The e-kklesia

by

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On Monday March 21, 1994, when Vice President Al Gore spoke before the International Telecommunications Union on the issue of the Global Information Infrastructure's impact on politics, he proclaimed, "I see a new Athenian Age of democracy."[1] Such rhetoric is common in the crucible of today's wired world. Nonetheless, the essential question is perhaps framed best by Benjamin Barber: "Can democracy, a form of government born in the ancient world and designed to bring small numbers of individuals with consensual interests together into a self-governing community where they might govern themselves directly, survive the conditions of modern mass society? Does technology help replicate the ancient conditions?"[2]

Alas, for most modern scholars, there is little concern over or movement toward such a precise renewal. Euben presents us with "Athenian democracy is represented as an ideal which, however fully realized 2500 years ago, is irrelevant to our own society of infinitely greater scale and complexity" as the typical claim among academics.[3]

This paper, by contrast, suggests that there is a very *real* way in which we can pursue a renewal of the type Gore implies. First, I will examine the Athenian ideal as exemplified in its most powerful body, the Ekklesia. This Ekklesia, or assembly, was for Athens the ultimate expression of its faith in direct democracy, of the *polis'* ability to justly and wisely direct the affairs of the community. Through an exploration of numerous facets of direct democracy and modern computer-mediated communications (CMC) – enacted via cell-phones, the Internet, etc. – I argue that there exists now an opportunity for the establishment of an e-kklesia, an online electronic assembly, of always connected citizens, perpetually participating in the governance of the community, and that such an e-kklesia can be a much more exact and effective realization of the Athenian ideal than even occurred in Athens itself.

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[1] Albert Jr. Gore, *Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Vice President Al Gore, International Telecommunications Union* (March 21, 1994 [cited November 30 2003]); available from http://www.eff.org/GII_NII/Govt_docs/gii_gore_buenos_aires.speech.

[2] Benjamin R. Barber, *A Passion for Democracy : American Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 247.

[3] J. Peter Euben, "Democracy Ancient and Modern," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 26, no. 3 (1993): 479.

The Athenian Ideal

Pericles

We begin with Pericles' "Funeral Oration" in which he lauds the following characteristics of the Athenian *polis*:[4]

1. "Our belief in the courage and manliness of so many should not be hazarded on the goodness or badness of one man's speech."

2. "We regard wealth as something to be properly used, rather than as something to boast about."

3. "…what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses."

4. "Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people."

5. "No one… is kept in political obscurity because of poverty."

6. "Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well…."

7. "[Athenians believe that] the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated."

8. "[The fallen] have blotted out evil with good, and done more service to the commonwealth than they ever did harm in their private lives."

9. "…in public affairs we keep to the law… because it commands our deep respect."

10. "We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are for the protection of the

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[4] Thucydides, Rex Warner, and M. I. Finley, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, Eng., Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), 143-51.

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oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break."

These elements of Athenian culture indicate important reasons *why* Athenian democracy functioned as it did. The reasons can be clarified by arranging Pericles' comments into groups which reflect certain characteristics of Athenian life. Items 1, 2, and 3 indicate that individuals were not judged on their rhetoric or wealth, but on their ability. Items 4 - 8 demonstrate a firm commitment to citizen participation, even going so far as to suggest that through public acts and the defense of the Athenian system the individual can redeem his personal misdeeds. Items 9 - 10 reveal a deeply felt legitimacy for the laws, authorities, and even customs of the community, a legitimacy that is granted by citizen participation. The notion that citizen participation creates legitimacy further presupposes a faith in the individual's ability to add value to the *polis* merely by participating, i.e. an intrinsic value, which is manifest in Athenian society in the Ekklesia.

Aristotle

Aristotle, too, examines many characteristics of the Athenian democracy, in particular the following:

1. "We praise the ability to rule and to be ruled, and it is doubtless held that the goodness of a citizen consists in ability both to rule and to be ruled well."[5]

2. "For all when assembled together have sufficient discernment, and by mingling with the better class are of benefit to the state, just as impure food mixed with what is pure makes the whole more nourishing than the small amount of pure food alone; but separately the individual is immature in judgment."[6]

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[5] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, *Dover Thrift Editions* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), 1277a.
[6] Ibid., 1281b.

