

Forms of government and rhetoric: perceptions of democracy and oligarchy in Demosthenes¹

Priscilla Gontijo Leite

Abstract: Demosthenes is recognized as one of the great orators of antiquity and as a defender of Athenian democracy and freedom, particularly in voicing his concern about the growth of Macedonian power. While the defence of democracy is a recurring theme in his speeches, Demosthenes did not develop a theory of democracy. Rather, he tended to idealize the Athenian democratic experience prior to the Peloponnesian War. Further, in his defence of democracy and the *ethos* of the democratic citizen, Demosthenes references oligarchy, though again not from a theoretical perspective. The objective of this paper is to analyse Demosthenes's use of the democratic and oligarchical forms of government in his defence of Athens, with a focus on his construction of an antithesis between them and his deployment of the Athenian experiences with oligarchy in 411 and 404 BC in his oratory.

Keywords: rhetoric, Demosthenes, democracy, oligarchy.

Tuttavia, anche se i regimi politici possono venire rovesciati, e le ideologie criticate e delegittimate, dietro un regime e la sua ideologia c'è sempre un modo di pensare e di sentire, una serie di abitudini culturali, una nebulosa di istinti oscuri e di insondabili pulsioni. C'è dunque ancora un altro fantasma che si aggira per l'Europa (per non parlare di altre parti del mondo)? (Eco 2017, 22–3).

1. Introduction

In the 20th and 21st centuries, democracy has generally been considered the best form of government, and most countries have defined themselves as democratic. Democracy has strongly positive connotations, being associated with

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freedom and equality under the law (*isonomia*). Today, the notion of democratic equality transcends the political field to include growing demands for socio-economic equality, as observed in the demands of various social movements. In these respects, democracy is fundamental to contemporary politics, guiding the conceptions and actions of modern citizens and leaders.

At the same time, democracy (Agamben 2009) has suffered some recent blows as autocratic governments have come to power in some countries and disrupted democratic processes. Thus fascism continues to haunt democratic governments like a ghost (*fantasma*), to borrow a simile from Umberto Eco (2017). Fascism can be considered a powerful expression of hatred for democracy that, as the French philosopher Rancière (2014, 8) observes, is coeval with it, while democracy itself can be viewed as an expression of hate. The term is inherently controversial since it implies conflict between the rich and poor² and the emergence of popular sovereignty through violence, as indicated by a *kratos* that the *demos* wields (cf. Pl. R. VIII, 557a–c).³

The political participation of the poor has always been a point of tension for governments. Since antiquity, critics of democracy have emphasized the inability of the poor to engage in politics on the grounds that they lack the education necessary to practise good government (Leite 2017, 2019a; Leite and Silva 2018). The discussion of this and other conditions necessary for political participation has been part of the broader discussion of the forms of government (Bobbio 1997). From the perspective of theory, the aim of the present discussion is to understand the qualities, positive and negative, of the major forms of government (rule by one, rule by the few, rule by the many) recognized in ancient Greece (De Romilly 1959). Reflections on these issues in the Western tradition trace back to Herodotus (Hdt. 3.80–3) and are dealt with in increasing depth by the Greek philosophers (Simpson 1998; Kraut 2002; Keyt 2006; Meyer 2006; Blössner 2007; Cartledge 2009, 65–90; Miller 2009), notably Plato and Aristotle in the *Republic* and *Politics*, respectively.

The textual sources make clear that the majority of Athenian citizens were familiar with such discussions of the forms and functions of government. Thus, Aristotle (Rh. I, 1365b) asserts that an understanding of the characteristics of various governments increases the persuasive powers of orators when arguing in support of a regime. In other words, an orator who knows how governments work and the positive and negative characteristics of their various forms (oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny) can persuade an audience by showing concern for the well-being of society. Similar arguments could also be used to attack opponents by characterizing them as indifferent to the security of the polity, a well-known example being Lycurgus's *Against Leocrates* (Leite 2018).

Unlike Attic political philosophy, Attic rhetoric rarely includes abstract thinking about forms of government. Rather, orators spoke about political experienc-

² On rich and poor in ancient Greece, see Fisher 2002.

³ Canfora 2015, 180–81; Piovani and Giorgini 2021, 4–5; Hansen 2021, 27–8.

es, particularly in the context of Athenian democracy, which they idealized in the form that it had assumed before the Peloponnesian War. Thus, the forms of governments that orators presented to their audiences existed in a kind of middle ground between the real and the ideal.

The focus of this paper is Demosthenes's understanding of democracy and oligarchy as revealed in his speeches. These forms of government together constitute an antithesis so that each helps define the other. Almost by definition, democracy is characterized by freedom, broad participation, and political transparency, and oligarchy by the restriction of freedom and decision-making power to a small group. In ancient Greek politics, another form of government, tyranny, existed alongside oligarchy. The analysis here is broadened by consideration of the impact of Macedonian politics on Demosthenes's political thought, the argument being that the political situation contributed to his construction of the antithesis between democracy and oligarchy. Thus, the Athenian orator emphasized freedom, bribery, political transparency, and the preparation of rulers through this antithesis. These issues are of great relevance to contemporary politics and can inform reflections on the modern democratic experience (Dabdab Trabulsi 2016) in a moment of skepticism towards, and even weakening of, democracies worldwide (Rancière 2014).

