("παντοπώλιον πολιτειῶν"), which ultimately produces an incapacity to act politically, a failure even to rule over oneself that ultimately deauthorizes any principles of ruling, so that either anarchy reigns unlimited or tyranny gains total control. Because "a democratic city thirsts for freedom," Plato argues, it is vulnerable to "the lot of bad cupbearers" and thus to a regime of "uncontrolled intoxication" ("ἄκρατος μέθη" [pt. 557d]). The adjective cannot pass uncommented: *akratos* means a condition where there is nothing to hold on to and nothing to be beholden to but also, politically speaking, a regime without power, without *kratos*, a stateless, drifting condition, where freedom means insatiable desire that annihilates all *archē*.

For Plato this uncompromising mathematics, in which the politics of the multitude is tantamount to the rule of none, to the annihilation of the very conditions of rule—when even ruling over oneself fails—is a societal malady: the city suffers from democratic addiction. The malady is incurable, and the outcome is certain self-destruction. Democracy marches inevitably toward tyranny, a tyranny already produced in the contempt toward authority with which a people intoxicated by freedom treat all traditional rulers until one of their own (a "bad cupbearer") magnetizes everyone's desire toward his ruling hand. Aristotle too names one of the dangers of democracy to be falling under the rule of the One, but for him this is just a possibility, nothing more: the occasion when the many overtake the law they share in making by consolidating themselves into one, so that the *dēmos* becomes *monarchos*, a singular ruler (bk. 4, pt. 1292a). For Plato the danger isn't the possible consolidation of the many into one but the one's demagogic usurpation of the many. And this danger is certain: tyranny is democracy's internal teleology. More than that, what Plato targets as the greatest threat is democracy's intoxication induced by freedom, its openness to uncontrolled desire, which destroys all order—"it makes its way into private households and in the end breeds anarchy even among the animals" (*Republic*, bk. 8, pt. 562e). Clearly, this language is but a repetition of the terms of his condemnation of poetry—mimesis, performativity, tragedy—in the earlier books of the *Republic*.

Plato knows that democracy is a tragic regime, and that's why he finds it insufferable. In the *Laws* he famously calls it "theatrocracy" in a passage that links the audience's capacity to judge art with its vulgarity of taste and its power (*kratos*) to demand a spectacle (*theatron* [bk. 3, pt. 701a]). In the *Republic* philosophy doesn't just vanquish poetry (tragedy) as a form of knowledge; it vanquishes democracy as a way of life—the combination means that philosophy vanquishes tragic life. The legacy of this gesture is the triumph of theological configurations of life, which in modernity shift easily into technological configurations of life. In the end Plato's strategy of deploying philosophy against democracy is caught in a brilliant, ironic loop, not only because

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosophy emerges out of democracy—even if philosophers of democracy don't exist (poets are the intellectuals of democracy)—but also because epitomizing the *hubris* of democracy is the most hubristic Athenian sophist, Socrates, who in Plato's hands becomes exemplary of philosophy as poetry's and democracy's simultaneous defeat.

From this standpoint tragedy as a poetic form has much to do with how democracy is tragic—but as a symptom, not a source. A tragic sense of life is consubstantial with the imaginary of democracy. And the space of inquiring, examining, and envisioning what "tragic life" might mean is hardly restricted to literary types. When Derrida claims that "democracy protects itself and maintains itself precisely by limiting and threatening itself," he invokes the crux of the notion of democracy as a tragic regime (36). It isn't only an absence of guarantees that opens democracy to the peril of *hubris*; its very nature—if this term is appropriate—is continuously (self-)denaturalizing, continuously demanding of us to come to terms with the fact that our nature is political: conflictual, antagonistic, and power-ridden, yes, but also unconditionally collective and accountable to the differential contours of forming and transforming a social space that our singular identity cannot contain. Derrida: "The thinking of the political has always been a thinking of *différance* and the thinking of *différance* always a thinking *of* the political, of the contour and limits of the political, especially around the enigma or the autoimmune *double bind* of the democratic" (39).