3. "Now no doubt any one of them individually is inferior compared with the best man, but a state consists of a number of individuals, and just as a banquet to which many contribute dishes is finer than a single plain dinner, for this reason in many cases a crowd judges better than any single person. Also the multitude is more incorruptible--just as the larger stream of water is purer, so the mass of citizens is less corruptible than the few; and the individual's judgment is bound to be corrupted when he is overcome by anger or some other such emotion, whereas in the other case it is a difficult thing for all the people to be roused to anger and go wrong together."[7]

4. "They assert this as the aim of every democracy. But one factor of liberty is to govern and be governed in turn; for the popular principle of justice is to have equality according to number, not worth, and if this is the principle of justice prevailing, the multitude must of necessity be sovereign and the decision of the majority must be final and must constitute justice, for they say that each of the citizens ought to have an equal share…. [Liberty] is the second principle of democracy, and from it has come the claim not to be governed, preferably not by anybody, or failing that, to govern and be governed in turns; and this is the way in which the second principle contributes to equalitarian liberty. And these principles having been laid down and this being the nature of democratic government, the following institutions are democratic in character: election of officials by all from all; government of each by all, and of all by each in turn… the Ekklesia to be sovereign over all matters…"[8]

For Aristotle, ruling and being ruled in turn become manifest by citizen participation, and it is through the collective power of the Ekklesia that good judgments are to be arrived at and, if the Ekklesia is supreme, implemented.

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[7] Ibid., 1286a.
[8] Ibid., 1317b.

<u>Dahl</u>

For the modern interpretation of the Athenian ideal we turn to Robert Dahl. "Within the enormous and often impenetrable thicket of ideas about democracy, is it possible to identify some criteria that a process for governing an association would have to meet in order to satisfy the requirement that all the members are equally entitled to participate in the association's decisions about its policies? There are, I believe, at least five such standards":[9]

1. Effective participation

2. Voting equality

3. Enlightened understanding

4. Control of the agenda

5. Inclusion of adults

Ancient, direct, democracy relied on the above criteria for the proper self-governance of the *polis*. Dahl stresses that number five seems to be a uniquely modern condition, that is, inclusion as a general principle, but, as we shall see, even if Dahl is correct, then Athenian democracy was still remarkably ahead of its time.

As we explore the various properties of the e-kklesia, we will be able to compare and contrast them with Athenian democracy insofar as they exemplify or diverge from that ideal. If it is the case that in Athens "participation was instrumental, the means by which social groups and classes constituting the majority of inhabitants gained access to forms of power that enabled them to improve their condition by contesting the forms of power associated with wealth, birth, and education,"[10] then the e-kklesia offers us a similar empowerment today.

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[9] Robert Alan Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 37-8.
[10] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Democracy: Electoral and Athenian," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 26, no. 3 (1993): 477.

Direct Democracy Issues

<u>Scale</u>

One of the most raised issues of modern vs. ancient democracy is that of scale. Dahl charges that "the sheer size, scale, and complexity of a modern society such as the United States render Athenian democracy a curiosity rather than an inspiration."[11] Even Aristotle suggests that the ideal polis must not be so large that the citizens cannot hear its herald's voice.[12]

Interestingly, Dahl formulates a separate set of "requirements" for modern democracy, distinguishing ancient from modern by saying "modern, large-scale democratic governments are [and must be] *representative*."[13] He goes on to say, "*All the institutions necessary for a democratic country would not always be required for a unit much smaller than a country.* Governments of small organizations would not have to be full-fledged *representative governments…*"[14] Unfortunately, Dahl does not say why he draws the line at a country, as opposed to a metropolis like New York City. He does ask, "But how big is too big for assembly democracy?"[15] He does the arithmetic and concludes that since everyone must be allowed to speak, the timeframe for a meeting gets too long. Continuing, Dahl admits that when actual participation in the debate decreases as the number of those present increases, the few who speak up act as *de facto* representatives. His conclusion that we may choose instead to *elect* representatives misses a crucial fact: The same individuals would not likely speak up on every issue, that is, individuals with expertise or interest would speak out on a given issue and would sit silent at other times. Herein, all of the members of the *polis* become each others' representatives

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[11] Ibid.: 475.
[12] Specifically, for the expansive *polis*, none but Stentor, the herald from Homer's Illiad, would suffice. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1326b.
[13] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 85.
[14] Ibid., 91-2.
[15] Ibid., 106.

all of the time. This is no different than what occurred in the Athenian Ekklesia, a point I will, to be sure, belabor.