2. Distrust in Democracy: Past and Present

Recent critiques of and actions against democracy have, in general, provoked strong reactions, reinforcing the importance of democracy as an ideal for most contemporary societies. In 2020, even amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the debate spilled out into the streets in popular demonstrations in democratic countries including the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Brazil. The past few years have indeed witnessed an increase in radical rhetoric expressing disdain for democracy, though democracy has always been the subject of intense criticism from both the left and the right for failing to deliver on its promises. Today, its advocates promote democracy as the basis for a good quality of life, especially in material terms. When citizens under a democracy cease to believe that they can secure or maintain the lifestyles that they desire, various groups within the polity may begin to claim that only a strong authoritarian regime is capable of achieving this goal for them. In other words, when a desired improvement in their quality of life seems impossible, citizens may begin to aspire to an idealized order and notion of security characterized by a conservative orientation and rigid hierarchy. From this perspective, democracy is seen as a space of chaos that allows minority groups that would otherwise be invisible access to the public arena. Thus, the notion of restoring the hierarchy includes banishing these groups from the public arena and rendering them invisible.

As Bobbio (2015, 32) observes, democracies are constantly breaking their promises. Even the most loyal defenders of democracy accuse it of failing to come to terms with "invisible power" acting behind the scenes to maintain the continuity of political and commercial oligarchies. Contemporary democracies,

despite efforts to maintain egalitarian governance, have been unable to eliminate the weighty influence of elites from political decision-making. According to Castoriadis (2002, 117), modern democracies are increasingly resembling more or less liberal oligarchies in which power is in the hands of large corporations. Democratic governments have also been unable to implement self-government characterized by full equality. The result has been an increase in the concentration of income and successive economic crises in democratic countries that have been increasingly frequent and catastrophic. Under such circumstances, citizens, feeling impoverished and alienated from political decisions, may be sympathetic to authoritarian rhetoric that promises a change in the power structure and adherence to high moral standards.

Economic crisis and disbelief were likewise characteristic of Athens in the 4th century BC as the city recovered from the Peloponnesian War, which had nearly destroyed its infrastructure, caused revenues to plummet, increased the concentration of income and land, and left the peasants (*thetes*), as well as the mercenaries who had fought in the war, immiserated. This period was marked by profound social transformation involving democracy and citizenship as the government increasingly became the domain of specialists while the citizens turned their attention to their businesses (Leão 2012, 15–33). The decrease in revenue raised questions about *misthophoria*, the payments to citizens that were an important measure for guaranteeing the participation of the poor in public affairs (Dabdab Trabulsi 2018, 202–9).

The constant wars that disrupted the economies of some cities also fuelled the growth of a lucrative trade in war matériel and created the demand for the aforementioned mercenaries. For many poor Greeks, the only solution was to leave their cities and join a foreign military force. These conditions meant that there was no consensus regarding war or peace within cities. The speeches for and against war and peace were replete with examples from Athens in the previous century, which was depicted as a golden age (Worthington 1994), except for the oligarchic episodes. Furthermore, 4th-century orators depicted Solon as the exemplary legislator and founder of Athenian democracy, with references to *patrios politeia*⁴ in various speeches serving to reinforce the call for a democracy that can deliver good legislation and command the obedience of its citizens.

Amid so many uncertainties, these orators adduced democratic values as a guide, and, therefore, various groups used them in rhetorical ways. So it is that, since antiquity, democracy has never been a fixed idea, instead remaining open and disputed. In 4th-century Athens, the wealthy with oligarchic tendencies criticized democracy as “radical” and pointed to excesses committed by the people when they had held power.

In this rhetoric of oligarchy, the *demos*⁵ was compared to a tyrant who stops at nothing to satisfy his appetites. This trope has a long history in Greek thought,

⁴ See the contribution of Leão, *supra*, p. 11.

⁵ On the *demos*, see Leite and Silva 2018; Leite 2019b.

appearing, for instance, in Herodotus, when Megabyzus characterizes the *demos* as foolish and hybriistic, conducting public affairs like a river in flood (Hdt. III 81). Plato famously does not consider democracy among the better forms of government and argues that democracies inevitably give rise to tyrannical regimes (Pl. R. VIII, 577a–c). Similarly, Aristotle frames democracy as one of the “deviations” (*parekbaseis*) from the “correct” (*orthas*) forms of government, though he suggests that it is the “most measured” (*metriotaten*) of these deviations (Arist. Pol. IV, 1291a). He goes on to enumerate various types of democracy, the worst of which emerges when demagogues—who he has already depicted in a negative light—hold power because the authority of the people is superior to that of the law; conversely, the best type of democracy emerges when the authority of the law is supreme. For Aristotle, then, the legitimacy of a regime is a function, not of its responsiveness to the popular will, but of its observance of the law.

Thus, part of the Athenian elite always looked with suspicion at the exercise of power by the people. The challenges of the 4th century BC caused the elites to rethink their role in the city, especially regarding the liturgies (essentially, taxes paid by the wealthy to fund specific public projects).⁶ As a consequence, several proposals emerged, such as the “tutelary democracy” of Isocrates and Lysias under which the leadership would remain in the hands of the elites (Plácido and Fórnis 2012, 87–9). Demosthenes also does not disregard the importance of the elites for the city, assigning them a fundamental role in the recovery of the regime and the maintenance of Athenian power. Accordingly, he argues that the richest should fulfil the liturgies and that their actions should be closely monitored to avoid any possibility of their becoming tyrants. Demosthenes’s personal and political adversary Meidias was a particularly egregious example of abuse of power and the use of wealth to avoid punishment for serious crimes (MacDowell 2002; Leite 2017).