Note in this phrase that the democratic is configured as the limit of the political. I would say it is the self-limitation of the political, the limit instituted *as* the political, in the sense that the *polis* emerges out of a social imaginary that conceptualizes the limitless as a mediating terrain, as *meson*. This is tragic language. The paradoxical terrain hinges on this untenable sense of limit: on the a priori absence of limits that necessitates the creation of limits as internal contours of differentiation, self-differentiation. The double bind occurs because if democracy places "objective" or external limits (a constituted body of laws that must be obeyed no matter what), it ceases to be democracy. And yet if it places no limits, it also ceases to be democracy. Derrida's proposed solution—an autoimmunity that protects the organism from itself—is to enact self-limitation, which, however, cannot be self-interdiction, self-censorship, repression of desire, and so forth, because then democracy would lapse yet again. Democracy surely does not consist of a bunch of happily law-abiding citizens; that would be a travesty of citizenship—in fact, a totalitarian nightmare. Nor is it, however, a bunch of freely consensual citizens, devoid of antagonism and political impetus. Contrary to whatever liberalism argues, the cornerstone of democracy is not consensus but dissent. You can have democracy without consensus, but you have no democracy without dissent.

Therefore, divisiveness is not a negative or politically disempowering principle in the democratic imaginary. On the contrary, it underlies the requisite resistance to uniformity; it animates the heterogeneity necessary to withstanding a debilitating stability (or status quo) of political agency. In the Athenian example this is expressly dramatized by the peculiar conceptualization of Cleisthenes's reforms, whose numerology is worth a little attention. Cleisthenes divides the traditional (in all Greek cities) four tribes into one hundred *dēmoi* (multiples of ten communal units), each of which is composed of three parts according to a spatial *nomos* (city center, inland, shoreline), thereby giving us the following arithmetic change: $4 \rightarrow 10 \rightarrow 3$. In terms of disintegrating and integrating division, this arithmetic is asymmetrical. It points to the limit of what can be divided and how: a transformative arithmetic in the sense that each act undoes the digital archi-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tecture of the previous one. Mathematically, no division is possible here from the standpoint of the whole; it leaves an unintegrable remainder. Politically, however, it leaves no remainder at all; all citizens are accounted for equally. This disjunction explains how a *polis* that remains heterogeneous in all social and economic respects—Athenian democracy does not abolish class structure or sex inequality—achieves nonetheless a political unity. Etymological actualities are inadequate here: unity does not mean oneness—just as social or economic equality does not necessarily (causally) imply political isonomy.

Such is the unsettling mark of democracy: a political condition that requires an unconditional commitment to the continuous formation and transformation of the *polis*, which, in this respect, can never settle. The limits of democracy are always under negotiation—always challenged as to how they would be recognized, always open to being deinstituted and reinstituted, imagined and reimagined, (self-)created and (self-)destroyed. Hence the usefulness of Derrida's notion of democracy's autoimmunity as the epitome of an unconditional condition of bearing the self: the body's immunity mechanism extends even to itself, thereby producing a line of defense not merely against the body's own excesses and failures but also against its own constitution. The self conjures itself as an other and stages a brutal defense against the evident threat of this (self-)othering. The result is the demise of the self, against which the self mounts yet another defense, and so on—but not ad infinitum, because the body is positively finite. Democracy is finite too—the Athenian experience is only too illustrative. But this is true of all societies, all human forms, all living beings. The point here is that democracy, more than any other mode of political organization, is likely to give itself over to suicidal practices: "Democracy has always been suicidal, and if there is a to-come for it, it is only on the condition of thinking life otherwise" (Derrida 33). I would respond that not only openness to self-destruction (the risk of suicide) but also the very phrase "life otherwise" signals the tragic life, the sort of life that does not cower from ultimately confronting the actuality of living as an experience of othering, of encountering the other without conditions but with the consequence of forming and transforming the other within oneself.

Notes

1. I address this, reading Anaximander and Aristotle, in "*Archē*."

2. See Carter for an insightful discussion of this quandary, centering on the problem of audience in Athenian theater.

3. Unattributed translations are mine.

4. Vernant argues that because of its phonetic character, Greek writing is wrested away from "the specialty of a class of scribes" and forges "an element of a common culture" that reverses its social and psychological significance: "The purpose of writing was no longer the production of archives for the king's private use within the palace. Now it served a public purpose: it allowed the various aspects of social and political life to be disclosed to the gaze of all people equally" (37).

