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## The *Dēmos* still Matters: Bridging the Gap between Political Theory and Democratization Research

*Abstract:* This paper attempts to bridge the gap between contemporary scholars of democratization and researchers studying the political history of Ancient Greece. Although these two subfields already share important commonalities, they have remained indifferent to each other's work. I argue that the *dēmos* can serve as yet another area of convergence between them. The increased dialogue between these two research traditions should enrich scholarly debates in both subfields and it also offers an opportunity to address their methodological drawbacks. Specifically, contemporary democratization research tends to undervalue the significance of ordinary people in the democratization process. Conversely, scholars of the ancient Greek world have a tendency to be enigmatic about their use of research methods, which potentially perpetuates the perception that political theorists engage in anachronistic research. Thus, bridging these two camps offers a real opportunity to enrich them individually, as well as the democratization paradigm that underpins both of them.

*Keywords:* research methods, democracy, democratization, *dēmos*, Cleisthenes, Ancient Greece

### Introduction

The argument that the discipline of political science is divided is not new (Almond 1988). In fact, even pioneers of political science saw distancing of political theory from other subfields as appropriate (Dahl 1958; Easton 1951). More recently, the discipline has experienced a shift from constructing grand narratives to favoring empirical studies of individual political phenomena, which has alienated political theory from other subfields even further (Adcock et al. 2009). To be sure, the subfield of political theory is a wide-ranging camp which itself has evolved as much as the broader field of political science. Initially, political theorists engaged in descriptive accounts of politics (see, e.g., Arendt 1963), however, the emphasis of at least some scholars in the subfield eventually shifted towards the goal of knowledge accumulation. The concern of the latter group of scholars was not description of political phenomena but rather aggregation of knowledge, which in turn allowed political theory to remain in a critical dialogue with other subfields. This form of scholarship focused on different parts of the scientific process, including the construction of general and mid-range theories (Parsons 1951), examination of political mechanisms (Elster 2007), and even critique of assumptions widely recognized as valid by most political scientists (Johnson 2010). Nonetheless, the legacy of the behavioral revolution is proving to be long lasting and continues to push political theory away from the rest of political science.

In contrast to the view that alienation of political theory is desirable, this article takes the opposite view and aims to bridge the gap between parts of political theory and comparative politics. More specifically, I argue that scholars of political history of Ancient Greece and contemporary researchers of democratization already share many substantive concerns, including an interest in Aristotle and the inner workings of democracy. Furthermore, this article suggests that the *dēmos* serves as yet another area of convergence between them. I contend that an increased dialogue between these two subfields will not only enrich both areas of scholarship, but it will also help remedy some of their respective methodological weaknesses.

To demonstrate that a possibility of an increased dialogue between researchers studying political history of Ancient Greece and comparative scholars of democratization is not farfetched, I begin by discussing two of their already existing areas of overlap—Aristotle and democracy. Aristotle is considered as the founder of many disciplines, and both democratization studies and political theory have their roots in his works. Although Aristotle's significance for political theory is almost self-evident as he was the theorist *par excellence*, it is interesting to note that he is the founder of the democratization subfield in the fullest sense of the phrase. While the roots of Western political theory stretch back to Plato, Socrates, and other philosophers who pre-dated Aristotle, comparative democratization research starts with Aristotle (Coppedge 2012: 1). By comparing different Greek constitutions, Aristotle established the cardinal methods of comparative politics (Roskin 2013: 5).

The two camps also share a common interest in democracy, even though little agreement exists about what the concept actually means. Some scholars conceptualize democracy procedurally, with an emphasis on its ability to institutionalize conflict (Przeworski 1999: 44). Others employ a more substantive understanding, viewing it as a means to other ends (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). Nonetheless, democracy today tends to be treated as the only game in town, even though that was not always the case. Ancient philosophers, for instance, despised democracy (Ober 1989a: 3), while the American Founding Fathers created the representative system not as a type of democracy but as a preferred alternative to it (Manin 2010). Thus, the widespread acceptance of democracy is a relatively recent phenomenon, cemented by the third wave of democratization (Fukuyama 1989; Sen 1999). When the Soviet Union failed, it was widely understood that democracy had arrived, and it was likely here to stay (but see, Brownlee 2007).