Athenian finances are a constant concern in Demosthenes’s speeches—for instance, *On Organization* (D. 13) and *Against Leptines* (D. 20)—in large part because he recognized that the fiscal health of the city was essential if it were to withstand the Macedonian advance. Thus, he distinguishes the wealthiest regarding their *ethos* as either concerned with their civic duties and willing to provide their money and services to the city or eager to evade their obligations (such as Meidias). Demosthenes’s characterization of the wealthy is rooted in popular ideas about democracy, in particular regarding the defence of freedom, the possibility of participation through speech, demonstrating respect in dealings with other fellow citizens, and the appropriate use of wealth.

The relationship of the rich with the rest of the population is presented with subtlety in Demosthenes. The leadership role of the elite included payment of the aforementioned liturgies, which symbolized an equal sharing between rich and poor in the benefits of citizenship. In a democracy, the rich need to feel that their assets are safe from undue appropriation; in return, they must com-

⁶ On finance and democracy, see Hansen 2021, 43–5.

mit themselves and a portion of their resources to the city (D. 10.45). In this respect, the protection of the city was tied to the defence of private property. Demosthenes was clearly of the opinion the elite should do what was necessary to return Athens to its position at the head of an empire. This would form the *ethos* of the good democrat, who is concerned with defending the city and opposing tyranny. Demosthenes's speeches were not really intended to educate the elites, but he certainly hoped that the *demos* would adhere to his proposals and criticize the behaviour of certain members of the elite and, thereby, weaken his rivals politically. He characterizes Eubulus and Meidias, for example, as public and powerful statesmen (addressing the former, he says, a man of influence and a statesman—*δύνασαι μὲν καὶ πολιτεύει*, D. 21.207) who use rhetoric to evade their financial obligations while acting outside the law to harm their enemies, showing disdain for the people. Having described them thus, he asks the jury to imagine what would be the attitude of either, or of any of their allies, in the face of the supplications of the people should they become owners of the government, or, in other words, if they were to institute an oligarchy (D. 21.209–11). In this hypothetical situation, he affirms, these men would never hear the people's pleas, for the interests of oligarchs and democrats are irreconcilable.

After the consolidation of Macedonian power in Greece, a new political phase began for the cities. Although many remained democracies, at least in form, a kind of euergetism took hold, such that the actions of the rich came to be compared with those of contemporary Hellenistic kings. Depending on the circumstances, philanthropic oligarchs and hereditary rulers might be beneficial to the people. With the end of the Peloponnesian War, the argument that monarchy could be a good form of government circulated again as it had in the period leading up to the Persian Wars in intellectual circles, provided that the king possesses certain positive characteristics, particularly a sense of fairness, fear of the gods, self-control, incorruptibility, and considerable wealth. With the political success of Philip II and his son, these ideas gained more strength and became a rough model for model for Hellenistic monarchy (Eckstein 2009, 253). At that time, democracies only managed to survive under the protection of kings, who kept them under constant surveillance; thus, Athenian decrees of the period dedicated to the Macedonian king describe him as responsible for the protection of the city (Plácido and Fórnis 2012, 93).

3. Demosthenes and the 4th century BC

Demosthenes played an important role in Athenian politics for a considerable portion of the 4th century BC,⁷ especially in the matters relating to foreign policy that were central to life in the *polis* (Worthington 2000, 97). Later, he came to be considered a model of rhetorical prowess and political action, for which reason his speeches were preserved. The *ethos* that he developed and dis-

⁷ On democracy in the 4th century BC, see Sealy 1993; Hansen 1999.

played coloured the reception of his image over time. He presented himself as a staunch defender of democracy and his proposal as the best alternative for the preservation of a free Greece under Athenian leadership.

However, Demosthenes's proposal for maintaining the independence of the *poleis* was not the only one. The period was marked, like previous Greek history, by competition among Greek cities. The disputes among Thebes, Corinth, Sparta, and Athens naturally facilitated the Macedonian advance, allowing the king to expand his influence in the region, both through alliances and by force. Philip II presented a viable alternative to cities when he proposed taking the fight to the Persians and the signing of peace treaties that would allow economies weakened by war to recover. From 351 to 336 BC, then, Demosthenes directed all his rhetorical skill towards convincing his fellow Athenians not to adhere to these treaties, but he was largely unsuccessful (Ryder 2000, 45).

In numerous speeches, Demosthenes demonstrates the dangers posed by the Macedonian king, thereby reinforcing the impression that treaties with him were attractive, for, if opposition to the king were so easy, the orator would not need endless subterfuge to attack the supporters of Macedon. Thus, a lasting peace was perhaps an attractive proposition to the Greeks, who were still suffering from the after-effects of the Peloponnesian War. Though their speeches have not survived, the rhetorical ability of Demosthenes's opponents no doubt made these proposals the more appealing.

During the reign of Philip II, Demosthenes's career was very active. Worthington (2000, 94) describes his insistence that the Athenians take a firm position on Macedonian politics as "scare-tactic rhetoric." That is, Demosthenes emphasizes the dangers of the monarch's actions and their consequences for Athens, always exaggerating the consequences. This tactic found fertile ground in the 4th century BC, which was haunted by the "ghost of the lost thalassocracy" (Plácido and Fórnis 2012, 80).

