Episode 197 -LucretiusToday Interviews Dr. Marcelo Boeri

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Cassius asked Dr. Boeri about his thoughts on Epicurus' political leanings, e.g. whether he would be inclined to democracy (small d) or monarchism. My recollection is that Dr. Boeri replied that this was a very good, but difficult, question.

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Epicurus lived in Athens from 306 BC till his death in 270 BC. According to a Wikipedia article (all bold/italics mine):

"Athenian democracy developed around the 6th century BC in the Greek city-state (known as a polis) of Athens, comprising the city of Athens and the surrounding territory of Attica. Although Athens is the most famous ancient Greek democratic city-state, it was not the only one, nor was it the first; multiple other city-states adopted similar democratic constitutions before Athens.[1][2] By the late 4th century BC, as many as half of the over one thousand existing Greek cities might have been democracies.[3] Athens practiced a political system of legislation and executive bills. ***Participation was open to adult, free male citizens (i.e., not a metic), who probably constituted no more than 30 percent of the total adult population***.[4]

"Solon (in 594 BC), Cleisthenes (in 508–07 BC), and Ephialtes (in 462 BC) contributed to the development of Athenian democracy. Cleisthenes broke up the unlimited power of the nobility by organizing citizens into ten groups based on where they lived, rather than on their wealth.[5] The longest-lasting democratic leader was Pericles. After his death, Athenian democracy was twice briefly interrupted by oligarchic revolutions in 411 and 404 BC, towards the end of the Peloponnesian War. It was modified somewhat after it was restored under Eucleides; the most detailed accounts of the system are of this fourth-century modification, rather than the Periclean system. ***Democracy was suppressed by the Macedonians in 322 BC. The Athenian institutions were later revived, but how close they were to a real democracy is debatable.***"

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy)

Under the heading of **"Citizenship in Athens"** are these comments:

"Only adult male Athenian citizens who had completed their military training as ephebes had the right to vote in Athens. ***The percentage of the population that actually participated in the government was 10% to 20% of the total number of inhabitants, but this varied from the fifth to the fourth century BC***.[25] This excluded a majority of the

population: slaves, freed slaves, children, women and metics (foreign residents in Athens).[28] The women had limited rights and privileges, had restricted movement in public, and were very segregated from the men."

"***Some Athenian citizens were far more active than others, but the vast numbers required for the system to work testify to a breadth of direct participation among those eligible that greatly surpassed any present-day democracy.***[25] Athenian citizens had to be descended from citizens; after the reforms of Pericles and Cimon in 450 BC, only those descended from two Athenian parents could claim citizenship."

Under the heading **"Women in Athens"** are these excerpts:

"With participation in Athenian Democracy only being available to adult male Athenian citizens, women were left out of government and public roles. Even in the case of citizenry, the term was rarely used in reference to women. Rather, women were often referred to as an astē which meant "a woman belonging to the city" or Attikē gunē which meant 'an Attic woman/wife'. Even the term Athenian was largely reserved for just male citizens."

"In addition to being barred from any form of formal participation in government, women were also largely left out of public discussions and speeches with orators going as far as leaving out the names of wives and daughters of citizens or finding round about ways of referring to them. Pushed out of the public sphere, women's role was confined to the private sphere of working in the home and being cast as a second-rate human, subservient to her male guardian whether that be a father or husband."

– All the more remarkable that Epicurus not only allowed women in the Garden, but also to participate in philosophy as well (e.g. Leontion)!

Under the heading: **"Main Bodies of Government"**:

"***There were three political bodies where citizens gathered in numbers running into the hundreds or thousands. These are the assembly (in some cases with a quorum of 6,000), the council of 500 (boule), and the courts (a minimum of 200 people, on some occasions up to 6,000)***. Of these three bodies, the assembly and the courts were the true sites of power – although courts, unlike the assembly, were never simply called the demos ('the people'), as they were manned by just those citizens over thirty. Crucially, citizens voting in both were not subject to review and prosecution, as were council members and all other officeholders."