The minimalist definition of democracy focuses on procedures and elections, which makes conceptualization and quantification of democracy easier. Given this emphasis, it is perhaps unsurprising that much of the democratization scholarship focuses on existing democracies, while normative concerns tend to be pushed aside. Procedural democracy, however, is not without its complications. Economic inequality, political marginalization, and racial discrimination are just a few examples of factors that undermine proper democratic governance. As questions about the quality of democracy began to re-surface, it turned out that political theory was particularly well equipped to sketch out possible alternatives. In their search for solutions to contemporary problems, political theorists very often drew on the experience of the Athenian *polis* (see, e.g., Wolin 2008). It is certainly the case that adoption of specific institutional solutions found in antiq-

uity to contemporary societies is for the most part impractical, but the task of political theory has been to recover the spirit of the first democracy (Finley 1985). This is also why theorists of contemporary democracies are so committed to acknowledging the heritage present systems share with Ancient Greece (Dahl 1989; Held 2006; Manin 2010).

In this paper, I argue that the *dēmos* provides another point of convergence between the two research traditions. It is difficult to provide a clear-cut definition of the term because social concepts are complex and their essence evolves over time. However, if forced to reduce the concept to its bare minimum, it is probably most fruitful to understand the *dēmos* as either the sovereign people or the common people (Eidinow et al. 2012: 439). It is also true that some members of the *dēmos* might become members of the elite, and *vice versa*. The relationship between these two groups is not straightforward because it is moderated by the socio-political context. For instance, the underlying dynamic between them can be antagonistic (Ober 2007) or cooperative (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Ultimately, the outcome of any democratization process depends on how the interaction between the *dēmos* and elites plays out, while it is equally clear that the former group is also an indispensable element of democracy (Ober 1989a: 4; Wolin 2008: 243).

Promoting a greater dialogue between political theory and comparative politics matters because it will open both subfields to new arguments, theories, and findings, all while answering the call to make democratization studies more historical (Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010). The increased dialogue should also help both subfields mitigate their respective methodological weakness. As we will see, contemporary democratization scholars tend to overlook the *dēmos* in favor of elite-oriented explanations, which can amount to ignoring an important explanatory variable. Political theorists, on the other hand, are prone to being enigmatic about their research methods, which consequently casts a shadow of doubt on the validity of their findings.

The approach advocated in this paper is possible because both subfields already share enough methodological and theoretical overlap to facilitate it. The increased dialogue between the two subfields will moreover result in more holistic accounts that will enrich the discipline as a whole. Interestingly, even skeptics of holistic explanations acknowledge that social scientists would do well to move away from methodological individualism in favor of meso-level explanations (Little 2016).

In what follows, I demonstrate that contemporary democratization studies, although eclectic on the surface, nonetheless give excessive weight to explanations that focus on individual leaders and elites. This disproportionate emphasis on individual political actors results in numerous methodological difficulties. On the other hand, scholarly accounts analyzing the birth of Athenian democracy are marked by a much greater balance between the elite-driven and structural explanations, making this strand of scholarship more holistic and historically accurate. Such balance is achieved despite shortage of sources, but methodological transparency of the latter camp continues to lag behind and likely contributes to the alienation of political theory from the rest of the discipline. This article ends by underscoring how a greater dialogue between these two subfields has a potential to enrich their respective weaknesses.

### Democratization without the *dēmos*

When a regime change occurs, the relationship between elites and the *dēmos* is best described as interactive because they influence each other interchangeably (Coppedge 2012: 240), and yet much of the contemporary scholarship on democratization tends to downplay the significance of the *dēmos* in favor of focusing on elites. Generally speaking, scholars identify modernization theory, historical sociology, and principal-agent models as the three main strands in democratization research (Grugel and Bishop 2014). The core expectation of modernization school is that it links democratization with economic performance, as captured by the famous formulation that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chance that it will sustain democracy” (Lipset 1959: 75). Economic growth is thus the driving force behind societies moving away from feudalism to modernity. The road to modernity consists of different stages, with capitalism being the last one (Rostow 1960). Capitalism, in turn, creates wealth, which unproblematically trickles down to the lower orders, creating socio-economic changes favorable to democracy. These include a large middle class, higher levels of education, and secularization (Norris and Inglehart 2011). Overall, modernization theory is functionalist and economistic because it sees democracy as an outcome of capitalism (Grugel and Bishop 2014: 76), and the *dēmos* are not an essential part of the story.