Thus, on the level of ideas, Demosthenes's characterization of democracy and oligarchy was framed by the scare-tactic rhetoric and memories of the naval power that Athens once wielded. As he would have it, the citizens were responsible for maintaining the democracy and the leadership of Athens as a defender of freedom in Greece. Rhetorically, he associates himself positively with democracy and his opponents, especially Philip II, and negatively with oligarchy and tyranny.

According to Demosthenes, the king was responsible for spreading oligarchies wherever he went, thereby depriving people of freedom (D. 1.23; 28.65)⁸ and showing himself to be a tyrant (D. 1.5) and a barbarian (D. 2.17, 24; 9.30–1). Likewise, changing political regimes by transforming democratic cities into tyrannies was one of Alexander's tactics (D. 17.14). The reality was, of course, more complex than the picture presented in Demosthenes's speeches, for Philip II is known to have helped democrats in some cities that, without his support, would

⁸ Leite 2019a.

hardly have been able to remain in power. Alexander even transformed some cities, such as Chios and Sardis, into democracies, leaving garrisons there to ensure that his decisions were respected (Heckel 2006). In practice, Alexander and some others referred to local groups favourable to himself as “democrats”, and those favourable to the Persian king as “oligarchs” (Plácido and Fórnis 2012, 93–4).

In Demosthenes’s view, full democracy was impossible under the rule of the king because freedom was impossible. Thus, to him, despite calling themselves democrats, the subjects of the king were just that, subjects, and nothing more. The expansion of Macedonian politics, then, influenced the development of the opposition between democracy on the one hand and oligarchy/tyranny on the other, with the Macedonian kings being characterized as either tyrants or liberators of Greece by their opponents and allies, respectively.

Demosthenes had an active and successful career through Alexander’s ascension (336 BC) to *On the Crown* (330 BC), remaining a fixture of Athenian political life (Worthington 2000, 90–3). Proof of his political prestige includes his invitation to preside over the funeral prayer for those who died at the Battle of Chaironeia in 338 BC (Plu. *Dem.* 21), despite the fact that he had been one of the driving forces behind the policy that led to this decisive military defeat of Athens. His diplomatic stance from 336 to 330 BC was, again, subtle, though he remained committed to defending Athenian sovereignty (Worthington 2000, 98). His political fortunes began to decline in 330 BC as he remained outside Athens and travelled to Aegina and Troezen (Plu. *Dem.* 26). When Alexander died in 323 BC, Demosthenes began to organize resistance to Macedon and take advantage of this opportunity for Athens to free itself at last from foreign influence. Thus, he participated in the failed revolt against Alexander’s immediate successor in Greece, Antipater, and then, facing arrest, committed suicide in 322 BC.

4. Demosthenes and Democracy

In general, in Demosthenes it is possible to notice that the Athenian democracy is always presented as the best alternative to ensure the freedom of the Greeks, threatened by the Macedonians. For him, democracy meant the freedom of a people, because it is what effectively guarantees the power of a *polis* (Sancho Rocher 2002, 252).

The guiding principles of Athenian democracy were freedom, political equality, and participation, conceptualized as *isegoria*, *isonomia*, and *isocracia* (Sancho Rocher 1991; Montiglio 1994; Lombardini 2013; Raaflaub 2015). Freedom was associated with political participation because it guaranteed the right to participate in the assembly, holding oneself and others to account, serving on juries, and, if the circumstances demanded it, submitting to a trial in court (Arist. *Pol.* IV, 1295b21–2, 1317b12–13). In other words, “being free” became synonymous with “being a citizen” (Hansen 2010b). Likewise for Aristotle, one of the main objectives of democracy is precisely to guarantee freedom. (Arist. *Rh.* I, 1366a; *Pol.* IV, 1317a40–b17).

Freedom in the Greek world proved to be a versatile notion easily mobilized in rhetoric. The arguments of promotion and restriction of freedom were used alternatively by the orators of both sides, for or against the Macedonian (see Leite 2019a). Philip II made use of this rhetoric when he characterized the Persians as the Greeks' common enemy. Demosthenes, on the other hand, used it to highlight what Greeks stood to lose as the monarch advanced. Thus, in *On the Chersonese* (D. 8) from 341 BC, he denounced Philip II as an irreconcilable enemy of *politeia* and democracy (ἐχθρὸν ὑπειληφέναι τῆς πολιτείας καὶ τῆς δημοκρατίας ἀδιάλλακτον ἐκείνον; D. 8.43). The monarch, he claims, is unconcerned about the freedom of Greek cities, while the defence of freedom was an Athenian tradition:

[42] You are not yourselves well-suited to acquire or possess an empire. Rather, you are good at preventing another from taking places, and at recovering them from one who has got hold of them, and at generally obstructing those who wish to rule, and at liberating people. He does not wish freedom at your hands to be lying in wait on any moment of crisis for him— quite the contrary—and his calculation is sound and to the point. [43] First, you must understand that he is an inveterate enemy of our democratic constitution. If you are not fully convinced of this, you will not be willing to treat the situation seriously. Second, you must recognize clearly that all his policies and machinations are directed against our city, and that, wherever anyone resists him, he does so on our behalf (D. 8.42–3; translation by Trevett 2011).

