Retrieving the Lost Worlds of the Past: The Case for an Ontological Turn

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Our discipline's grand historicist project, its commitment to producing a kind of cumulative biography of our species, imposes strict limits on the kinds of stories we can tell about the past. Most immediately, our histories must locate all of humanity's diverse lifeworlds within the bounds of a single universal "real world" of time, space, and experience. To do this, they must render experiences in all those past lifeworlds duly commensurable and mutually intelligible. And to do this, our histories must use certain commonly accepted models and categories, techniques and methods. The fundamental problem here is that all of these tools of our practice presuppose a knowledge of experience that is far from universal, as postcolonial theorists and historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty have so well observed. In effect, these devices require us to "translate" the experiences of all past lifeworlds into the experiences of just one lifeworld, namely a post-Enlightenment "Europe," the world of our own secular, capitalist modernity. In so doing, they actively limit our ability to represent the past's many non-secular, non-capitalist, non-modern "ways of being human."[1]

To be sure, the discipline's cultural turn of the last thirty or more years has helped sensitize us to the alterities of non-modern experiences.[2] No doubt our ongoing explorations of past mentalities, ideologies, imaginaries, discourses, and the like have allowed us to move beyond the more explicitly modernist, materialist concerns of our

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[1] For Chakrabarty, "Europe" is in the end an "imaginary" figure, a "somewhat indeterminate" domain of experience, one that would prevail wherever life is broadly governed by Western, post-Enlightenment principles. And so long as our historicism deems only this "European" mode of being to be "theoretically knowable," "Europe" will always be the ultimate "sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories." See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), especially the Introduction and chaps. 1–4. Important aligned works of postcolonial critique would include Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, Ill., 1988), 271–313; Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1475–1490; Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Basingstoke, 2007).

[2] On the genesis, gains, and limitations of the cultural turn, see, e.g., William H. Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), chap. 2; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Introduction," in Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York, 2005), 1–31.

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predecessors with the fortunes of states, societies, and economies. No doubt cultural history has helped us to see that our non-modern subjects knew their worlds otherwise. But in its mainstream forms, it still presupposes a peculiarly "European" knowledge of experience, one that takes for granted a primordial divide between matter and meaning, between a pre-given material reality and the culture one uses to represent that reality. Like materialist histories, it is still a historicist device that obliges us to translate the experiences of peoples unlike us.[3]

To substantiate the point, consider a well-known example cited by Chakrabarty. When the Santal, a tribal people of Bengal and Bihar, rebelled against British forces and local landlords in 1855, they were, by their own account, simply acting on the orders of their "lord," the god Thakur. Yet as soon as one attempts to historicize this event, to tell a story in the ways prescribed by our discipline's "European" codes and protocols, one loses the ability to express the central role played here by Thakur. The best one can do within the limits of our historicism is to resort to the ways and means of cultural history, to "anthropologize" Thakur's divine agency, rationalizing it as the "religious belief" of his human devotees, who can be the only "real," material agents. Thus, even the most sensitive efforts to write a "good" subaltern history of the Santal revolt, one that restores full agency to a historically oppressed people, will end up denying the truth of the event as it was actually experienced by the Santal themselves. By reducing the superhuman lord of their lifeworld to an artifact of "culture," to a mere construction of discourse or pre-scientific belief, it will end up "Europeanizing" their real, lived past. It will translate that past into the past of another lifeworld altogether, namely our own.[4]

Given that the vast majority of past peoples, including all those of the premodern "West," inhabited lifeworlds that were partially or wholly untouched by the European Enlightenment, the postcolonial critique of mainstream historicism has far-reaching implications for our entire disciplinary enterprise, as growing numbers of historians have come to recognize.[5] So long as the production of historical knowledge

[3] Cf. Barbara Weinstein's important observation that mainstream (i.e., "anthropological") cultural histories tend to presuppose rather than disturb established causal, materialist grand narratives, which thus continue to serve as "the historian's 'common sense.'" See Weinstein, "History without a Cause? Grand Narratives, World History, and the Postcolonial Dilemma," *International Review of Social History* 50, no. 1 (2005): 71–93, especially 72–78. More radical forms of cultural history would assign language or discourse a primary, active role in the "construction" of the real, thereby challenging the presumption that a pre-given material reality is always already there to be represented. See, e.g., Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–797; Elizabeth D. Ermarth, "Agency in the Discursive Condition," *History and Theory* 40, no. 4 (2001): 34–58. But to date the discipline's embrace of "discursive history" has been at best selective, perhaps because it remains hard to reconcile the general proposition that "all the world's a text" with historicism's materialist foundations.