To be fair, Dahl admits that "perhaps today and increasingly in the future you might be able to solve the territorial problem by employing electronic means of communication that would enable citizens spread out over a large area to 'meet,' discuss issues, and vote."[16] Barber reduces scale to the "problem of communication," arguing that the "size" of the polity is relative, not absolute.[17] "Because a political community is 'a human network rooted in communication,' the problem of scale can be ameliorated."[18]

Dahl asks, "how can citizens *participate effectively* when the number of citizens becomes too numerous or too widely dispersed geographically (or both, as in the case of a country) for them to participate conveniently in making laws by assembling in one place?"[19] Within this question, there are three dilemmas raised:

1. the number of citizens

2. the impact of geographical distance

3. the need for assemblage in one place (obv. simultaneously)

Regarding these, we can now conclude:

1. The e-kklesia is number-independent, with no upper limit to its capacity.

2. The e-kklesia is geography-independent, insofar as participation would be unhindered by physical location (U.S. citizens anywhere on the planet could participate).

3. The e-kklesia is an ongoing always-open assemblage.

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[16] Ibid., 105.
[17] Diana Saco, *Cybering Democracy : Public Space and the Internet*, *Electronic Mediations ; V. 7* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 42.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 93.

Absent Presence

What does it mean to be "present" in a world with globe-spanning telecommunications, email, and the like? What kind of "presence" is most appropriate for the e-kklesia?

In Athens, attendance in the Ekklesia suffered over time. Even after Pericles' institutionalization of pay for attendance, actual numbers were low enough that soldiers would march across the agora holding a cloth dyed red so as to 'tag' individuals at random who were subsequently ushered into the Ekklesia. Today, instead of requiring a presence in a present, CMC's offer us a unique alternative by way of an omnipresence within an omnipresent. "When does an online forum take place, and where do you show up for it?"[20] Such a solution, via "perpetual contact," manifests itself in the paradoxical Weltanschauung of "absent presence."[21] The world of absent presence "is a world of relationships, both active and vicarious, within which domains of meaning are being created or sustained. Increasingly, these domains of alterior meaning insinuate themselves into the world of full presence – the world in which one is otherwise absorbed and constituted by the immediacy of concrete, face-to-face relationships."[22] In this way, the virtual affects the real as much as the real affects the virtual. The ancient dynamic between participation and identity is resurrected in the modern *polis*.

Meier notes that "the Greeks enjoyed not only a civic (or, in their terms, political) *presence*, but also a civic (or political) *present*, which went hand in hand with political identity…."[23] The e-kklesia, by being an always-on event in an always-open virtual space,

[20] William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits : Space, Place, and the Infobahn* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 17.
[21] Kenneth J. Gergen, "The Challenge of Absent Presence," in *Perpetual Contact : Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, ed. James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 227.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Christian Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 22.

creates a perpetual present, sometimes referred to by post-modern digerati as "the long now."[24]

Within this moment, the modern orator can achieve an audience inestimably greater than even

Demosthenes who is said to have practiced speaking by the seashore over the crashing surf to

make his voice stronger.[25] But, to re-ask the Athenian question, "Who will speak?" I think many

of us. In contrast to Carter's claim that "apragmosyne [apathy] grew out of the Athenian

democracy – as a product of it and as a reaction against it,"[26] the e-kklesia celebrates the fact that

people love to talk, to speak their opinions, to be heard, to debate, to argue. This assertion is

borne out daily online, in the chat-rooms, forums, discussion groups, by email, and through all of

the innumerable ways in which citizens discuss the issues of the day.