Demosthenes makes a similar point in *Philippic 4* (D. 10), which he composed the same year. He again characterizes Philip II as an enemy of *politeia* and democracy (ἐχθρὸν ὑπειληφέναι τῆς πολιτείας καὶ τῆς δημοκρατίας ἀδιάλλακτον ἐκείνον D. 10.15) whose ultimate goal is to conquer Athens. In this speech, to make explicit the tactics of the king, Demosthenes distinguishes two groups of Greek cities:

[4] Accordingly, at a time when the inhabitants of the cities of Greece are divided into two groups—those who wish neither to rule anybody else by force nor to be enslaved to another but to manage their city in peace and in accordance with the laws, on terms of equality, and those who desire to rule over their fellow-citizens, submitting to anyone who they imagine will allow them to do so—those who are of his persuasion, men who desire tyrannies and dictatorships, are everywhere victorious, and I cannot think of a single securely democratic city apart from our own. [5] And those who allow him to control their government are successful by means of all the things that get things done: first and foremost by having someone who will give money on their behalf to those who are willing to take it; and second—though no less important—by the existence of a power that can subdue their opponents whenever they ask (D. 10.4–5; translation by Trevett 2011).

Some cities wish to govern with freedom, laws and equality (ἐλευθερία καὶ νόμοις ἐξ ἴσου πολιτεύεσθαι) rather than by force, and not to be enslaved by

other cities (δουλεύειν), and thus have democratic tendencies. By contrast, in cities subject to external tyranny, a small group of citizens agrees to obey a foreign government in exchange for political support to rule over their fellow citizens. In this way, they make true freedom impossible since citizens must obey the rulers, and they, in turn, must obey the Macedonian king. With this type of tyranny having spread throughout Greece, Demosthenes asserted, Athens was left as one of the few cities with a stable democracy and, consequently, one of the few capable of saving all of Greece.

In *On the Liberty of the Rhodians* (D. 15), 353–352 BC, Demosthenes contrasts the reasons for which the Athenians go to war against oligarchies and democracies:

[17] Consider too, men of Athens, that you have fought many wars against both democracies and oligarchies. That much you know, but perhaps none of you has thought about what you were fighting for in each case. For what, then? Against democracies you were fighting either over private claims, which you could not resolve in public, or over the division of land or border disputes or out of rivalry or over leadership. But against oligarchies you fought not over any of these things but for a form of government and for freedom. [18] And so I would say, without hesitation, that in my opinion it would be better for all the Greeks to be at war with you, so long as they are democrats, than for them to be friendly to you and oligarchs. For I believe that you would have no difficulty in making peace with free men, whenever you wish, but with oligarchs I do not think that even friendship can be secure, since there is no way that the few can be well disposed to the many, or that those who seek to rule others can be well disposed to those who have chosen to live on terms of political equality (D. 15.17–8; translation by Trevett 2011)

The reasons for war against other democracies are related to Athenian interests in certain territories or in resolving internal problems in other cities that the local governments had found intractable. Waging war against an oligarchy, though, requires no justification since the problem is the governments that stood in the way of freedom. Besides, Demosthenes argues, oligarchical governments are unreliable and therefore incapable of sustaining long-lasting friendships.

From this perspective, it was better for Athens to wage war on other Greek cities with democratic regimes than to be on friendly terms with those ruled by oligarchies. For one thing, there could be no guarantee that oligarchs would respect an agreement because they failed to respect the freedom of their fellow citizens. Philip II, however, was responsible for spreading oligarchies, making himself an enemy of freedom. In *On Organization* (Dem. 13.9), Demosthenes appeals to the *pathos* of the audience in similar terms, affirming that the citizens should hate the enemies governed by oligarchies more than those living in a democracy and, by extension, that Philip II has revealed himself as the true enemy of freedom, one determined to destroy the *politeia* and replace it with an oligarchy. In practical terms, the type of regime was irrelevant to Athenian imperial policies, for there is no evidence of differences in Athens's treatment of

cities based on their forms of government. Nevertheless, Demosthenes systematically reinforces this difference for his audiences.

In characterizing democracy, he naturally emphasizes freedom, which is in line with his interest in emphasizing to the audience that Athens never submitted to a foreign ruler. The advantages of freedom for a democracy include ensuring that good citizens maintain a healthy rivalry among themselves, competing for honours and rewards offered by the *demos* (D. 20.108)—which is only possible in a democracy guided by the belief that everyone has equal and fair rights (τῶν ἴσων καὶ τῶν δικαίων, D. 21.67). The rewards of democracy are better than those of any other regime. In an oligarchy, the rich distribute rewards as they please, regardless of the merit of the recipients, who are, therefore, seen in many cases as sycophants. In a democracy, the principle of *isegoria* prevents the meritless distribution of rewards (D. 20.15). Furthermore, freedom of speech is important to prevent those in power from distributing favours to their friends (D. 20.17). In general, in the speeches of Demosthenes, democracy is characterized by the notion that the *demos*, as the legitimate holder of power, rewards the good citizen for his good deeds. This power is rooted in freedom and laws that protect citizens from anyone who wishes to take power away from the people (D. 21.107).

Freedom, however, can also cause problems for a democracy. Thus, orators may abuse the right of *isegoria* and persuade the citizens to pass laws and decrees contrary to their interests (D. 20.3). To avoid this pitfall, citizens need to be held accountable for what they say, for example through a protective mechanism such as the *graphe paranomon*, a legal procedure for challenging legislation and decrees and the authors thereof. Demosthenes does not criticize the freedom of speech in a democracy in principle but draws attention to some citizens, his opponents, who, he says, could take advantage of this freedom to achieve their private aims to the detriment of the community, characterizing them as liars and manipulators (Leite 2014).