The agency approach, sometimes referred to as the transition approach, focuses on individual decision makers and elites. According to this paradigm, democratization occurs when committed political actors act appropriately because democracies are created not by causes but by causers, where causers refers to political leaders who are willing to take risks to make democracy happen (Huntington 1991: 107–108). Pact-making is another characteristic of the agency approach. It stresses the consensus among elites, which facilitates institutional breakthrough (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Barbara Geddes argues that scholars focusing on Latin America are especially elite-oriented since they “stress the importance of the elite-initiated democratization, while assigning little importance to popular mobilization as a cause of democratization” (1999: 120). Furthermore, even when the role of popular protest is underscored, it is not seen as the leading cause of regime change since popular mobilization usually occurs when democratization is well on its way (Geddes 1999: 120). The dominant narrative of the agency approach emphasizes the top-down nature of regime transitions, as opposed to an organic change initiated by a widespread unrest. In some cases, active citizenry is even seen as detrimental to democratization, such as when popular mobilization threatens the interest of elites and could stifle prospects for democracy (Przeworski 1991). Overall, the agency approach not only does not consider the *dēmos* to be important, but in some cases the *dēmos* is seen as an obstacle to democratization.

Finally, historical sociology is inherently structural, focusing on macro-level variables such as class conflict, the state, and the political system in general. This strand of research is arguably best exemplified by Barrington Moore’s (1966) study of different types of revolutions. In his account, democracy is a result of two interconnected processes. Once the dependence of the peasantry on the landed elite is done away with, and the interest of the upper class is realigned towards commercial gains, democracy arises. Theda Skocpol (1979) extended his analysis by arguing that the state is a crucial macro-level variable. Her

account of social revolutions presents the state as an actor capable of forming its interests and independent of the ruling class. Historical sociology was further transformed by scholarship highlighting the importance of interaction between class, the state, and transitional power structures (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). Historical sociology tends to be deeply grounded in the details of particular cases and comes closest to highlighting the importance of the *dēmos*. However, because of its structural bent and association with Marxism, the approach has been pushed to the fringes of the social sciences along with the *dēmos* (Grugel and Bishop 2014: 84), and has been subjected to fierce methodological criticism (see, e.g., Przeworski 1990).

### Causes and Consequences of Undervaluing the *dēmos*

One of the main reasons why elite-oriented explanations are so prevalent in contemporary accounts of democratization has to do with methodological advancements in the subfield. As the subfield became more specialized, holistic and structural explanations gave way to what was believed to be more rigorous scholarship, but at the cost of focusing on smaller classes of events. Some scholars argue that since structural variables change very slowly, comparative research tends to be biased towards analyzing actions of elites and political leaders (Ragin 1987: 70). Even researchers who engage in comparative historical analysis, which traditionally has focused on macro-level variables, are encouraged to link structural variables with individual decision-makers to account for chronic instability of the path dependent approach (Bernhard 2015). Some even suggest that research in the social sciences as a whole can be reduced to psychology of individual decision makers (Elster 2007: 257). These types of methodological developments, in turn, facilitated micro-level accounts of democratization while more structural explanations have been pushed into the background.

The emphasis on elite-oriented explanations and micro-foundations results in two problematic consequences for the subfield. First, the approach obscures the role of the *dēmos*, which can amount to omitted variable bias. Without the *dēmos*, democratization cannot take place and democracy cannot arise since the people are the antecedent of democratization and democracy (Finley 1985; Ober 1989a; Wolin 2008). Therefore, scholars who exclude or ignore the *dēmos* almost by default present an incomplete account of the democratization process (see also, Grugel and Bishop 2014). To be sure, democratization is a complex and dynamic process that involves a whole host of interdependent variables. It is equally true that comparative democratization has such a long-standing tradition that includes many approaches, including those for whom the *dēmos* is an essential part of the story (see, e.g., Driscoll and Krook 2012; Tucker 2007). However, such studies are the exception rather than the norm, and generally the subfield does not give the *dēmos* the amount of attention it deserves.

The second drawback of the excessive emphasis on micro-foundations of political elites is that it can over-emphasize, and at times even romanticize, the role of political leaders. Doubtlessly, their role and influence were crucial for furthering the process of democratization in some cases. However, incorporating the *dēmos* into the explanatory accounts will result in a more balanced and accurate portrayal. Consider the example of Lech Wałęsa, the

founder of the Solidarity trade union in Poland. In the West, he is known as the legendary leader of Polish democratization, which won him many international accolades. Already in 1981, the *Time* magazine awarded him the “Man of the Year” honors, following the lead of the *Financial Times* and *The Observer* (Smith 1982). He also went on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983. In 1989, Wałęsa addressed a joint session of the US Congress, only to have his speech continually interrupted by standing ovation, while prominent scholars of democratization praised him for his “charismatic leadership” (Linz and Stepan 1996: 247). Even contemporary accounts describe Wałęsa as a legendary leader and the father of democratic Poland (see, e.g., Rice 2018: 126–165).