[4] For the Santal case and its historiography, see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, chap. 4. A similar case, where the historiography of the practice of *sati* systemically "silences" the subaltern widow, is discussed in Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," especially 299–307.

[5] See, e.g., the recent roundtable on "Historians and the Question of Modernity," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (June 2011): 631–751, especially the contributions by Carol Symes, Gurminder K. Bhambra, Richard Wolin, Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, and Dipesh Chakrabarty himself. Among historians of the premodern "West," medievalists have been particularly receptive to the possibilities raised by postcolonial critique. Thus, some have claimed that modernity has used historicism to "colonize" the Middle Ages as its subaltern "other," thereby preventing historians from analyzing medieval experience on its own terms. See, e.g., John Dagenais and Margaret R. Greer, "Decolonizing the Middle Ages: Introduction," *Decolonizing the Middle Ages*, Special Issue, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000): 431–448; Carol Symes, "When We Talk about Modernity," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (June 2011): 715–726.

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requires us to deracinate non-modern experiences by rendering them all into modern terms, the essential heterogeneities of countless human pasts will remain forever lost in translation. But what, exactly, is the alternative?

To date, scholarly efforts have focused largely on confronting historicism's epistemological and methodological limitations, but a consensus alternative has yet to emerge.[6] Our more urgent task should be to confront historicism's ontological limitations, which seem to be altogether more fundamental. Before we can rethink our conventional ways of knowing and representing non-modern realities, we need to reconsider the very nature of realness itself. To help us retrieve all those pasts that we have lost in translation, we need a historicism that can make sense of each non-modern lifeworld on its own ontological terms, as a distinct real world in its own right.

Historical and ethnographic records attest to considerable ontological diversity across human experience. Every past way of life presupposed its own particular ontology, its own prevailing account of the givens of existence, its own particular forms of subjectivity and sociality, agency and authority, freedom and equality, temporality and spatiality, rationality, ideality, materiality, vitality, and so forth. But our conventional historicist models, categories, and protocols do not allow us to historicize past experiences all the way down to the ontological level. Instead, they require us to analyze non-modern lifeworlds as if all were experienced within one and the same real world, within a single universal reality governed by "Europe's" objectivist standards of truth and realness, a reality where modernity's characteristically materialist, secularist, anthropocentrist, and individualist ontology always already prevails. The net result is a disciplinary practice that effectively modernizes the very fabrics of non-modern being, thereby denying past peoples the power to determine the truths of their own experience.

Yet the standards of truth and realness that sustain the whole edifice of this historicist practice are far less secure than they might appear. For more than a century now, these modernist certainties have been directly and indirectly challenged by influential currents of thought in a wide array of fields, from philosophy and critical theory to science studies and quantum physics. By drawing on the most powerful of these currents, we can in turn begin to formulate an alternative historicism, one that sees realness itself in an entirely new way: not as an objective, pre-given material condition but as a process, as an ongoing effect produced by the dynamic entanglement of thought and materiality. Hence, this heterodox form of historicism

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[6] Gabrielle Spiegel has observed that "postmodernism" in general has taught us to recognize that the past "has to be understood within the terms of the conditions of possibility that shaped it [at] any given time." See Spiegel, "Épater les médiévistes," *History and Theory* 39, no. 2 (2000): 243–250, here 250. Yet the new modes of practice that might yield such "understanding" remain all too unclear. Among the suggested possibilities, Chakrabarty himself would challenge historicism's methodological and epistemological limits by counterposing other, non-modern "forms of memory," the aim being to offer "at least a glimpse" of historicism's "finitude," to view it from a kind of non-European "outside"; *Provincializing Europe*, 93. Alternatively, building on the insights of others, Carol Symes has argued that we need to develop new ways to periodize the past if we are ever to liberate non-modern experiences from their "subordination to modernity"; "When We Talk about Modernity," 717. Cf. Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008). By contrast, Richard Wolin insists that making our "Eurocentrist" historicism somehow more "enlightened" and "self-critical" will allow us to produce more ethical histories while avoiding a chaos of "cultural relativism." See Wolin, "'Modernity': The Peregrinations of a Contested Historiographical Concept," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (June 2011): 741–751.

would require us to take an ontological turn in our practice. It would oblige us to make sense of each past lifeworld in its own metaphysical environment, because whatever our non-modern subjects collectively believed was always already there in their worlds would be an active, constitutive ingredient of whatever was really there at the time.[7] And if we are prepared to make this move, we will duly produce histories that are at once more ethically defensible, more theoretically robust, and more historically meaningful.

