

# Society and Politics in Fifth-Century Athens

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## The Peloponnesian War and Its Aftermath<sup>1</sup>

After the Greek war with the Persians (499-449 BC), Athens emerged as a powerful military, commercial and cultural center. Led by Pericles (c. 495-429 BC), Athens used its military strength to extend its rule throughout the Aegean islands. Having conquered neighboring city-states, inhabitants of these dependent colonies were either taken as slaves or forced to pay annual fees in return for "protection".

Domestically, Pericles was able to balance the needs and interests of the two dominant political factions: the established wealthy families that made up the traditional **oligarchy** (aristocracy), and the emerging advocates of **democracy**. As pressure for increasing democratization was felt, policies were instituted that opened public office and policy-making decisions to more citizens. A new system of trial by jury was also introduced.



Leo von Klenze, Reconstruction of the Acropolis and Areus Pagus in Athens, 1846.

As its wealth and power increased, numerous cultural projects were carried out under the guidance of Pericles. Monuments and temples were built on the Acropolis, most notably the *Parthenon* (constructed 447-432 BC). And the Agora (public marketplace) became an international center of commercial trade.

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<sup>1</sup> W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy, V. II: The Classical Mind* (Second Edition), New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970. Online reference map: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/64/Map\\_athenian\\_empire\\_431\\_BC-en.svg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/64/Map_athenian_empire_431_BC-en.svg) (Last access 4 July 13). See also: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifth-century\\_Athens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifth-century_Athens)

The influx of foreigners brought to Athens a renaissance in the arts and sciences, and a cosmopolitan atmosphere conducive to new ideas and ways of doing things. The influence of natural science came through the teachings of Anaxagoras<sup>2</sup> (born c. 500-480 BC) who moved from Ionia to Athens in the fifth century. His attempt to explain the world in physical and rational, rather than mythological, terms was both an intellectual stimulus for liberal-minded thinkers in Athens and a political threat to the conservatives who demanded respect for “tradition”, i.e. wealth and religion. Anything that questioned the state religion and the established order was likely to be met with fear and contempt. Proponents of these views were generally accused by conservatives of promoting **atheism** and corrupting the youth of Athens. As a young man, Socrates’ interest in the new science led to his being identified (and parodied by Aristophanes) as a follower of Anaxagoras.

Athens also attracted traveling professional educators—the **Sophists**—who offered to teach young men how to achieve success and political influence through the use of **persuasive rhetoric**. Their emphasis on materialism and disregard for the established order also posed a threat to the conservatives who now felt besieged on at least two fronts.

### **The Politics of Mid-Fifth Century Athens — Direct Democracy vs. Oligarchy**

The ruling body of Athens — the Assembly<sup>3</sup> — was made up of all the adult, male citizens present at any given meeting. Women, foreigners and slaves were not allowed to participate. Thus, there were approximately 40,000 eligible voters out of a total of roughly 400,000 inhabitants of Athens. In other words, one in ten were eligible to vote. But far fewer were likely to attend at any given meeting of the Assembly.

Final authority was vested in the Assembly and, in general, *any law could be changed at any meeting*. Thus, the power of persuasion was a valuable asset. This, of course, left the state open to manipulation by demagogues and the voting strength of an uneducated proletariat. Also, the older aristocratic families could often control the Assembly by acting as “party bosses” to influence voting. (There was a marked disparity of wealth among Athenians.)

### **Economic and Ideological Conflicts.**

Eventually, Athenian ambition and expansion prompted Sparta and Corinth to form an alliance against Athens. This led to the Peloponnesian (Greek civil) War (431-404 BC). It is important to keep in mind that the Athenian army was comprised of citizen soldiers, i.e. there was no professional army. (And Socrates is said to have served with distinction during the war.)

During the first summer of the conflict Athens was hit by a plague which led eventually to the death of Pericles (429 BC, when Socrates was 40 years old). Without a strong politician and a clear vision, the Assembly fell into disarray. Athens was ultimately defeated by Sparta.

A postwar oligarchy (“puppet regime”) was put together out of a group of thirty of the old conservatives. They ruled for nine months, a period known as the “Tyranny of the Thirty” (404-403 BC) inflicting extreme brutality and terror on the citizens of Athens, who were subjected to mass arrests and executions for speaking out against the government. It has been said that more Athenians were killed by “the Thirty” than the total who died in the twenty-seven years of the war.

When the supporters of democracy returned to power, enemies of Socrates accused him of complicity in the brutalities of “the Thirty”. He was acquitted of this apparently groundless charge

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<sup>2</sup> See Curd, Patricia, “Anaxagoras”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/anaxagoras/>>.

<sup>3</sup> For more on ancient political philosophy, see: Lane, Melissa, “Ancient Political Philosophy”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/ancient-political/>>.

only to be charged and convicted of “impiety” toward the State and corrupting the youth of Athens.

The overriding concern among the establishment in Athens after the occupation by Sparta was to restore social and political stability and support for the new administration. While a measure of autonomy was recovered, Athens no longer had the military power to defend it. The rulers must have felt they were governing a fragile peace indeed. No doubt anyone who tended to question, distract from, or undermine support for the new administration, whether they be Sophists or scientists, would be looked upon unfavorably. For “the many”, Socrates’ questions — What is human excellence (virtue) and how can it be achieved? What political order is most likely to produce good citizens? — made him an expendable nuisance.

## Summary

The transformation in fifth century Athenian attitudes was shaped by the following factors:

- **A critique of democracy:** Skepticism, cynicism and despair lead to an attitude critical of democracy.
- **An “enlightened” belief in power:** The new mood is characterized by a rejection of traditional Greek beliefs, and an attitude that “might makes right” (the “enlightened” attitude of the Sophists).
- **An increasing rejection of the old oligarchy and its ideals:** The new interest in mobility and material success confronts the conservative attitude that looks back to the “simple life” and the traditional values of the established social order.
- **A relativism that threatens the traditional concept of justice (*dike*):** Justice (fairness in external affairs combined with personal integrity) is threatened by rival social orders. A form of social relativism emerges: If different cities have different laws and customs, then *justice* must differ from city to city. This raises new questions: Should justice hold between cities? If so, on what basis?
- **A shift in values associated with justice:** As a result of the pressures placed on the concept of justice, concepts such as *good*, *virtue*, and *the beautiful* (“that which is well thought of”) became problematic, with communication and thought about moral issues being muddled.

Timothy Quigley, revised 7 July 13