The problem with these accounts is that they are at odds with how Wałęsa is viewed by the press and scholars in Poland. In 1989, when his international profile was at an all-time high, Wałęsa was becoming increasingly unpopular and marginalized in his native country. For instance, on June 24, 1990, Solidarity leaders met to discuss the future of the movement, but transcripts from that meeting demonstrate how politically inexperienced political elites were. Gluza writes that their “arrogance and wishful thinking” resulted in an “ideological fragmentation of the parliament and Wałęsa’s arrogant presidency” (2015: 1). Instead of a charismatic Wałęsa, we see a politician who is overmatched by the political situation and ends up destroying Solidarity and the intellectual circles within it, all while handicapping the ongoing process of democratic reform in Poland (Król 2015: 42). Even some foreign-born scholars, who nonetheless experienced Polish democratization first-hand, noticed too that Wałęsa was becoming more dictatorial (Ash 2002). Others go as far as to claim that Wałęsa was a paid communist informer and his collaboration compromised Solidarity’s posture towards the communist regime (Cenckiewicz 2013).

The rise of Solidarity was a complex socio-political event with many internal and external contingencies (Ciżewska 2010; Ost 2005). Thus, the almost exclusive focus on individual leaders truncates the explanatory narrative, and often presents these figures in more favorable light than the historical record warrants. These observations have significant implications for the role of the *dēmos*. Wałęsa is clearly a complex political figure, but it is also apparent that his success and failures need to be interpreted in the wider context of the masses of people who surrounded him. To better understand how countries move away from non-democracy to democracy, it is not enough to focus mainly on political elites because they never act alone.

### The Democratization of Athens

Democracy was first practiced in Athens more than 2,500 years ago. A short historical overview of pre-democratic Athens highlights the complexity of its democratization. Tyrant Peisistratus and his sons had ruled Athens before the *polis* became a democracy (Robinson 2004: 76). In 511/10 B.C.E., Spartan King Cleomenes liberated the city from tyranny in favor of an oligarchic government (Fornara and Samons 1991: 38). With Sparta’s support Athenian aristocrat Isagoras was elected archon, the highest-ranking officials in Athens, in 508/7 B.C.E. (Robinson 2004: 93). In response to Isagoras’ election, Cleisthenes — who competed with him for political power — aligned himself with the *dēmos*, promising it

a package of constitutional reforms in exchange for its support. Ober observes that since Isagoras was not interested in political compromises, he expelled Cleisthenes and some seven hundred “religiously polluted” families from the *polis* (2007: 86–87). With Cleisthenes and other prominent aristocrats in exile, Isagoras looked very much in control, but when he attempted to dissolve the existing council, the people of Athens rebelled. Unexpectedly, the *dēmos* defeated the Spartan army and brought back Cleisthenes along with the seven hundred exiled families (Ober 2007: 88). As a result, in 508/7 B.C.E. Cleisthenes implemented a series of political reforms that many regard as the real foundation of Athenian democracy (Wood 2008: 34).

In discussions of Athenian democracy, a controversial issue is whether its democratization developed organically or if it was imposed by elites. On the one hand, some argue that the *dēmos* successfully demanded a new regime type. This strand of scholarship tends to stress the historical antecedents that made the rise of the *dēmos* possible. But once the ordinary people acquired enough power to voice their demands, democracy became the answer to their requests. On the other hand, another group of scholars contends that democracy was primarily an elite-driven affair. At best, democracy was an unintended consequence of elite actions. However, in other accounts Cleisthenes is presented as a figure who skillfully used the *dēmos* for his political purposes.

Raaflaub and Wallace (2007) point out that democratization of Athens was made possible because of the pre-democratic ideals and practices present among the *dēmos*. While these ideas and practices developed slowly over time, they have re-shaped the Athenian civic community, making it more egalitarian (Wood 2008: 30). The earliest account of such attitudes was presented in Homeric writings on the make-up of the hoplite army. Given the strict structure of the hoplite formation, the best fighters fought in the first rank, irrespective of their economic and political place in the society. As a result, a sense of communal cohesion was fostered because people from different classes fought for a common goal of defending their *polis* (Raaflaub and Wallace 2007: 34–35). Military service also offered a significant economic benefit. As the Athenian army grew in power, higher numbers of ordinary people depended on it for everyday survival. That has been particularly true for the Athenian navy whose imperial riches were distributed even to the poorest citizens (Wallace 2007: 76–81).