As a proverbially "Western" lifeworld, classical Athens can serve as a suitable test case for the proposed alternative, allowing us to see in some concrete detail how an ontological turn would work in practice.

Every historical way of life at once presupposes and realizes a set of ontological commitments. In order to act in and upon the world as a group, the members of any given historical community must know that world as a group. They must share a general commonsense knowledge of what is really there, of the basic objects, relations, and processes of which that world self-evidently consists. They must share a way of objectifying the phenomena that form the metaphysical foundations and essences of their common experience, phenomena like those we would call personhood and subjectivity, kinship and sociality, freedom and authority, humanity and divinity, and the sources, means, and ends of life itself. And they will accordingly premise their shared ways of acting in the world, all their norms, their stories, and their practices, upon the realness of such *a priori* foundations and essences. In other words, every community, past and present, takes for granted, acts upon, and thereby summons to material life its own particular ontology, its own account of what it deems to be the real world. Which is to say, there have been innumerable real worlds in history, not just one.

To illustrate this variability, we have only to consider the real world of our own liberal capitalist modernity, which rests on at least four historically anomalous ontological commitments. First, and perhaps most fundamentally, modernity's prevailing ontology is uncompromisingly materialist. The states, economies, and other essential structures upon which modern Western social being is staked all presuppose a thoroughly disenchanted real world, a world in which true realness is granted only to those materially self-evident phenomena that comply with our scientifically es-

[7] Hence, too, this alternative would be distinctly different from recent attempts to formulate some kind of hybrid material-cultural history that would retain historicism's modernist distinction between material and cultural phenomena while somehow regarding both as equally real. See, e.g., Geoff Eley, "Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later," in Terrence J. MacDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1996), 193–243; Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices* (Baltimore, 1997); William H. Sewell, Jr., "The Concept(s) of Culture," in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 35–61; Richard Biernacki, "Language and the Shift from Signs to Practices in Cultural Inquiry," *History and Theory* 39, no. 3 (2000): 289–310; Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, eds., *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (London, 2010). My own approach would be more closely aligned with recent cases made for an "ontological turn" in anthropology, which I have learned of only since beginning work on this project. See, e.g., Morten Axel Pedersen, "Common Nonsense: A Review of Certain Recent Reviews of the Ontological Turn," *Anthropology of This Century* 5 (October 2012), http://aotcpress.com/articles/common_nonsense/.

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tablished "laws" of physics and nature. As such, our real world has no place for what it regards as purely imaginary or ideational objects, relations, and processes. It is thus a world entirely devoid of all the gods and monsters, demons and angels, spirits and ghosts, and the myriad other "supernatural" beings that have variously governed, nurtured, energized, and terrorized all other historical realities for millennia.[8] It is a world where physical death is final extinction, a world emptied of heavens and hells, reincarnations, and all those mortal agencies, from Christian saints to the Igbo *egwugwu*, whose powers continue to radiate and condition life from beyond the grave. It is a world that has summarily extinguished all those "magical" vital forces that once animated entire ecologies and civilizations, like Polynesian *mana*, Hindu *shakti*, and Chinese *qi*. It is a world without *anima* or *atman*, *psyche* or soul.[9]

From this rather literal materialism, it of course follows that modern liberal ontology is also thoroughly secular. Insofar as it recognizes the possibility of divinity at all, it objectifies gods as effects of the thoughts and beliefs of human beings, as artifacts of human faith, prayer, and ritual, not as independently existing, "magical" agencies in their own right. It thus feels comfortable relegating all gods and the beliefs that produce them to a second-order realm of experience called "religion," a sacred space or sphere that is rationally disaggregated from the rest of social life. This idea of a detached, abstract realm of "religion" may well make sense to those who have come to think of divinity itself as a detached, abstract object of belief, like the god of Protestant Christianity. But it would have made no sense at all in most non-modern lifeworlds, where divinity was somehow immanent in all of life's processes, where life itself would have ceased altogether if the gods who self-evidently controlled it were somehow relieved of their responsibilities. Religion is a category that makes sense only in our modern Western world, a world that is already secular, a world where gods have been turned from subjects into objects, because humans already presume that they have the know-how and the wherewithal to take charge of life itself.[10]

