

*Mini-publics and mass meetings:  
an ancient Greek perspective on open democracy*

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Landemore's excellent new book rests on a startling premise: that modern representative (i.e. electoral) democracy is a form of oligarchy. The ancient Greeks would have agreed. Electoral democracy resembles the species of *oligarchia* practised in ancient Larissa and Abydos, in which the *dēmos* (citizen assembly) elected those who sat on the governing council.<sup>1</sup>

Landemore wants us to think more imaginatively about non-electoral forms of representation. Here, too, ancient Greek democrats are her allies. Some may be surprised by Landemore's suggestion that ancient Greek democracies used political representation, but she is right,<sup>2</sup> as is shown by the frequent appearance, in Athenian political prose, of the term *hyper*, "on behalf of" or "in the interests of," with respect to political figures.<sup>3</sup> Ambassadors, who were elected by assembly-goers, acted "on behalf of" the *polis*, i.e. the entire citizen community. Orators in the assembly—who were self-selected—spoke and acted "on behalf of" the *dēmos*. Councillors—who, in democratic Athens, volunteered into annual local lotteries to serve on a panel of five hundred for a year to set the agenda and attend to other matters for the assembly—spoke and acted "on behalf of" the *polis* and *dēmos*. And judges (*dikastai*, sometimes translated "jurors")—who

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 1305b28-34.

<sup>2</sup> Landemore, *Open Democracy*, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> See Daniela Cammack, "Representation in Ancient Greek Democracy," *History of Political Thought* (forthcoming).

volunteered into a daily lottery to sit on judicial panels several hundreds strong—gathered, deliberated, and decided “on behalf of” the *polis*, *dēmos*, and *plēthos*, i.e. the wider multitude.

This and other evidence suggests that ancient Greek democrats were perfectly comfortable with the idea that a relatively small number of ordinary citizens might act on behalf of the community. But besides these mini-publics the ancient Greeks used another form of representative political institution, which also deserves open democrats’ attention: the open mass meeting (*ekklēsia*).

Was the ancient Greek *ekklēsia* a representative political institution? Yes. Ancient authors routinely described the *dēmos* (the agent constituted at the meeting)<sup>4</sup> as gathering, deliberating and deciding “on behalf of” the *polis* and *plēthos*, using the same term (*hyper*) as they used to describe the activities of ambassadors, orators, councillors, and judges. That fits what we know about the numbers who attended such meetings. In Athens, during most of the classical period, a typical assembly comprised around a fifth of the citizen body. In other democratic communities, the proportion was smaller: say 1,000-3,000 out of citizen bodies up to 20,000.<sup>5</sup>

Ancient Greek councils, courts and mass assemblies are all examples of “synecdochical” political representation, in which a part stands for a whole.<sup>6</sup> Within that sphere, Landmore privileges what she calls “open mini-publics”—large, all-purpose, randomly selected assemblies of between 150 and a thousand or so people, gathered together for an extended period of time—

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<sup>4</sup> Daniela Cammack, “The *Dēmos* in *Dēmokratia*,” *Classical Quarterly* 69 (2019), pp. 42-61.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Robinson, *Democracy Beyond Athens* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 232-3.

<sup>6</sup> Or, to be more precise, a part saliently undistinguishable from other parts of the community stands for a whole. The relevant contrast is “metaphorical” political representation, meaning that someone saliently distinct from other members of the whole stands for the whole—for example, because they have been elected, or because they possess certain special qualities such as unusual rhetorical or organisational powers. I borrow the language of synecdoche and metaphor from Frank Ankersmit, “Synecdochical and Metaphorical Political Representation: Then and Now,” in D. Castiglione and J. Pollak, eds., *Creating Political Presence* (Chicago, 2019), pp. 231-253; for further discussion, see Cammack, “Representation in Ancient Greek Democracy.”

such as the Athenian council and (perhaps) courts.<sup>7</sup> She favours what we may call the dialogical model of deliberation: she wants all the members of the deliberating group to have the opportunity to participate in exchanging with one another reasons for their positions.<sup>8</sup> That, obviously, is not possible in an assembly of thousands. Nonetheless, I think an ancient Greek democrat would have seen at least three reasons for using open mass meetings *along with* open mini-publics—reasons that open democrats should endorse.