In addition to being a liar, Demosthenes's bad citizen also accepts bribes, but the practice of bribery is more likely to be found out in a democracy owing to political transparency and freedom of speech, which empower citizens to inspect public officials and report them for any wrongdoing. Demosthenes also alerted his audiences to statements favourable to the oligarchy, questioning whether his fellow citizens were truly receptive to such rhetoric (D. Prooem. 2.1). For him, their true intent was to receive even greater advantages (i.e. through the payment of bribes) while excluding the people from any possibility of receiving benefits (D. Prooem. 2.2).

Further, because bribery was part of the real world of ancient Greek politics, a major responsibility of democratic institutions was to prevent it. One measure implemented for this purpose in Athens was the use of sortition (Dabdab Trabulsi 2018, 116–17; Sintomer 2021) as the complex system to select jurors for the popular courts (Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 63–6). Bribery also played a role in foreign policy, for instance, in securing local allies, and could serve to avoid armed conflict. According to Demosthenes, this strategy was one of Philip II's strategies for becoming an autocratic leader (αὐτοκράτωρ) and lord of all (κύριος πάντων),

paying off officials so that the cities would accept disadvantageous agreements (D. 18.235). He further asserts that there are individuals in Athens willing to lie on behalf of the city's enemies and prevent the proper consideration of serious matters in exchange for gifts. The offence, he insists, is especially serious in a democratic government in which speeches serve as the basis for political decisions.

There is no greater crime someone could commit against you than to speak false words. For how could people whose government is based on speeches govern themselves securely unless the speeches are true? And if someone is bribed to speak in support of policies that favor the enemy, how does that not also put you at risk? (D. 19.184; translation Yunis 2005).

To discourage bribery, the attention of officials' fellow citizens was important. For this reason, jurors should be careful when passing sentence, for, should they acquit a notoriously guilty defendant, they could be seen as having placed personal gain before their oath to follow the laws (D. 22.45).

The transparency of public actions, vigilant observation of one another, freedom of speech, and the liability of any citizen to face judgement for public crimes—all of these policies made democracy unattractive to those who wished to lead an unscrupulous life (D. 22.31). On the other hand, in an oligarchy, illegal and unethical behaviour may be committed without recriminations (D. 22.32) since those who hold power are not subject to scrutiny, even after committing shameful acts. Therefore, in addition to freedom, the transparency of public transactions distinguishes democracy from oligarchy.

Political transparency is among the oldest problems in political philosophy. The issue is discussed in Herodotus (Hdt. III 83) when Darius argues that monarchy is superior because decisions are restricted to the king, so that information that could be damaging, for instance, relating to war plans, cannot be leaked. Transparency and secrecy are a part of the politics with which each form of government deals in a distinct way. In a democracy, transparency is essential, as just discussed, regarding the actions of those who exercise political power, together with accountability and the right to make accusations against public officials. That is, true democratic regimes exercise public power in public (Bobbio 2015).⁹ In fact, of the forms of government, only democracy imposes on those in power the obligation to make their acts transparent. Of course, at times, secrecy is beneficial and even essential for the functioning of a democracy; the example of war plans was already mentioned and the principle of the secret ballot is enshrined in contemporary representative democracies. It is up to the people to decide whether keeping a secret is positive or negative for a polity (Bobbio 2015, 63). Thus, according to Bobbio (2015), a secret becomes especially harmful during a scandal, which represents a disconnect between the promises of democracy and their fulfilment. A scandal can ruin a democracy, as has been

⁹ For a discussion of the public in Athenian democracy and the role of knowledge aggregation see Ober, 2021.

the case in some modern countries in which successive scandals have significantly undermined public trust in democratic institutions. For Demosthenes, peer pressure and transparency prevented “shameless and insolent and thieving and arrogant” individuals (ἀναιδῆ καὶ θρασὺν καὶ κλέπτην καὶ ὑπερήφανον, D. 22.47) from participating in a democracy. His expectation was that citizens would respect the laws and have “compassion, mercy, and all the feelings typical of free men” (ἔλεος, συγγνώμη, πάνθ’ ἃ προσήκει τοῖς ἐλευθέροις, D. 22.57; translation by Harris 2008).

The city’s greatest assets, Demosthenes therefore declares, are its democratic constitution and its freedom, which are made possible by its laws (D. 24.5). For democratic institutions to function, citizens have to be “philanthropic and democratic and neither cruel nor violent nor oligarchic” (φιλανθρώπως καὶ δημοτικῶς οὐδὲν γὰρ ὤμῶν οὐδὲ βίαιον οὐδ’ ὀλιγαρχικόν, D. 24.24; translation by Harris 2008).¹⁰ With this opposition, he cautions his fellow-citizens to ensure that new laws and decrees will not unravel the *politeia* (D. 24.78). Thus, all legislation should follow democratic principles, and citizens should condemn a lawmaker who legislates on behalf of those whose acts damage society rather than for the purpose of protecting the temples and the people (μήθ’ ὑπὲρ τῶν ἱερῶν μήθ’ ὑπὲρ τοῦ δήμου νομοθετεῖ, D. 24.119). The religious dimension and respect for customs constituted an essential aspect of Athenian civic life constantly mentioned by the Attic orators.

Laws also played an important role in maintaining the city’s power, which was, in turn, linked to the thalassocracy projected by its triremes that had given Athens a unique position in the Greek world. Demosthenes, inspired by an idealized notion of the thalassocracy, considers democracy, especially as manifest in a city’s laws, necessary for both maintaining and equitably sharing its wealth (D. 24.216). On this point, his analysis resembles that of the author of the *Constitution of the Athenians*, who likewise attributes to the *demos* the responsibility for maintaining the empire and describes the *demos* as the greatest beneficiary of its revenues (Ps. Xen. *Ath. Pol.* 1–2).