Changes in socio-economic relations were also crucial for the empowerment of the *dēmos*. In the Homeric pre-*polis* society, the household (*oikos*) was dominated by the lord and served as the principal economic unit of society (Wood 2008: 31). In this type of association, jurisdiction belonged exclusively to the lords, and barely any public space existed. After the Homeric period had ended (approx. 800 B.C.E.), household ties started being displaced by the ties of territoriality. Peasants were still not very well organized. Wood argues that peasants “were a fairly loose collection of individuals and households” (2008: 31). Furthermore, the lack of centralized state apparatus meant that lords and peasants “confronted each other not as two opposed communities, but as individuals and classes” (Wood 1988: 98). By the time Athenian lawgiver Solon came to power around 594/3 B.C.E., the struggle between the two classes came to the fore. To ease this conflict, Solon eliminated various forms of extra-economic appropriation and weakened the political role of birth and blood, which strengthened the community of citizens. Solon’s reforms were necessary be-

cause the *dēmos* became a much more significant factor in local politics. Paradoxically, the civic community was further strengthened by aristocratic rivalry. After losing its dominant political position, the aristocracy started to look for much-needed support from the lower strata (Wood 2008: 32–36). When Cleisthenes came to power, the *dēmos* was already a vital political force ready to assert its agency.

The analytical focus on the collective strength of the *dēmos* runs against the idea that the introduction of democracy was an elite driven outcome. Ober (2007) believes that Cleisthenes and other leaders were only responding to changes in the Athenian political environment, and such changes were a direct result of the collective action of the *dēmos*. As a political leader, Cleisthenes did not act in an unprecedented way, but followed a long-established political strategy of incorporating the lower strata into the political system. His reforms “may have been no different from those of any other aspirant to tyrannical power” (Wood 1988: 101). This is not to say of course that Cleisthenes was irrelevant. His genius lay in the ability to correctly understand the political situation at the time. He knew that Athenian people created a new political environment and going back to aristocratic rule was no longer a viable option (Ober 2004: 108). In the critical year of 508/7 B.C.E., Cleisthenes’ reforms were implemented, but they would not have been possible without the popular revolution that underpinned them (Ober 2007: 89). After the revolution, Cleisthenes may have been able to stipulate for certain political and economic advantages for himself and his family, but his demands were limited by the *dēmos* who supported him as long as he advanced its revolutionary cause (De Ste. Croix 2004: 135). Anarchy was the outcome that everyone wanted to avoid, and the best strategy to maintain stability was not coercion or order imposed by force but implementation of political reforms that favored the *dēmos* (Ober 1989a: 69).

Not everyone agrees that the *dēmos* mattered. In fact, Ober’s (1996) emphasis on the importance of the *dēmos* has been criticized by (Samons 1998: 111) for employing a straw man argument. Presumably when Ober complains about the elite-oriented scholarship in the study of Athenian democracy, he does so partly for the purposes of his own argument and partly by misreading the relevant literature. Scholars who do not agree that the *dēmos* played an important role point instead to the significance of Cleisthenes and the institutional framework he has helped implement. The analytical focus thus shifts to Cleisthenes’ beliefs and motivations, and the question becomes whether he was a committed democrat or if his reforms created unforeseen consequences that resulted in the creation of democracy. But regardless of how Cleisthenes’ intentions are understood, this strand of research emphasizes that the introduced reforms were not intended to serve the *dēmos*. To that end, Lewis (1963) argues that the new constitution was an attempt to deal with local cult ties that often supported Cleisthenes’ political opponents. Similarly, Sealey (1960) believes that the aim of change was to destroy Cleisthenes’ enemies and ensure the supremacy of his true allies, the city aristocracy. A less instrumental account of the new constitution portrays it as a failed attempt to consolidate power. Fornara and Samons (1991: 39) write that 508/7 B.C.E. Cleisthenes managed a *coup d’état* meant to defeat his political rivals. Unfortunately for Cleisthenes, implementation of the reforms had unforeseen consequences leading to his eventual fall. Once the changes were implemented, democracy proceeded on its independent course (Fornara and Samons 1991: 58).