Even if participatory presence – the total number of potentially participating citizens – is

100%, momentary presence – the actual number of citizens present at any given point in time –

would not be. This is, however, an un-problem. As Carter notes of the Athenians, "from the very

start they [Athens] must have accepted that any meeting of the assembly was bound to be a

sample of the citizenship – and not even a random sample: the assembly was inevitably going to

reflect the views of the town-dwellers against those living in the outlying villages and hamlets."[27]

As we mentioned in the earlier section on "Scale," technology eliminates participatory distance.

It is important, though, not to dismiss Carter's point out of hand. Although in Athenian times the

division may have been geographical, today it may be encapsulated in the notion of the "digital

divide" of those online vs. those not. Either way, the key distinction is between those who

actually have access to the halls of power and those who don't, despite systemic claims of open

access for all. Ober's commentary on the Ekklesia is relevant: "If its social composition was,

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[24] The term was coined in Brian Eno's observation that, "for must of us, 'now' means - at most - this week, and that more and more *he* found himself wanting to live "in a Big Here and a Long Now". An extended present, in other words. Stewart Brand, *The Clock of the Long Now : Time and Responsibility*, 1st ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[25] Donald Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy* (New York/Toronto: Free Press; Collier Macmillan Canada; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1991), 49.

[26] L. B. Carter, *The Quiet Athenian* (Oxford/New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1986), 187.

[27] Ibid., 193.

typically, dramatically different from that of the citizen body as a whole, this would have a considerable bearing upon our reading of the nature of the arguments made by politicians in Assembly and of the decision-making system of the democracy as a whole."[28] Thus, to avoid such an imbalance, a commitment to the e-kklesia would involve a commitment to provide citizens with a connection of some kind, via cell-phone, computer, etc.

Face to Face

Citing Finley's "Athenian Demagogues," Ober recounts the standard face-to-face argument, namely that "[Athens was] 'the model of a face-to-face society': a society whose members knew each other intimately and interacted with one another closely."[29] Kleisthenes, for one, agrees with Finley. His restructuring of the Athenian social into *phylai*, away from family lineages and towards a more heterogeneous *polis*, was based on the belief that "if wide sections of the population (made up, broadly speaking, of peasants) in a relatively large city-state were to pursue a common policy, they had to have not only common aims but also mutual contacts."[30] "The purpose of this particular manoeuvre, according to Aristotle… was to 'mix everyone up in order to dissolve the previous associations' and thereby 'to give more people a share in public affairs (*politeia*).'"[31] Ober demonstrates however that despite Kleisthenes' reforms, with a population of nearly 30,000, and an Ekklesia attendance of up to 6000, the belief in Athenian face-to-face society is mathematically untenable. Ober concludes, therefore, that Athens was "a political society that existed at the level of law and of ideology but not of personal

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[28] Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens : Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 134.
[29] Ibid., 31.
[30] Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, 76.
[31] M. I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, *The Wiles Lectures ; 1980* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 42. citing Aristotle, *Politics*, 1319b25-7; Aristotle and P. J. Rhodes, *The Athenian Constitution*, *The Penguin Classics* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England ; New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin, 1984), 21.2.

acquaintance."[32] We moderns no longer know our neighborhood grocer, or the lanky teen at the

marketplace, but it seems, neither did the Athenians.

Even if we allow for the claim that face-to-face society is necessary, or at the very least,

valuable, the evidence suggests that CMC's *increase* face-to-face community, not erode it. In his

distinction between *endogenous* and *exogenous* sources of absent presence, Gergen notes that

"unlike radio, mass publication, film, sound recording and television – all of which originate from

outside the community – telephone conversation…. originated within and extended the potentials

of face-to-face relationships…. The realities and moralities of the face-to-face relationship are

revitalized."[33] Rheingold, Katz, and many others emphasize the profound impact of virtual

communities to bring people together through online contact leading to face-to-face

interactions.[34]

There is one other aside regarding face-to-face interactions that we must deal with,

namely online anonymity and false identity. There are numerous effective ways of establishing a

standard for tracking real-world identity online, so here we will not pay undue attention to what is

essentially a technological issue.[35] It should be noted, and not lightly, however, that online

anonymity – in the case of drug rehab assistance, terminal-illness support groups, and forums for

political dissidents under oppressive regimes – has an invaluable role to play in some forms of

online political participation.