"As the system evolved, the courts (that is, citizens under another guise) intruded upon the power of the assembly. Starting in 355 BC, political trials were no longer held in the assembly, but only in a court. In 416 BC, the graphē paranómōn ('indictment against measures contrary to the laws') was introduced. Under this, anything passed or proposed by the assembly could be put on hold for review before a jury – which might annul it and perhaps punish the proposer as well."

“In the 5th century, there were no procedural differences between an executive decree and a law. They were both simply passed by the assembly. However, beginning in 403 BC, they were set sharply apart. Henceforth, laws were made not in the assembly, but by special panels of citizens drawn from the annual jury pool of 6,000. These were known as the nomothetai (νομοθέται, 'the lawmakers').”

“The institutions sketched above – assembly, officeholders, council, courts – are incomplete without the figure that drove the whole system, ***Ho boulomenos*** ('he who wishes', or 'anyone who wishes'). This expression encapsulated ***the right of citizens to take the initiative to stand to speak in the assembly, to initiate a public lawsuit (that is, one held to affect the political community as a whole), to propose a law before the lawmakers, or to approach the council with suggestions.*** Unlike officeholders, the ***citizen initiator*** was not voted on before taking up office or automatically reviewed after stepping down; these institutions had, after all, no set tenure and might be an action lasting only a moment. However, any stepping forward into the democratic limelight was risky. If another citizen initiator chose, a public figure could be called to account for their actions and punished. In situations involving a public figure, the initiator was referred to as a kategoros ('accuser'), a term also used in cases involving homicide, rather than ho diokon ('the one who pursues').”

“Pericles, according to Thucydides, characterized the Athenians as being very well-informed on politics: ‘We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.’”

Under the section **“Criticism”**:

Athenian democracy had many critics, both ancient and modern. Ancient Greek critics of Athenian democracy include Thucydides the general and historian, Aristophanes the playwright, Plato the pupil of Socrates, Aristotle the pupil of Plato, and a writer known as the Old Oligarch. ***While modern critics are more likely to find fault with the restrictive qualifications for political involvement, these ancients viewed democracy as being too inclusive. For them, the common people were not necessarily the right people to rule and were likely to make huge mistakes***.[73] According to Samons:

‘The modern desire to look to Athens for lessons or encouragement for modern thought, government, or society must confront this strange paradox: the people that gave rise to and practiced ancient democracy left us almost nothing but criticism of this form of regime (on a philosophical or theoretical level). And what is more, the actual history of Athens in the period of its democratic government is marked by numerous failures, mistakes, and misdeeds—most infamously, the execution of Socrates—that would seem to discredit the ubiquitous modern idea that democracy leads to good government.’”

“A new version of democracy was established in 403 BC, but it can be linked with both earlier and subsequent reforms (graphē paranómōn 416 BC; end of assembly trials 355 BC). For instance, the system of ***nomothesia*** was introduced. In this:

“A new law might be proposed by any citizen. Any proposal to modify an existing law had to be accompanied by a proposed replacement law. The citizen making the proposal had to publish it [in] advance: publication consisted of writing the proposal on a whitened board located next to the statues of the Eponymous Heroes in the agora. The proposal would be considered by the Council, and would be placed on the agenda of the Assembly in the form of a motion. If the Assembly voted in favor of the proposed change, the proposal would be referred for further consideration by a group of citizens called nomothetai (literally "establishers of the law").”

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Okay, an already overlong post! 😜😳 But as I was gathering snippets for myself, I thought I’d put them up.

All of which is only intended to outline the kind of (varying) democracy Epicurus might have been familiar with during his tenure in Athens. How much he approved and how much he criticized (and which aspects) – and what he might think of today’s institutions – remains an open question. But I suspect he would have disagreed with Pericles.