*The importance of agency.* Open democrats ought to require at least one political process in which citizens' participation depends *only* on their own agency, thus maximizing the political impact of ordinary citizens (which I take to be the point of democracy) and helping to justify rule by those citizens. Only if we know that everyone who wished to take part in making a decision *could* have done so, can we infer that those who did not participate were comfortable with others making a decision on their behalf. Landemore calls this stance tacit majoritarianism, and modern elections, for all their faults, have this feature.<sup>9</sup> Mass meetings held in spaces too small to fit the entire citizen body do not fully meet this criterion. Nevertheless, open mass meetings come much closer to making citizen agency dispositive than randomly selected mini-publics, which, by design, do not allow each citizen the agency to determine participation.

*The importance of decision-making.* Early on, Landemore argues that Rousseau was mistaken: popular sovereignty is not just about taking part in final decisions, but also about control of the agenda and deliberation on the dialogical model.<sup>10</sup> Control of the agenda was certainly

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<sup>7</sup> Landemore, *Open Democracy*, pp. 13, 219. The courts do not fully meet Landemore's criteria, because they did not meet for an extended period of time—only a single day.

<sup>8</sup> Landemore, *Open Democracy*, p. 139. Alternative models of deliberation are “internal” and “audience”: see Daniela Cammack, “Deliberation in Ancient Greek Assemblies,” *Classical Philology* 115 (2020), pp. 486-522, and Daniela Cammack, “Deliberation and Discussion in Classical Athens,” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, online publication 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Landemore, *Open Democracy*, pp. 109-110. The ancient equivalent was ostracism, in which any citizen who wished might drop off a potsherd (*ostrakon*) bearing the name of a citizen he would like to be exiled.

<sup>10</sup> Landemore, *Open Democracy*, pp. 56-60.

important to democratic Athenians, and the people retained that control through the assembly's supremacy over the council.<sup>11</sup> But the ancient Greeks put most weight on being a decision-maker—the term *bouleuesthai*, “to deliberate,” implied coming to a decision.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Landemore, I am not persuaded that we owe one another reasons for our positions. What we owe one another are equal opportunities to take part in decision-making and to make public any potentially salient considerations beforehand. At the Athenians' open meetings, everyone could vote and anyone could speak. Few did speak, but that is not always a demerit. People may often feel that someone else has already aired their position effectively.<sup>13</sup> Open democracy's purview need not be restricted to numerically small gatherings. Instead, open democrats should consider supporting mass meetings, mass debates, and mass votes wherever possible.

*The power of numbers.* There is something powerful about seeing a mass of people: it's a reminder of the power of collective agency, including its physical power to prevail. The ancient Greeks called the power to prevail—especially physically—*kratos* and enshrined it in the term *dēmokratia*.<sup>14</sup> That term reminds us of the main advantage that a *dēmos* has over the smaller socio-economic, political and even rhetorical elites that often try to dominate it. Today, the physical power of a mass of people is typically visible only in revolutions and protests, when crowds gather together. But the ancient Greeks gave mass gatherings a place in everyday politics, and open democrats should consider doing the same. There is no harm—in my opinion, quite the contrary—in reminding political leaders and office-holders that the crowd has resources, including physical ones, that its leaders cannot match.

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<sup>11</sup> See Landauer forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Cammack, “Deliberation in Ancient Greek Assemblies.”

<sup>13</sup> As rightly argued by Landemore, *Open Democracy*, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> Emile Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society* (Hau, 2016 [1973]), pp. 361-2; Daniela Cammack, “*Kratos* and Other Forms of Power in the Two *Constitutions of the Athenians*,” forthcoming.

Ancient Greek democracy was indeed representative, albeit in an unfamiliar mode—the “synecdochical” mode—and it offers us significant imaginative resources. Open democracy, as Landemore sketches it, draws on one kind of synecdochical representation—the “lottocratic,” as seen in the open mini-public. But it neglects another, what I’ll call simply the *kratic*, alluding to the one real bit of political leverage ordinary citizens have at their disposal: their *kratos*, that is, their overwhelming power to prevail when they come together collectively.