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[32] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens : Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People*, 33.
[33] Gergen, "The Challenge of Absent Presence," 237.
[34] James Everett Katz and Ronald E. Rice, *Social Consequences of Internet Use : Access, Involvement, and Interaction* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002); Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community : Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).
[35] The most promising of these is the Augmented Social Network. Ken Jordan, Jan Hauser, and Steven Foster, *The Augmented Social Network: Building Identity and Trust into the Next-Generation Internet* (First Monday: Volume 8, Number 8, 2003 [cited November 30 2003]); available from http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue8_8/jordan/.

Access/Inclusion

Having raised the necessity of citizen connectivity, now is the proper time to address the issue of citizenship in the first place. Citizens get connected, but who gets to be a citizen? Athenian democracy has been criticized for its lack of inclusion but it should be noted that it went to great lengths to broaden citizenship, and was for its time remarkably inclusive. As Kagan recounts, "What sets Athenians apart are not… [the few] exclusions but the unusually large degree of inclusion, as well as the extraordinarily significant and rewarding participation of those included."[36] From Kleisthenes to Pericles, substantial changes in citizenship laws allowed metics, children of non-citizens, and many others to gain Athenian citizenship, and in some cases property as well.[37] Also, although modern citizens can vote occasionally, they are effectively barred from all other forms of participation. Unlike Athens, we have no system of rotation, appointment by lot, or other means of keeping the people involved in government. In fact, "the Athenians… would have been astonished at the claims of modern states to that title (democracy)… for to them an essential feature of democracy was the direct and full sovereignty of the majority of citizens."[38]

Thankfully, modern democracies tend towards inclusion as a principle. In keeping with Pericles' assertions earlier, democratic access must not be predicated on wealth or property. Thus, inclusion calls for "universal access – without which, income and education disparities are likely to be reproduced by information and technology disparities, with cleavages between rich and poor being replicated as cleavages between the information rich and the information poor."[39] So, as in the absent presence section above, inclusion requires a commitment to include both via an enhanced citizenry as well as readily available CMC's.

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[36] Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*, 49.
[37] Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes : Structure, Principles, and Ideology* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, USA: B. Blackwell, 1991), 52-54.
[38] Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*, 49.
[39] Barber, *A Passion for Democracy : American Essays*, 267.

On Experts

In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates insists "when the city has to do something about buildings, they call for the builders as advisers and when it is about ship construction, the shipwrights, and so on with everything else that can be taught and learned. And if anyone else tries to advise them, whom they do not think an expert, even if he be quite a gentleman, rich and aristocratic, they none the less refuse to listen, but jeer and boo, until either the speaker himself is shouted down and gives up, or the sergeants at arms, on the order of the presidents, drag him off or remove him. But when the debate is on the general government of the city, anyone gets up and advises them…" to which Protagoras replies, "but when they come to discuss political questions, which must be determined by justice and moderation, they properly listen to everyone, thinking that everyone shares in these qualities – or cities wouldn't exist."[40] Socrates misrepresents the Ekklesia though, and Kagan assures us that "the Athenians did, in fact, appreciate the importance of knowledge, skill, talent, and experience where they thought these things existed and could be used in the public interest."[41] Again, as Pericles informed us, it is ability, not rhetoric, that carries weight. Hansen adds, "It was informed advice, and not mere eloquence, that the people expected… and they saw to it that they got it."[42] This is not to say that the Athenian Ekklesia was "led" by experts. Kagan points out that "No self-respecting Athenian democrat would allow some individual, whatever his qualifications, to tell him what was relevant evidence and what was not, or which laws and precedents applied. That would give to much weight to learning and expertise…"[43] So, Athenians deferred to experts when necessary, but those experts had to speak out in the assembly. So, too, the e-kklesia. Interestingly, in online forums where questions are asked that require expertise, members consistently defer to the experts, particularly when those

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[40] Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*, 58-9; Plato, Protagoras, and Benjamin Jowett, *Protagoras, Philebus, and Gorgias*, *Great Books in Philosophy* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1996), 319b-23a.
[41] Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*, 58-9.
[42] A. H. M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy*, Johns Hopkins pbk. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 133.
[43] Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*, 57.

experts exhibit a consensus around a particular position. The modern representative democracy, by contrast, commits a grave error. When it removes the people from the governing process, it enacts a system where experts are all it has left. More to the point, it assumes that individuals or collectives are unable to decide *when to* defer to experts and *when not to*. Athenian democracy demonstrated time and again that the *polis* is capable of precisely that wise judgment. It is my contention that the e-kklesia would demonstrate the same.