Maintenance of the Athenian empire depended on winning battles and making good decisions collectively and in accordance with the law and principles of freedom (D. 26.10). These were fundamental elements of ancient democracy, along with public participation in civic institutions. In the operation of these institutions, advantageous proposals (βέλτιστα λέγοντας) should, naturally, outweigh the bad (μοχθηρίαν ἀντιλεγόντων, D. 19.185). In the oligarchies and tyrannies, however, none of this was necessary, because the decisions were restricted to a few and subject to no debate:

[...] In those forms of government [oligarchy or tyranny], I believe, everything is done immediately by dictate. But with you first the Council must consider every matter and issue a preliminary decision, and that cannot happen any day but only when heralds and envoys have been notified in advance. Next, the

¹⁰ The same was in D. 22.51.

Assembly must meet, and that takes place when the laws specify. Then the politicians who offer the best policy must defeat and overcome those who oppose them out of ignorance or corruption (D. 19.185; translation by Yunis 2005).

Democracy for Demosthenes is also characterized by the action of the courts that judge private and public cases, the council that makes its decisions in accordance with the law, and the assembly that brings the citizens together (cf. D. 24.99). For this kind of cohesiveness to be possible, the aforementioned *mis-thophoria* was necessary (D. 24.99), as it was at the height of the thalassocracy.

By Demosthenes's time, democracy had already consolidated the participation of even the poorest Athenian citizens as political actors in maintaining the empire. In particular, a considerable portion of them served in the Athenian navy. The social opposition between poor and rich was also mapped onto the ideological opposition between democracy and oligarchy. Thus, according to Aristotle, the poor govern democracies and the rich govern oligarchies (Aris. *Pol.* 3, 1279a–80a). Demosthenes understood these conditions, and, notably, mapped the opposition between poor and rich onto the opposition between good and bad citizens, leading his audience to identify with the former since the good citizens had as their main duty the defence of the city (D 16.32).

Thus, Demosthenes mobilizes a traditional conceptualization of democracy in terms of freedom and laws. The association of democracy with justice and the guarantee of freedom elicited a powerful sense of *pathos* in his audiences (Sancho Rocher 2001, 48–9). Democracy is preferable to oligarchy (D. 22.51; D. 24.163) because it brings prosperity (D. 20.111), justice, transparency, and courts composed entirely of citizens (D. 24.58), accountability (D. 19.2), and the guarantee that the laws will protect the citizens (D. 18.132). The laws especially protect those with few resources and lacking in rhetorical skill and, therefore, particularly susceptible to suffering injustices at the hands of the powerful. An example of citizen protection in a democracy is that no one may enter another's dwelling without permission or prior authorization by a decree of the assembly (*ἀνευ ψηφίσματος*) (D. 18.132). Only subjects with oligarchical tendencies, Demosthenes asserts, such as Androtion (D. 22) and Meidias (D. 21), disrespect these rules. Therefore, in his view, under a democratic regime, the law is the same for the strong and weak, while under an oligarchy, the strongest overpower the weak (D. 13.29).

5. Demosthenes and Oligarchy

Like the idea of democracy, the idea of oligarchy was disputed in ancient Greek political thought (Sancho Rocher 1991, 258). There is evidence for this dispute in the division between Plato and Aristotle on the one hand, who favoured oligarchy and looked with suspicion on democracy, and Polybius on the other, who favoured democracy and was suspicious of oligarchy (Plb. 6.1–11, 43–57). All three agreed that tyranny was the worst form of government, though they

differed on whether it was more closely related to democracy or oligarchy. In Demosthenes's rhetoric, tyranny was always linked to the oligarchy.

Tyranny for the Greeks did not always have a negative connotation. The term refers to the taking of power through force or persuasion. Typically, tyrants were members of a city's elite class, and, in the archaic period, they performed important services for the community, especially in terms of expanding access to citizenship. After the period of tyrannies, which rarely survived more than three generations, oligarchies and democracies emerged that were the predominant forms of government in the classical period.

The negative aspect of the tyrant who abuses his power was present in Greek literature from an early time. This sense was strengthened in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, in part owing to Greeks' exposure to the figure of the Near Eastern monarch, especially the Persian king. Common examples of tyrants' abuse of power included confiscation of property, capital punishment without trial, and indiscriminately exiling political opponents (Forsdyke 2009, 237).

Greek democrats and oligarchs alike mobilized the concept of tyranny as a counterpoint to criticize various forms of government (Forsdyke 2009, 245). Thus, democrats likened oligarchs to tyrants by pointing to their shared lack of transparency and unequal treatment of citizens before the law. From an ideological perspective, tyranny represented the opposite of good democratic government because it required the citizen to submit to the will of one man. These arguments served to criticize the performance of elites (Forsdyke 2009, 236). Again, such criticism had a long history in Greek thought tracing back to Herodotus, who puts in the mouth of one Persian, Otanes, a defence of ruler by the many on the grounds that the citizens are not subjected to the *hybris* and envy of a single individual (Hdt. III 80). Herodotus then has another Persian, Megabyzus, counter with the argument that the people display the typical characteristics of a tyrant, particularly disorderliness, violence, and impulsiveness (Hdt. III 81). It is precisely in this sense that the oligarchs used tyranny to criticize democracy, to instil in the elite the fear that they would be treated badly by the people, just as a tyrant abuses his subjects, including: i) financial exploitation and the moral duty to pay liturgies, ii) blame when a collective decision proves wrong, and iii) the threat of ostracism (Forsdyke 2009, 239). While disenfranchising the people, the oligarchs also sought to value the laws, rescuing its superhuman character. Thus, they made themselves political experts, justifying their unique position within the government (Sancho Rocher 1991, 261).