And this brings us to the third essential commitment of our modern Western ontology, which is its unapologetic anthropocentrism. Humans who presume themselves capable of confining the actions of God within a designated field of religion,

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[8] This is not to deny for a moment that millions of individuals in, say, the contemporary United States sincerely trust in the existence of divinities and other "religious" phenomena. But because of prevailing modern standards of realness, such phenomena are deemed to belong exclusively to the realm of "faith" or "private belief," even by the believers themselves. And regardless of the personal beliefs of its members, no "modern" government would ever act on the assumption that the health and wealth of its subjects are controlled ultimately by "supernatural" or "magical" forces.

[9] This ontological materialism somehow persists even though quantum physicists have long questioned the value of classical Newtonian ideas of material quiddity. See, e.g., Paul Davies and John Gribbin, *The Matter Myth: Dramatic Discoveries That Challenge Our Understanding of Physical Reality* (New York, 1992); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, N.C., 2007).

[10] For the apparent paradox that the category "religion" is a product of the modern secular world, see especially Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993); Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto, Calif., 2003). On the historical antipathy of Protestant Christianity to "magic," see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1971). On the birth of a modern "biopolitics," which authorizes humans to "take charge" of the wellsprings of life, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (New York, 1990), pt. 5; Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (Basingstoke, 2008), chaps. 1–3.

a marginal, socially inessential realm of their own making, will obviously have little compunction about imposing their self-evidently rational dominion upon the rest of his creation. Modern capitalist ecology is predicated upon an assumption of manifest species exceptionalism. The tangled mess of experience is thus categorically sundered into two mutually exclusive objects, whereby an intrinsically human order of knowledge and reason, agency and subjectivity, appears to be self-evidently distinct from a non-human order of "nature," from a mere "environment" of inert "resources," subject-less "processes," and enclosable "property."[11] And with this act of cosmic dichotomy, moderns have also sundered their world forever from most if not all non-modern worlds. They have irrevocably distanced themselves from peoples whose modes of being were governed by the unchanging annual rhythms of the seasons and the heavenly bodies, by the life cycles of animals and plants; from peoples who knew the lands that nurtured them in some sense as their parents or ancestors; from peoples who took it for granted that countless non-human agents and subjects were always out there, immanent in earth, sky, rivers, and seas, making all human life possible.[12]

But perhaps the modern ontological cuts that would be most unfathomable to non-modern peoples would be those we make between ourselves and other persons. Here we come to the fourth and last of the core ontological commitments that sustain liberal capitalist reality, namely our individualism, our commonsense assumption that all human beings are naturally autonomous, self-interested, pre-social subjects.

This ontological individualism would have been scarcely intelligible to, say, the inhabitants of precolonial Bali or Hawai'i, where the divine king or chief, the visible incarnation of the god Lono, was "the condition of possibility of the community," and thus "encompasse[d] the people in his own person, as a projection of his own being," such that his subjects were all "particular instances of the chief's existence."[13] It would have been barely imaginable, for that matter, in the world of medieval Europe, where conventional wisdom proverbially figured sovereign and subjects as the head and limbs of a single primordial "body politic" or *corpus mysticum*.[14] And the idea of a natural, pre-social individual would be wholly confounding to, say, traditional Hindus and the Hagen people of Papua New Guinea, who objectify all

[11] See, e.g., Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

[12] See, e.g., Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago, 2013); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley, Calif., 2013). For the claim that we now live in an "anthropocene" era, in which humankind has assumed the status of a geological agency, see, e.g., Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, *Love Your Monsters: Postenvironmentalism and the Anthropocene* (Oakland, Calif., 2011).

[13] Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, N.J., 1980), especially 128–129; Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985), 36; Sahlins, "Hierarchy and Humanity in Polynesia," in Antony Hooper and Judith Huntsman, eds., *Transformations of Polynesian Culture* (Auckland, 1985), 195–217, here 207, 214–215.

[14] This figure can be found in the works of numerous intellectual luminaries of the age, from Thomas Aquinas and Dante to Christine de Pizan and Jean Gerson. See Otto von Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Age*, trans. Frederic William Maitland (Cambridge, 1927), 22–30; Anton-Hermann Chroust, "The Corporate Idea and the Body Politic in the Middle Ages," *Review of Politics* 9, no. 4 (1947): 423–452; Antony Black, *Political Thought in Europe, 1250–1450* (New York, 1992), chap. 1. On the self-evident interdependence of human beings, see, e.g., Aquinas, *Commentary on the Ethics of Aristotle* 1.1.4. For "body politic" as *corpus mysticum*, see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), chap. 5.