Voting

Through a mathematical analysis, Hansen concludes that "a study of voting by show of hands in large assemblies shows that an exact count of the hands raised has never been practiced and is in fact impracticable."[44] Thus, votes in the Ekklesia were not actually counted unless absolutely necessary, as in the case of a close contest. Today, we can improve upon the ancient model. Vote counting in the e-kklesia can be electronically recorded, including not only who voted for what, but also *why*, giving us a more thorough democracy than Athens.

Passions

"Among ancient writers, such as Thucydides and Plato, as well as among moderns such as Madison and Tocqueville, one of the common charges against democracy was that its dynamic or driving forces was in the 'passions' of the multitude."[45] Wolin, drawing on Plato, outlines the common argument saying, "the *demos* was… disrespectful of social boundaries (Republic, 537b-d). Wherever the *demos* was incorporated as sovereign, the passions so to speak were collectivized…. In contrast, the counsels of reason, elaborated by the philosopher and attributed to the Few, produced prudent judgments and virtuous actions."[46] Fortunately, we need only

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[44] Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Assembly : In the Age of Demosthenes*, *Blackwell's Classical Studies* (Oxford [Oxfordshire] ; New York, NY, USA: B. Blackwell, 1987), 42.
[45] Wolin, "Democracy: Electoral and Athenian," 476.
[46] Ibid.

return to Aristotle and his observation that in actual practice the "many" was significantly less corruptible than the "few."

The e-kklesia Problematique

In conclusion, must we accept that "the idea that the citizenry could exert any sort of hegemony in a modern liberal democracy seems, on the face of it, chimerical,"[47] or may we instead contend that insofar as CMC "permits ongoing communication and deliberation among individuals… that can inform and improve democracy,"[48] then CMC can enable the restoration of direct democracy via the e-kklesia. It is to the chimerical aspects that we now turn.

<u>Democratic Culture</u>

Let us not forget thought that the e-kklesia depends also on a culture of democratic norms as Pericles and Aristotle both have mentioned. That culture is neither prior to nor antecedent to participatory democracy, but is co-constituted. There is little evidence that modern mass society even *desires* such participation. Barber offers a warning: "A commercial culture will entail a commercialized technology. A society dominated by the ideology of privatization will engender a privatized internet."[49] Unfortunately, members of online communities are also politically apathetic even in the governance of their own communities as long as the existing dictatorial technocrats keep them satisfied. Furthermore, because "[The Net] takes us seriously as

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[47] Josiah Ober, "How to Criticize Democracy in Late Fifth- and Fourth-Century Athens," in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, ed. J. Peter Euben, John Wallach, and Josiah Ober (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 171.
[48] Barber, *A Passion for Democracy : American Essays*, 256.
[49] Ibid., 261.

consumers, spectators, clients, and buyers and sellers, but it ignores us as citizens,"[50] we may be

lacking the reinforcement of democratic culture necessary to sustain online citizen participation.

Reification

Another fear regarding online democracy is that "the critical communication between

groups that is essential to the forging of a national culture and public vision will vanish; in its

place will come a new form of communication within group, where people need talk only to

themselves and their clones."[51] This is the typical argument, propounded by numerous scholars,

here by Barber, but it fails because it is predicated on a misunderstanding of the online experience

which (though no fault of the political theorists in question who seem to have a very limited

experience of life online) nevertheless prevents any understanding of the true benefit of online

participation both for the individual and for the community. People who participate in a

historical, geographic community participate *in only one community*, i.e. theirs. By contrast,

individuals online typically participate in *many communities simultaneously*. Because of this,

individuals online act as conduits by which ideas spread from one community to another, and it is

this cross-pollination, that actually achieves Barber's desired goal above *better than the*

traditional polis itself. Speaking as a member of an online community that discusses everything

it can think of, it is common for individuals who rally together in one forum to be vehemently at

odds in another one. Conversely, Sunstein recounts "I've been in chat rooms where I've

observed… African-Americans and white supremacists talking to each other…. By the end you'll

find there's less animosity than there was at the beginning."[52] Still, Barber laments that since