Scholars favoring elite-centered explanations do not dispute the idea that Cleisthenes and the *dēmos* were aligned. Instead, they stress that the relationship between the two was vertical rather than horizontal. The most extreme version of such interpretation argues that Cleisthenes essentially subsumed the *dēmos* for his personal and political goals by “appealing to the effective sub-aristocratic majority, and by offering them what he was able to persuade them they wanted from political participation, namely, some sort of decisive say, he won them round to his way of thinking and for the first time incorporated them centrally in the political process” (Cartledge 2007: 160). On this account, Cleisthenes did not appeal to the *dēmos* as a whole but only to the part of the group that was closest to being aristocratic. In other words, the revolutionary potential of the *dēmos* was co-opted by Cleisthenes and a small minority within the group. Furthermore, the *dēmos* appear as incapable of forming its interests and preferences. Presumably, that is why Cleisthenes not only convinces the masses to join him, but he does so by “offering them what he was able to persuade them they wanted” (Cartledge 2007: 160). Wood writes that this interpretation “makes the *dēmos* little more than a pawn of its aristocratic leader and it denies its revolutionary force” (2008: 34 ft. 7).

Although the debate about the democratization of Athens may seem of concern to only a small group of scholars, it should in fact inform anyone who cares about contemporary democratization. To be sure, scholars who underscore the importance of the *dēmos* and those who focus on political elites produce two competing narratives, however, the net result of this debate is the balanced account of the democratization of Athens. It might even be the case that these two strands of research complement each other. This stands in stark contrast to many studies explaining contemporary transitions to democracy, as these studies tend to be both ahistorical and elite-centered (Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010; Geddes 1999).

### **Limited Sources and Incorporation of New Research Methods— Challenges and Opportunities**

The explanatory balance of approaches, evident in the scholarship on the birth of first democracy, is achieved despite numerous methodological challenges and scarcity of sources. The difficulties posed by proper data collection are of course well known to contemporary scholars of democratization, as their research very often necessitates the acquisition of a new language and fieldwork in dangerous settings. However, scholarship on the democratization of Athens is also hampered by a similar problem since the historical sources are very scarce. There are no contemporary sources for the Cleisthenic revolution. We are reliant, almost entirely, upon Herodotus’ *Histories* (written in between the 440s to 420s B.C.E.) and Aristotle’s *Constitution of Athens* (written probably in the 430s B.C.E.) as the two most important points of reference. Other minor sources include parts of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, parts of Aristotle’s *Politics*, the Athenian archon list, and the drinking song celebrating Harmodios and Aristogeiton as they hint at what contemporary Athenians thought about the liberation of their homeland in the late sixth century (Robinson 2004: 93).

The scarcity of historical sources has had a profound impact on our understanding of Athenian democracy. Consider the case of Cleisthenes, who today is regarded as one of the essential political figures. Cleisthenes did not leave any writings of his own and the limited number of sources allowed him to disappear from the pages of history, only to be re-discovered after more than two millennia of obscurity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Raaflaub 2007: 2). The re-emergence of Cleisthenes is attributed to the publication of *A History of Greece* by George Grote in 1846 and the re-discovery of Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens* in 1891 (Hansen 1994: 25–27). Grote presented Cleisthenes as the main character behind Athens' democratic reforms. Until then, the role of Cleisthenes was entirely overshadowed by Solon, who received all of the attention whenever the Athenian constitution was mentioned. To illustrate this point, Hansen (1994: 26) references Friedrich Schiller, who in 1789 delivered his lectures at Jena University on the comparison of Athens and Sparta. The two leaders Schiller focused on were Lycurgus to represent Sparta, and Solon to represent Athens (Schiller 1988). Grote's *A History of Greece* allowed Cleisthenes to re-emerge and his work even received praises from John Stuart Mill who wrote that "after Solon, the first great constitutional change was the reformation of Cleisthenes, an eminent man, to whose character and historical importance no one before Mr. Grote had done justice" (1978: 327). However, the re-emergence of Cleisthenes was not fully cemented until the discovery and publication of Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens* in 1891 (Hansen 1994: 25–77).

The essence of the problems mentioned above is well captured by Raaflaub who argues, "our sources are not only limited; they also most often do not tell a straightforward, univocal story, and they were usually not written to answer the questions we are most interested in" (2007: 9). Herodotus, for example, shows little interest in the constitution of Cleisthenes and his account of the reforms is very unenlightening (De Ste. Croix 2004: 130). He viewed Solon as an archaic sage, rather than as a political leader. Thus, when Solon introduced a new law, stipulating that every Athenian should declare the source of his livelihood and failure to do so would be punishable by death, Herodotus's only comment is that the decree could "hardly be better" (Herodotus 2015: 185).