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persons as permeable, partible "dividuals" or "social microcosms," as provisional embodiments of all the actions, gifts, and accomplishments of others that have made their lives possible.[15]

We alone in the modern capitalist West, it seems, regard individuality as the true primordial estate of the human person. We alone believe that humans are always already unitary, integrated selves, all born with a natural, pre-social disposition to pursue a rationally calculated self-interest and act competitively upon our no less natural, no less pre-social rights to life, liberty, and private property. We alone are thus inclined to see forms of sociality, like relations of kinship, nationality, ritual, class, and so forth, as somehow contingent, exogenous phenomena, not as essential constituents of our very subjectivity, of who or what we really are as beings. And we alone believe that social being exists to serve individual being, rather than the other way around—because we alone imagine that individual humans are freestanding units in the first place, "unsocially sociable" beings who ontologically precede whatever "society" our self-interest prompts us to form at any given time.[16]

Accordingly, the logic of liberal individualism mandates a separation between this self-sustaining "(civil) society" of free individuals and any corresponding state. While "government" may be necessary to safeguard and enforce rights, especially the right to accumulate property, it is also by definition a "necessary evil," since it entails alienating one's natural freedom to rule oneself to other self-interested individuals, who will inevitably rule for themselves.[17] Hence government's powers must be expressly constrained by mechanisms such as elections and term limits. Hence, too, because "the wealth of nations" ultimately depends on the unencumbered liberty of individuals to act on their innate dispositions to "improve" themselves, a free realm of "private" life must be protected from the realm of "public" power by bills of rights and other such devices.[18] And hence in our modern world alone, it seems entirely

[15] See especially McKim Marriott, "Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism," in Bruce Kapferer, ed., *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Change and Symbolic Behavior* (Philadelphia, 1976), 109–142; Marriott, "Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology," in Marriott, ed., *India through Hindu Categories* (New Delhi, 1990), 1–39; Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley, Calif., 1988). Cf. Mark S. Mosko, "Motherless Sons: 'Divine Kings' and 'Partible Persons' in Melanesia and Polynesia," *Man*, n.s., 27, no. 4 (1992): 697–717; Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992).

[16] The classic statement of this account of human subjectivity and sociality is John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis, 1980), chap. 8. On humanity's "unsocial sociability," see, e.g., Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent," in Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals* (Indianapolis, 1983), 29–40, here 31–32. Attempts to argue for the presence of individualism in non-modern worlds tend to mistake behavioral individualism for ontological individualism. See, e.g., Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford, 1978). While instances of egoism and self-interested behavior may be more or less ubiquitous in history, I know of no non-modern lifeworld that objectified itself as the creation of natural, pre-social human individuals. Ontological individualism, as we know it, can be realized only in a "European" lifeworld, in an environment that is already conditioned by other consonant, uniquely modern metaphysical commitments, like those to materialism, secularism, and anthropocentrism.

[17] E.g., Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," in *Thomas Paine: Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge, 2000), 1–45, here 3. On the protection of property rights as the primary purpose of government, see, e.g., Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 29.

[18] On how the individual disposition to accumulate produces national wealth, see, e.g., Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations, Books I–III* (Harmondsworth, 1986), 446. This is the proverbial "invisible hand" mechanism, first mentioned in Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L.

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natural that rulers should not manage the basic means of existence, that what we call the "market forces" of our "economy" should be free from any governmental control. In our world alone, it seems, human individuals are presumed to possess the capacity to secure all of life's basic necessities for themselves.[19]

Yet the tools of standard historicist practice remain strangely insensitive to the ontological variabilities of past experience. Instead, they authorize us to superimpose peculiarly modern metaphysical conditions upon all non-modern lifeworlds. To illustrate the point, we can look to classical Athens, a non-modern "Western" lifeworld, and consider how mainstream scholarship historicizes the Athenian *politeia* ("way of life").