5. Writing's relation to law is crucial here, although the discussion is vast. Essential is Steiner's navigation of this complexity, angled ultimately in favor of written law as an instrument of tyranny against the performativity of democratic politics. The significance of oratorical agonistics to the latter cannot be overestimated. At the same time, Romilly makes an equally eminent counterclaim for written law as the guarantor of *isonomia* (with reference to an explicit passage in Euripides's *Suppliants*: "with laws written, the weak and the rich have equal justice [δίκην ἴσην]" [lines 433–34]). The matter is not easily settled. However Greek law was written, it was not written in stone, as the metaphor goes; its writing did not abolish its performative (oratorical) interrogation but made it impossible for any individual to "speak" the law.

6. Castoriadis makes an adroit argument that Thucydides's *History* is a tragic form, where the documented public orations serve as choral instances and, concerning Athens specifically, the *dēmos* is the tragic hero while Pericles's Funereal Oration is tantamount to a choral ode (*Thucydide*). See also Meier 462.

7. Loraux's argument that women's tragic lament marks tragedy's "anti-political" element puzzles me. The

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.809 Published online by Cambridge University Press

argument can only be made on an almost literal notion of the political that equates the *polis* with the affairs of free male citizens. But in that case theater is not a political space at all. See, in contrast, Foley 19–56.

8. Platonic philosophy draws a new line of thinking that counters many of the crucial elements of the Greek social imaginary. For example, lot (κλῆρος), as a social institution of warrior tribes, emerges from the imaginary horizon that privileges a sort of cosmic allotment: μοίρα, fate. Just as fate (*moira*) is replaced by justice (*dikē*) in the post-Homeric universe, we may speak of another register of allotment where law (*nomos*) becomes the operative framework, according to the exigencies of land apportionment (*nemein*). However, tragic life (and tragedy as a poetic form) retains a measure of the archaic *moira*—fate being essentially one's allotted piece of the fabric of the universe. In this sense the preeminence of lot as a political institution in democratic Athens testifies to its being literally a tragic regime. For Plato all this is cosmological anathema. On these issues Thomson's *Aeschylus and Athens* remains an incomparable source, despite its age and the limits of its Marxist anthropology.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Politics*. Trans. H. Rackham. London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1959. Print. Loeb Classical Lib.

Carter, D. M., ed. *Why Athens? A Reappraisal of Tragic Politics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. "Democracy as Procedure, Democracy as Regime." *Constellations* 4.1 (1997): 1–18. Print.

———. "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary." *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*. By Castoriadis. Ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997. 84–107. Print.

———. "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy." *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*. By Castoriadis. Ed. David Ames Curtis. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. 81–123. Print.

———. *Thucydide, la force et le droit*. Paris: Seuil, 2011. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. *Rogues*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.

Euripides. *Suppliant Women*. Suppliant Women; Electra; Heracles. Ed. and trans. David Kovacs. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. Print. Loeb Classical Lib.

Foley, Helene P. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.

Gourgouris, Stathis. "*Archē*." *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* 2 (2012): n. pag. Web. 20 June 2014.

Loraux, Nicole. *La voix endeuillée: Essai sur la tragédie grecque*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999. Print.

Meier, Christian. *Athens: A Portrait of the City in Its Golden Age*. London: Murray, 1999. Print.

Plato. *Laws*. Trans. R. G. Bury. Vol. 1 (bks. 1–6). Cambridge: Harvard UP; London: Heinemann, 1961. Print. Loeb Classical Lib.

———. *Republic*. Ed. and trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy. Vol. 2 (bks. 6–10). Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013. Print. Loeb Classical Lib.

Romilly, Jacqueline de. *La loi dans la pensée grecque des origines à Aristote*. Paris: Belles Lettres, 1971. Print.

Steiner, Deborah. *The Tyrant's Writ*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. Print.

Thomson, George. *Aeschylus and Athens*. London: Lawrence, 1941. Print.

Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Trans. Charles Forster Smith. Vol. 1 (bks. 1–2). London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1956. Print. Loeb Classical Lib.

Vernant, Jean-Pierre. *The Origins of Greek Thought*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.809 Published online by Cambridge University Press