Generally speaking, then, Greek democrats labelled any disrespect of the will of the many as tyrannical, while oligarchs saw the people as a wishful tyrant. Their one point of agreement about tyranny was that it was characterized by the abuse of power. Demosthenes's negative characterization of both oligarchy and tyranny is rooted in the fact that, in both cases, a minority considers itself above the law. At times, he cites the events of 411 and 404 BC to highlight the serious drawbacks of oligarchy (Sancho Rocher 2002, 232), focusing on the persecution of citizens and suspension of democratic institutions, such as the people's court, during those short-lived regimes. Another element of the orator's nega-

tive characterization is slavery (Leite 2019a). Thus, he depicts Philip II and his allies as being on the side of oligarchy and tyranny, mainly because their actions limit the freedom of individual citizens and the city itself.

The abuse of power typical of tyranny is the main characteristic mobilized by Demosthenes in his descriptions of the Macedonian king.¹¹ For him, Philip II is driven by *hybris* (ὕβριστης, D. 1.23) and ambition (φιλοτιμία, D. 2.18). Wherever the monarch passes, he undermines the dignity, supremacy, and freedom of the cities, in part by altering their constitutions (εἰ δ' ὁμοίως ἀπάντων τὸ ἀξίωμα, τὴν ἡγεμονίαν, τὴν ἐλευθερίαν περιείλετο, μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ τὰς πολιτείας, D. 18.65).

But many of these cities, indeed all of them, fared worse than we did! For if after his victory Philip straightaway up and left and then kept to himself, bringing grief neither to any of his allies nor to any other Greeks, then one could blame and disparage those who opposed his actions. But since he stripped from all alike their reputation, their power, and their freedom, and, from as many as he could, even their very form of government, how is it that your decision to follow my advice was not absolutely commendable? (D. 18.65; translation by Yunis 2005).

The tyrant, then, acts without respecting common laws or listening to the advice and decisions of his fellow citizens. The oligarch may also display these behaviours. Demosthenes assimilates tyrants and oligarchs through the negative depiction of the *ethos* of these opponents of democracy, to the point of crediting them with evils greater than those of the Thirty Tyrants. (D. 22.52; D. 24.163–4), while elsewhere in his speeches he describes the events of 411 and 404 BC as the worst in the history of Athens¹² (e.g. D. 24.57, 90), including the various executions ordered by the oligarchs (D. 40.46). The brutality (ἀσελγέστερος) of life under the Thirty Tyrants did not, however, extend to disregard of the principle of the inviolability of the home (D. 22.52, D. 24.163). Also at that time, the courts committed major excesses, delivering unjust verdicts (D. 24.58), and rich and poor alike were afraid to go at the *agora* (D. 22.52; 24.164).

The Thirty Tyrants left deep marks on the Athenians that facilitated later Athenian orators' negative characterization of their regime as cruel and lacking in respect for freedom and the laws (Sancho Rocher 2002, 245). Under such a regime, only the richest would profit, providing them, at least, with a feeling of harmony among themselves (D. 24.108). Accordingly, they would be willing to do anything to preserve their power and ward off popular participation in government.

6. Final considerations

Demosthenes articulated his ideal of democracy by opposing it to oligarchy in terms of freedom, popular participation, and respect for the laws. He expected that citizens would come to consider democracy preferable to oligarchy because, under

¹¹ On the characterization of monarchy in Demosthenes see Bianco 2015.

¹² Siron 2017.

the former, everything would be exceedingly easy (τοῦτ' ἀνεύροιτε προχειρότατον, D. 22.51). The opposition served well to characterize the opponents of democratic government, especially Philip II, who Demosthenes urged the Athenians to consider an enemy with all the negative characteristics of both a tyrant and an oligarch (D. 6.24–5). He did not reserve this sort of condemnation for the Macedonian king but extended it to his Athenian opponents, such as Meidias, Androtion, and Timocrates.

The opposition between democracy and oligarchy serves to characterize the *ethos* of those involved in politics, as Demosthenes makes clear in the hyperbolic claim that his adversary is responsible for acts more terrible than those of the Thirty Tyrants. He also invokes the *pathos* of his audience when urging his fellow citizens to defend the freedom of their city. Demosthenes asserts that freedom is one of the key aspects of democracy, though whether this pro-democracy discourse reflected his personal beliefs or was simply deployed to elicit the citizens' sympathy is unclear. The fact is that the figure of Demosthenes entered posterity as a great defender of democracy and freedom in Athens. For the moment, this is what democratic countries need to recover.

Democracy, as a space characterized by freedom, equality, transparency, and public participation, will always be subject to the predation of opportunists, who, at the first chance, will try to subvert it. The enemies of democracy will keep trying to transform democratic governments into the kind of oligarchy described by Demosthenes: a space without freedom, full participation, or public transparency. This is the *fantasma* (Eco 2017) that haunts democracies now, and there is great need for vigilance because, as Bobbio (2015, 83) observes, with each new secret, a new *coup d'état* and the death of democracy becomes more likely.

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