One should say up front that antiquity has left us no explicit, comprehensive accounts of what the Athenians took to be the essential givens of their existence. Unlike us, it seems, the Athenians did not need armies of scientific experts to tell them what was really there and what was not. Their ontology was implicit in the stories they told about themselves and in all their shared practices, and it was far less complex and convoluted than our own. Briefly stated, their *politeia* was premised upon just three *a priori* metaphysical foundations.[20]

First and foremost, there were the gods. There were two populations in the land of Attica, not just one. The Athenians coexisted with innumerable deities and other numinous beings. Their *polis* was "totally suffused" with "the gods and their concerns."[21] These gods were not just effects of human ideas or beliefs. They were real, independent subjects and agents in the world of time and space, who ultimately controlled all of life's processes and outcomes.[22] Hence, the most costly, conspicuous

Macfie, vol. 1 of *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Oxford, 1976), 184.

[19] On the invention of "the economy" as a metrological device in the 1930s, see Timothy Mitchell, "Rethinking Economy," *Geoforum* 39, no. 3 (2008): 1116–1121. On liberal market freedom and its formation, see, e.g., Bernard E. Harcourt, *The Illusion of Free Markets: Punishment and the Myth of Natural Order* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011); Eric MacGilvray, *The Invention of Market Freedom* (New York, 2011).

[20] To my knowledge, the following account represents the first attempt by a modern historian to specify the contents of the ontology that was presupposed by the Athenian *politeia*. An important qualification should duly be noted. Like any other ontology, the Athenian instance is in the end what we would call a "working model" of the givens of existence in a particular lifeworld, albeit a model whose truth was continually presupposed and reproduced in the thought and practice of everyday life. As a contingent, ultimately provisional human construct, it can thus help us account for the general prevailing patterns of thought and action in Athens. But it could not in itself rule out the possibility of heterodox thought and action at the time. Accordingly, in Athenian antiquity as in liberal modernity, one can readily find cases of individual thought and behavior that might seem to contradict the prevailing ontological commitments. And it is even possible to find alternative "models" of the foundations of social being in the work of certain heterodox thinkers, e.g., Plato.

[21] Loren J. Samons II, *Empire of the Owl: Athenian Imperial Finance* (Stuttgart, 2000), 326–327. While it is hard to know how many gods received cults in Attica, the number was probably above two hundred, including more than thirty avatars of Athena. On this unusually large number, see Robert Garland, *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992), 9–14; Robert Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford, 2005), 397; cf. Xenophon, *Constitution of the Athenians* 3.2; Pausanias 1.17.1, 1.24.3.

[22] On the more important gods of the Athenians and their respective life-sustaining functions, see Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens*, chaps. 17–18. Cf. Jon D. Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1983), chap. 3.

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buildings in Athens were not political structures or philosophical schools. They were temples, suitably opulent residences for the divine overlords of the *polis*. Hence, too, time itself in Athens was organized around the annual performance of dozens of festivals, local and national. And hence prayers, oaths, and offerings to gods accompanied almost every human activity and event, from farming, trading, decision-making, and warfare to marriage and childbirth. While the Athenians convened *en masse* to produce binding decisions in their assembly on just forty or so days each year, their engagements with divinity were ubiquitous and continuous, requiring a vast ongoing outlay of precious resources. Ritual action in Athens was not merely a matter of showing piety or reverence to higher powers. It was above all about inducing those powers to manage and secure the vitality of the *polis* as a whole.[23]

The second foundation of Athenian social being was the land of Attica itself. In the eyes of the Athenians, Attica was not some generic territorial tract or abstract reserve of enclosable property. It was a land like no other, a singular living organism that was at once their "nurse and fatherland and mother."[24] To begin with, since the Athenians claimed to be an autochthonous or indigenous people who had inhabited Attica since time immemorial, the land was understood to be a patrilineal family inheritance, a means of life passed down to them by their fathers.[25] But they also simultaneously gendered their land as female, as a generative body or agency with whom they shared an essential consanguinity. Mother Attica, they said, had physically given birth to the first Athenians, ancestral kings such as Cecrops and Erechtheus, who were born literally from her soil.[26] As the first land on earth to provide life-sustaining crops of grain and olives, she had also nourished these first humans.[27] She had introduced gods to her domain to serve as "rulers and teachers," to instruct Athenians in all the basic "skills" (*tekhnai*) necessary to maintain their fledgling *polis*.[28] And just as she had served them ever since, as "the very nurse of their existence," so too the Athenians had "cherished her as fondly as the best of children cherish their fathers and mothers," by defending her, cultivating her, and protecting her from harm of all kinds.[29]

These same children of Attica, of course, duly formed the third essence of the *polis*. But they did not do so as a mere aggregate of pre-given individuals. Rather, like their counterparts in, say, precolonial Hawai'i and medieval Europe, they took their place in the world as a single, corporate person, a person they called simply Demos, "the People of the Athenians." As the human face or person of the *polis* itself, this unitary Demos was a kind of ageless, primordial superorganism that had been continually present in Attica since the time of those first earth-born kings. It thus existed prior to and apart from the particular living, breathing persons who happened to constitute and embody it at any given time.[30] So membership in this

[23] For the Athenians' exceptionally lavish expenditures on festivals, see, e.g., Demosthenes 4.35–36.