To combat the problem of limited data, political theorists have developed a wide variety of interpretive methods. And while interpretative methods allow scholars to analyze historical sources from different perspectives, they also shape the topics we are interested in and consequently the answers we receive. Leo Strauss (1952) argued that canonical thinkers, under the threat of persecution, were forced to hide their messages in the bodies of their texts. Thus, to understand what these philosophers had to say, one has to read between the lines. Such reading of the text allows the intelligent reader to distinguish between the exoteric message addressed to the public at large and the esoteric meaning destined for the intelligent minority. The Cambridge School, with Quentin Skinner as its chief exponent, arose as a reaction to the Straussian approach. Skinner (2002) advocates a highly contextual reading of the texts while making it as historical as possible. He focuses not only on the texts of the greats, but also on their less well-known contemporaries. He argues that the language used by the canonical thinkers when situated in the proper historical context allows us to best understand the meaning of the texts.

The approaches advocated by Strauss and Skinner can be seen as opposites, while Wood's method falls somewhere in between them (2008: 11–16). She sees the canonical

thinkers as actively engaged in the pressing problems of their times, but attempting to make their case in the form of timeless principles. Although the greats do search for universal and transcendent truths, they are nonetheless humans who are shaped by the historical and social forces of their time. Thus, we can see that her approach differs from the one advocated by Strauss because it is rooted in the context of the time in which the texts were written. On the other hand, it differs from Skinner's approach because the method also looks at broader historical processes, as well as long-term development in social relations (Wood 2008: 11–16). It also becomes apparent that each of these approaches affects the way we understand the classical texts. For example, a scholar operating within the Straussian vein might assume *a priori* that there is a hidden message to be found, or that the text represents a comprehensive doctrine of the author's views (Skinner 2002). Conversely, Skinner's followers are at risk of reducing the question at hand to an atomized, isolated episode without any references to broader historical structures, and thus effectively emptying the topic of its meaning and relevance (Nederman 1985).

Given the epistemological diversity underpinning these research methods, it is hardly surprising that scholars produce competing explanations of the Athenian democratization, even when examining the same sources. As an illustration, when analyzing a passage from Herodotus's *History*, Wood acknowledges that *hetairoi* is challenging to translate, but believes that Cleisthenes' appeal to the *dēmos* was unambiguous. He wanted to make it his *hetairoi* (friends) and to form the *hetaireiai* (friendly association) with it (Wood 2008: 34). Cartledge, on the other hand, who is much closer to the Straussian school of analysis, argues that *hetairoi* has a deeper meaning (intimate comrades). Therefore, making the *dēmos* Cleisthenes's *hetaireiai* is an impossibility because by definition, "a *hetair(e)ia* was a small band of *hetairoi*" and the *dēmos* were not that to Cleisthenes (Cartledge 2007: 159). This exchange illustrates the problem of translation and interpretation. However, in other instances the actual analysis can become even more opaque because we are unsure what the epistemological starting point is. To take a case in point, consider Arlene Saxonhouse's (1996) book in which she argues that much of the scholarship on ancient democracy is based on "mythmaking" and "abuse" of the ancient authors. We learn that mythmaking can result from different causes. Sometimes translation is the problem. Saxonhouse believes that Thomas Hobbes translated the works of Thucydides more accurately than Rex Warner, whose more recent translation has influenced generations of contemporary scholars (1996: 2–3). Elsewhere, a well-known expert on Athenian democracy, M.I. Finley, is critiqued for his crude and naïve understanding of authority in the *polis*, because he engages in prescription, as opposed to analysis of the actual events (Saxonhouse 1996: 26–27). Mythmaking can also be rooted in the "uncertainty of the historical record and the lack of any author from ancient Athens whom we may describe as a democratic theorist" (Saxonhouse 1996: 27). But how does the author arrive at her conclusions? This crucial question is ultimately not addressed because the author does not inform us that she works within the Straussian school of analysis. We only learn that from the review of her book by (Mulgan 1998). The book, therefore, can be perceived as anachronistic, not because of the interpretive method the author is using, but because we do not know what the method is.

Furthermore, these are not isolated examples. Ober (1989b) emphasizes that the development and employment of diverse research approaches by scholars of ancient time

is inevitable because otherwise the subfield runs the risk of becoming irrelevant. Ober's prediction turned out to be on target. After all, the debate about Cleisthenes and the *dēmos* features now the employment of rational choice theory, case studies, critical junctures and particular attention is being paid to the formation of social science concepts, and yet methodological transparency is still lacking. Raaflaub and Wallace (2007: 22) advocate the use of case study research without explicating why it is desirable and what is meant by the term. Similarly, Raaflaub (2007: 16) writes about the importance of critical junctures but with no reference to the broader literature on qualitative research methods. What case studies and critical junctures are is very debatable, and a uniform understanding of the methods does not exist (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2007; Soifer 2012). The net result is that political theory has become more sophisticated methodologically without becoming more transparent, and without engaging the extensive methodological debates that exist in other subfields.

