Christian Meier and Paul Veyne, *Kannten die Griechen die Demokratie?: Zwei Studien*. Third Edition. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015. ISBN 978-3-515-11139-3. 125 pp. €24.

The first edition of *Kannten die Griechen die Demokratie?* was published in 1988, and a second edition followed in 1990. The new edition, only very lightly revised, appears after a quarter of a century of fruitful scholarship on the book's subject, Athenian democracy. Although the intervening years have rendered some of the ideas in this volume more familiar and less provocative than they might once have been, they have also served to confirm those ideas' critical importance for our understanding of the development and practice of democracy in ancient Athens.

The book consists of two essays: the first, by Paul Veyne, gives the book its title, while the second, by Christian Meier, is on the subject of "Bürger-Identität und Demokratie." The essays' common theme is the presumption of active citizenship that so dramatically distinguishes ancient democracy from its modern namesake. While the present-day democratic citizen is often imagined as little more than a voter at occasional elections, the citizens of the democratic Greek *polis* were expected to be ceaselessly and energetically engaged in public affairs, fighting for their city in peace just as much as in war. It is this crucial difference between ancient and modern conceptions of democracy that justifies the provocative question of whether the Greeks "knew democracy": did they know it *as we do*, in any meaningful sense? This question and its significance have yet to register with much of the educated public, and even scholars thoroughly acquainted with the distinction between what Benjamin Constant called "the liberty of the ancients" and "the liberty of the moderns" can still profit from Veyne's and Meier's wide-ranging reflections on the origin, application, and implications of the Greek ideal.

Veyne's word for the active citizen engagement that was supposed to characterize the Greek *polis* is *Militanz* (*militantisme* in his native French, from which his essay was translated). Broadly speaking, his interest is in sketching the lineaments of *Militanz* as an ideology and in tracing its connections to other important topics in Greek thought, such as leisure, autarky, decadence, and law. He is not particularly impressed by the reality of democracy in ancient Greece, which he regards essentially as a superficial concession to the vanity of non-elites: "Die politische Demokratie war Opium fürs Volk" (p. 40). He repeatedly stresses that even *Militanz* was only an aspiration which had little to do with practical politics except in times of crisis (p. 60) and which was important mostly insofar as it helped to shape the intellectual life of the ancient world. Like autarky, citizen militancy was more often a dream than a reality (Veyne himself draws this parallel on pp. 47–48), but the dream was a central element in antiquity's mental life, and it becomes, in Veyne's essay, a benchmark from which to survey a wide terrain. Thus, for example, Veyne attempts to show (pp. 28–39) that Platonic and Aristotelian arguments for the domination of politics by an elite result from a forcible conjunction between the essentially unrelated values of

citizen-engagement and leisure. He goes on to discuss, *inter alia*, how the valorization of *Militanz* conditioned an ancient conception of political decadence in terms of the weakening of citizen commitment; this in turn was used to justify a large role for the state in the molding and supervision of citizens' moral character (pp. 48–59). Veyne clearly regards the ideas and beliefs that depend upon the ideal of citizen militancy as no more valid or universal in their applicability than that ideal itself, and his project in this essay is one of demystification: he is concerned not only to deny the existence of an "eternal truth of politics" that would unite ancient and modern notions of democracy (p. 19) but also to argue that Greek ideologies were largely factitious, even within their own historical context.

While Veyne presents citizen engagement as something that existed mainly on the plane of ideology, Meier accepts its historical reality and seeks to understand its embodiment in the classical Athenian democracy. As he points out, direct democracy made extraordinary demands on the Athenians in terms of both time and effort, which suggests that the ideal of engagement must have been more than a mere pipe-dream. But how did the rights and obligations of citizenship come to be extended to all classes in the *polis*, and how did a system that demanded so much of its citizens manage to sustain itself over time? In attempting to answer these questions, Meier looks first at democratic institutions (specifically, those associated with the reforms of Cleisthenes: pp. 69–79), then at the development, in the archaic period, of rudimentary forms of political thought (pp. 80–91), and finally at the cultural or anthropological factors that led large numbers of Athenians to wish to take an active part in their city's government (pp. 92–105). Meier sees all these elements—institutional, intellectual, and cultural—as contributing in different ways to the drawing of all Athenians into the public sphere and to the formation and strengthening of a political identity whose maintenance became, for the mass of Athenians, more rewarding and thus more important than the pursuit of their personal interests. Especially critical in the development and preservation of this "citizen-identity" (*Bürger-Identität*), according to Meier, were the archaic aristocracy's exclusive power to define social values and the effective absence of competing opportunities for self-realization: the ordinary Athenian could acquire status and self-worth *only* insofar as he could have a share in the political rights and responsibilities that had formerly been restricted to an elite. For most Athenians, those rights and responsibilities were secured only by democracy, and the urgent need to defend democracy from elite encroachment guaranteed vigorous ongoing political engagement across broad strata of Athenian society. Politics in ancient Athens differed most strikingly from our modern idea of politics in that it was more a way of being than a means to an end (p. 120: "mehr ein Sein als ein Mittel"): the chief aim of politics was the political, and this circularity sustained democracy from the time of the Persian Wars down through the fourth century.

Any given reader will almost certainly prefer one of these essays to the other, and will find many things in both with which to disagree. Veyne seems unable to resist

gnomic hyperbole (see the aforementioned remark about democracy as the opium of the people) and his deconstructions of ancient ideologies can be rather glib—a reference to the relative prosperity of the U.S. and Japan in 1941, for instance, is hardly sufficient as a refutation of old beliefs in a correlation between wealth and decadence (pp. 48–49). Meier's focus on cultural and intellectual explanations necessarily means that his essay gives short shrift to other historical factors like economics and warfare as causes of social and political change: many readers, I suspect, will balk at his insistence that the Athenian lower and middle classes did not develop a class consciousness or seek to leverage their newfound political power in purely instrumental ways for economic ends (pp. 92–95, 110–112). But if the authors can sometimes be accused of overstating their cases, that is perhaps only the inevitable consequence of insisting on a fresh perspective. The intent of this slim volume is obviously to be challenging and thought-provoking, and even after almost thirty years these essays are crammed full of arguments and assertions that either bear repeating—e.g., Meier's remarks on the insufficiency of references to the Homeric assembly as an explanation for the origin of Greek democracy (pp. 82–83)—or have not yet been fully developed in other research. Even if much in this book will not be strictly new to ancient historians (especially those familiar with Meier's other work on Athenian democracy), those seeking an introduction to the anthropological or *mentalités* approach to Athenian democracy will certainly find it worthwhile. Its ideal use, perhaps, would be in a graduate seminar, where it could hardly be surpassed as a stimulus to discussion and a foundation for more extensive reading.

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