[24] Isocrates 4.24–25.

[25] E.g., Demosthenes 60.4; Herodotus 1.56.2, 7.161.3; Lysias 2.17; Thucydides 1.2.5, 2.36.1.

[26] E.g., Euripides, *Ion* 1163–1164; Herodotus 8.55; Homer, *Iliad* 5.47–48. Cf. Pindar, *Isthmian* 2.19.

[27] E.g., Demosthenes 60.4–5; Plato, *Menexenus* 237d–238a.

[28] Plato, *Menexenus* 238a–b.

[29] Isocrates 12.125.

[30] See Greg Anderson, "The Personality of the Greek State," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 129 (2009): 1–21. Demos was typically figured as a singular mature male person. For a catalogue and discussion of more than thirty attested Demos images, see Amy C. Smith, "Athenian Political Art from the Fifth and

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Demos was not a matter of abstract, legalistic "citizenship." It was about "having a share of" (*metekhein*) the life of a free social body, a *polis* life or *politeia*, without which an individual life would have been unfree and unthinkable.[31] Prevailing assumptions about the essentially corporate, primordial nature of Greek *polis* communities are well expressed by Aristotle:

> The *polis* is by nature clearly prior to the household and the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part; for example, if the whole body is destroyed, there will be no foot or hand, except in the equivocal sense that we might speak of a stone hand; for when destroyed the hand will be no better than that . . . The proof that the *polis* is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But he who is unable to live in society, or has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god; he is no part of the *polis*.[32]

For Greeks, in other words, human life beyond a bare animal existence was always already social, and social life was always already what we would call political.[33]

No less alien to modern sensibilities, the constituent elements of the Athenian social body were not persons but households (*oikoi*).[34] Between them, these households shared responsibility for extracting the means of existence from the land of Attica, which was conceptualized as a life source for all, not as "private property."[35] Like the cells of a human body, Athenian *oikoi* subsisted as discrete entities by maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the compound organism that they collectively composed. Hence, simply being born within Athenian territory did not make one an Athenian and give one the capacity to "share" in the *politeia*. Under normal circumstances, what made one an Athenian was being born into the body of Demos through an Athenian *oikos*, through parents who were themselves already products and producers of the life of the *polis*.[36]

Fourth Centuries BCE: Images of Political Personifications," in Christopher W. Blackwell, ed., *Dēmos: Classical Athenian Democracy*, 14–23, http://www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article_personifications. Cf. Aristophanes, *Knights*; Pausanias 1.3.3; *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 12.87.

[31] On the differences between *polis* membership and modern citizenship, see Martin Ostwald, "Shares and Rights: 'Citizenship' Greek Style and American Style," in Josiah Ober and Charles W. Hedrick, eds., *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern* (Princeton, N.J., 1996), 49–61.

[32] *Politics* 1253a19–29. For a more extended comparison of the *polis* to a human body, see *Politics* 1302b34–1303a2.

[33] In the Greek mind, the idea of a "society" of pre-social individuals would have evoked images of the lawless anti-*polis* of the antisocial, man-eating Cyclopes (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.105–130).

[34] On the "centrality" of the *oikos* to Athenian life, see, e.g., Hans Julius Wolff, "Marriage Law and Family Organization in Ancient Athens," *Traditio* 2 (1944): 43–95; S. C. Todd, *The Shape of Athenian Law* (Oxford, 1993), 201–231; Edward E. Cohen, *The Athenian Nation* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), especially 30–48.

[35] On Athenian ideas about land "ownership" and how they differed from modern, liberal suppositions, see Lin Foxhall, "Household, Gender and Property in Classical Athens," *Classical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1989): 22–44; Alison Burford, *Land and Labor in the Greek World* (Baltimore, 1993), chap. 1.