The lack of engagement with methodological literature is especially salient if, as Ober (2015) advocates, the Greek world can serve as a useful testing ground for theories from other subfields. In fact, on a limited scale, this development is already taking place. Consider the debate among elite-oriented scholars about Cleisthenes' motivations and the extent to which it mirrors the debate about actors' motivations among rational choice scholars. Both groups of scholars are trying to establish whether actors' motives can be inferred from her actions or not. Develin and Kilmer (1997: 5) believe, for instance, that researchers who see Cleisthenes as the founder of Athenian democracy ignore his preferences. This is problematic because the emphasis is on what Cleisthenes did, not why he did it. Thus, through this process of pure reductionism, Cleisthenes indeed emerges as the figure behind the creation of the first democracy (Develin and Kilmer 1997: 4). To be sure, Samons, (1998: 120) is certainly right in his assessment that Cleisthenes' "personal thoughts, as well as those of his barber or the average Athenian, are not available to us" (1998: 120). However, other scholars argue that there is enough contextual evidence to establish that Cleisthenes was not a committed democrat (Wood 1988: 101). To infer, therefore, from the consequences of his actions that he was the real founder of democracy would be a mistake. Rational choice practitioners engage in very similar disagreements. On the one hand, some scholars believe that we need not analyze actors' beliefs and desires because their preferences are revealed through actions (Satz and Ferejohn 1994). On the other hand, there are those who argue that for the rational choice theory to be reliable, individual beliefs and desires have to be internally consistent. As a result, individual motivations need to be accounted for, not ignored (Elster 2007; Hausman 1995).

As political theory became separated from other sub-disciplines, its findings started to appear as not salient. Unsurprisingly, political theorists sought to defend the merit of their work (see, e.g., Nelson 1984; Shapiro 2002) but these calls created a rather limited effect. One way for scholars interested in the democratization of Athens to defend merits of their work is to actively engage in methodological debates that are simultaneously occurring in other subfields. The Greek world can indeed become a useful testing ground for social science theories, and on a limited scale this development is already taking place. The lack of references to methodological debates in other subfields can be thought of as a missed opportunity to bridge the subfield with other fields of inquiry, this drawback can nonetheless be remedied rather easily.

## Conclusion

The discipline of political science continues to be divided. Political theory especially tends to be viewed as a subfield that is perhaps lacking in empirical rigor and continues to be distanced from the rest of the discipline. And while the main aim of this article is to promote a greater dialogue between political theory and contemporary democratization research, we have also seen that the subfields already share many important commonalities. The *dēmos*, I believe, provides yet another point of convergence between them, and thus makes their future cooperation even more feasible. However, the point of an increased dialogue is not only to make political theory more relevant but also to increase the quality of academic debates in both subfields, especially as these debates relate to social science methodology.

On the one hand, the strength of contemporary democratization research is exemplified by its use of an eclectic variety of research methods, and these methods being used in a clear and transparent way. On the other hand, the excessive analytical focus on political elites and individual decision-makers, promoted in particular by rational choice theory, has overshadowed the role that the *dēmos* can play in the process of democratization. The overemphasis of one variable (elites) vis-à-vis another variable (*dēmos*) can amount to what in statistical template is referred to as omitted variable bias. And while many political leaders rightfully deserve our analytical attention and respect, their role can at times be overstated and even romanticized. Interestingly, scholars of Ancient Greece achieved an analytical balance between those focusing on elites and those underscoring the role of ordinary people. This outcome is especially commendable if we keep in mind just how insufficient historical sources these scholars work with are. Whatever available information we have tends to focus on the role of individual actors such as Cleisthenes (Samons 1998: 119), and yet many researchers underscore the role of the *dēmos* and see it as a critical explanatory variable.

But scholars of the Greek world have their own methodological difficulties, and their challenges extend beyond the problem of limited sources. In recent decades an eclectic array of research methods has been incorporated into the study of Athenian democratization, moving it away from the almost exclusive use of traditional interpretive approaches. The subfield's practitioners, however, are prone to being opaque about why particular methods are being used and, in some cases, it is even unclear what the method is. This is problematic because political theorists already struggle with the charge of engaging in anachronistic research. Not being explicit about the use of research methods further fuels this critique. Thus, an increased dialogue between the two research traditions might help contemporary scholars of democratization take the *dēmos* more seriously while researchers of Athenian democracy are likely to become less esoteric about the choice and application of new research methods, which will also make their findings more valid and transparent.

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