"every parochial voice gets a hearing… the *public* is left with no voice. No global village, but a

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[50] Ibid., 242.
[51] Ibid., 241.
[52] Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.Com* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 87. citing Alfred C. Sikes and Ellen Pearlman, *Fast Forward : America's Leading Experts Reveal How the Internet Is Changing Your Life*, 1st ed. (New York: William Morrow, 2000).

Tower of Babel: a hundred chattering mouths bereft of common language."[53] But the e-kklesia

brings those mouths together so that they *can* forge the common voice. The e-kklesia makes

Barber's "strong democracy" possible – "a democracy that reflects the careful and prudent

judgment of citizens who participate in deliberative, self-governing communities…."[54]

Perpetual Participation

        Euben suggests "that we recognize that one thing that made the Athenian political

tradition distinctive was precisely its incorporation of institutionalized self-critique."[55] This kind

of feedback need not be relegated to the occasional election, but rather, thanks to CMC's, can be

made an ongoing permanent part of the system. Wolin lambasts modern representative

"democracy" as the "destruction of the demos as an actor, its marginalization as voter."[56] The

crux of the e-kklesia problematique, and the reason it should be instituted regardless of the

apprehensions of elites[57], lies in its potential for solving the democratic deficit of electoral and

representative systems.

        Thus, if "…social spaces are socially produced, then different ways of conceptualizing

participatory spaces become possible."[58] The e-kklesia, then, is a new space, a virtual Assembly

of all citizens always present, participating, and deliberating.[59] Euben tells us that we may

"require ideas and practices of civic virtue and political education, two ideas upon which the

Athenians relied in their exercise of democracy. Such reliance was one reason why their

'solution' to the problem of democratic excess was more democracy, not less. They assumed that

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[53] Barber, *A Passion for Democracy : American Essays*, 241.
[54] Ibid., 275.
[55] Euben, "Democracy Ancient and Modern," 480.
[56] Wolin, "Democracy: Electoral and Athenian," 476.
[57] Michael Margolis and David Resnick, *Politics as Usual : The Cyberspace "Revolution"*, Contemporary *American Politics* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000).
[58] Saco, *Cybering Democracy : Public Space and the Internet*, 200.
[59] Although it is outside the scope of this paper, there is nothing to preclude these concepts from being applied to the judicial system, e.g. jury duty. After all Athenian juries "were composed of several hundred ordinary citizens." See Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes : Structure, Principles, and Ideology*, 308.

expanding the opportunities for people to exercise power taught them the responsibility of power and that maximizing the places and ways people participate… provided multiple points of view about political controversies thereby encouraging a less parochial understanding of them than would otherwise be available."[60] He finishes thus: "In sum, democratic excess was to be contained by the political education in civic virtue that came from living a public life… Moral argument for the significance of continuous participation like that made by Aristotle… political activity is intrinsically valuable because it changes who you are by educating you to think and speak as a citizen rather than as a private person with private, narrowly partisan interests."[61] So, the absent democratic norms mentioned earlier, emerge as a function of the system. In fact, a recent empirical study concludes that "…interconnectivity always proves to be a significant predictor of democracy."[62]

Since citizen participation on any given issue, i.e. in any given forum, will not be 100%, one can think of an infinitude of potential e-kklesias all operating simultaneously and in parallel. This arrangement creates an assemblage of citizens relying on other citizens who have the interest in participating in given debates, with presence constantly shifting. Issues that garner less interest than others (trash collection?) can be made the topic of incentives (financial?) and/or participation can be chosen by lot, or by rotation, as in Athens. Regarding "the Athenian practices of lot, rotation in office, frequent elections, and close accountability of officials" Wolin notes that "doubtless these made for 'turmoil' and that impression offends the highly developed modern sensibility which looks upon 'order' as the sine qua non of politics and, more fundamentally of a

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[60] Euben, "Democracy Ancient and Modern," 479.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Christopher R. Kedzie and Janni Aragon, "Coincident Revolutions and the Dictator's Dilemma," in *Technology, Development, and Democracy : International Conflict and Cooperation in the Information Age*, ed. Juliann Emmons Allison, *Suny Series in Global Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 122.

(financial) market society."[63] Wolin reminds us that "the guardian of that order is not democracy but the state. And no modern society has yet managed to democratize the state."[64]

But the e-kklesia, and its emergent properties, can effectively democratize the state. Thus, the "turmoil" of democracy becomes "ordered."[65] The implication of this is that if deliberation and consensus yield decisions then "officials" are reduced to mere functionaries. Insofar as they merely replicate the common will, they become deliberatively obsolete. Thus the bureaucracy of the State vanishes against the complexity of citizen participation. What I'm suggesting is no mean feat. It is nothing less than the withering of the state under the empowerment of the citizens, or rather the long-overdue re-unification of the *polis* and the people. Meier tells us of Athens that "the centrality of citizenship was concomitant with the absence of an autonomous 'state'"[66] and that "the city was grounded in its citizens, not in an autonomous state apparatus. The citizens constituted the state."[67] Arendt concurs: "Not Athens, but the Athenians, were the *polis*."[68]

Modern political theorists often emphasize the issue of whether the state should merely reflect the preferences of the *polis*, or should instead seek to transform individuals by pursuit of "The Good." This dilemma is predicated on the separation of society and state, a separation which is not part of the ancient mindset. "Unlike the Athenian public realm (which had no social component), the modern public includes the state (as a depersonalized locus of political authority) and civil society (as an impersonal counterpart to political authority)."[69] For a citizenry based in perpetual participation, this division evaporates. As a result, sometimes political decisions would

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[63] Wolin, "Democracy: Electoral and Athenian," 477.
[64] Ibid.
[65] It is worth mentioning here that the rich literature of Complexity Theory offers much fertile ground for further development of these ideas. Key works include Steven H. Strogatz, *Sync : The Emerging Science of Spontaneous Order*, 1st ed. (New York: Theia, 2003); Mark C. Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity : Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Duncan J. Watts, *Six Degrees : The Science of a Connected Age*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).
[66] Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, 22.
[67] Ibid., 144.
[68] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures* ([Chicago]: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 195.
[69] Saco, *Cybering Democracy : Public Space and the Internet*, 62.

merely reflect the preferences of groups, and sometimes expressed preferences (e.g. a curriculum for public education) and participation itself would create the "good" citizen. As Aristotle told us, the good life comes from good habits.[70] Durant praises Athens just so: "This corrupt and incompetent democracy is at least a school: the voter in the Assembly listens to the cleverest men in Athens, the juror in the courts has his wits sharpened by the taking and sifting of evidence, the holder of office is molded by executive responsibility and experience into a deeper maturity of understanding and judgment…."[71]

Critics often claim "The trouble with the zealots of technology as an instrument of democratic liberation is not that they misconceive technology but that they fail to understand democracy." My rebuke is that the trouble with political theorists is not that they misconceive democracy, but that they fail to understand CMC's, and either paint them as inherently negative, or merely value-neutral. Neither could be farther from the truth. CMC's enhance a telos that is *already present in human nature*, and one which Aristotle recognized 2500 years ago, namely that "Man is by nature a political animal."[72] The *polis*, in its proper role as the unification of society and politics, is where humans compel themselves to exist. Perhaps, then, it is possible not only to bridge the divide between the modern state and the *polis*, but to heal it. I think it is time that we try.

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[70] Aristotle and Terence Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub. Co., 1999).
[71] Will Durant, *The Life of Greece; Being a History of Greek Civilization from the Beginnings, and of Civilization in the near East from the Death of Alexander, to the Roman Conquest; with an Introduction on the Prehistoric Culture of Crete*, ed. William James Durant (New York,: Simon and Schuster, 1939), 266.
[72] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.

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