[36] Hence, the process that scholars usually refer to in modern terms as "citizenship registration" was really no more than an attempt to verify that the would-be Athenian truly was descended from an established, legitimate Athenian *oikos*. Hence, too, this process was conducted in one's local district or "deme," not in a central location, since one's neighbors were best positioned to determine who was and who was not a real Athenian. See David Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica, 508/7–ca. 250 B.C.: A Political and Social Study* (Princeton, N.J., 1986), 97–109. As a general rule, "aliens" (*xenoi*) could become Athenians only if they had made some extraordinary contribution to the well-being of the Athenian *polis*.

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As for the respective contributions of those parents to the reproduction of Demos, the Athenians believed that the gods had designed male and female to play different, but complementary and equally essential, roles. Since every Athenian *oikos* was in principle a hereditary, patrilineal unit, its senior male member served as its custodial head and primary representative in the outside world. He duly assumed with his other fellow household heads the shared responsibility for administering and protecting the life of the social body as a whole. Meanwhile, as "outsiders" who had left one household to marry into another, adult females obviously did not normally assume such duties. Their primary role in the *polis* was rather to sustain the life of Demos by producing, nurturing, and managing life within its constituent *oikoi*.[37]

Given, then, the inseparable symbiosis between *polis* and *oikos* in classical Athens, how exactly did the Athenians objectify personhood and selfhood? Again, the prevailing notions were distinctly non-modern. Indeed, it may be helpful to think of each Athenian, whether male or female, as a "dividual" or plural self. Most immediately, each one was simultaneously both a *polites*, a constituent or expression of the social body or Demos, and an *idiotes*, a constituent or expression of a particular *oikos*.[38] In our modern terms, it is as if they were all two different people or beings at the same time, each with its own distinct form of personality or subjectivity. And both forms of subjectivity were relational.[39] That is to say, Athenians never stood just for themselves as disaggregated individuals, as singular instantiations of a universal personhood. They always confronted the world as constituents of a particular pre-given group or body larger than themselves, as human materializations of the *polis* and the household that made their lives free and possible in the first place. *Oikos* and *polis* were what they were, the very stuff that they were made of, making an Athenian essentially different from all other persons, Greek and non-Greek.[40]

In sum, the real world of the Athenians was premised upon a life-sustaining interdependence between just three elements: a cosmic ecology of gods, land, and people. If the gods' role in this ecology was to reproduce the basic conditions of existence for land and people, the role of mother Attica was to furnish the essential means of material life for people and gods. The people's role, meanwhile, was to harness and distribute these means in such a way that the land would always be cultivated and defended, that the gods would always be honored appropriately, and that they themselves would remain a healthy, united Demos, thereby ensuring the

[37] On the "natural" complementarity of gender roles, see, e.g., Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 7.1–43, where the wife/mother figure is cast as the "queen bee" of the *oikos*. More generally, on the vital contributions made by women to the reproduction of *polis* and *oikos*, see, e.g., Virginia J. Hunter, *Policing Athens: Social Control in the Attic Lawsuits, 420–320 B.C.* (Princeton, N.J., 1994); Cynthia Patterson, "The Case against Neaira and the Public Ideology of the Athenian Family," in Alan L. Boegehold and Adele C. Scafuro, eds., *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology* (Baltimore, 1994), 199–216; Patterson, *The Family in Greek History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Cohen, *The Athenian Nation*, 30–48.

[38] On the *polites/idiotes* distinction, see, e.g., Lene Rubinstein, "The Athenian Political Perception of the *Idiotes*," in Paul Cartledge, Paul Millett, and Sitta von Reden, eds., *Kosmos: Essays in Order, Conflict, and Community in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 1998), 125–143. Feminine equivalents of these distinct personalities (*politis*, *idiotis*) are also attested, though not commonly so.

[39] Cf. the similar emphasis on relational selfhood in Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue* (Oxford, 1996).

[40] For a recent argument that a distinctly "racial" (rather than legalistic) model of "citizenship" prevailed in Athens, see Susan Lape, *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy* (New York, 2010).

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orderly perpetuation of the ecology as a whole. And they organized themselves accordingly.

This mode of organization is what they called their *politeia*, their *demokratia*. It had nothing to do with "democracy" as we understand the term. It was whatever Demos had to do to ensure its own continued vitality in its particular environment, where life depended upon preserving symbiotic relations with mysterious non-human agencies in the face of more or less constant threats from other human communities elsewhere. In short, *demokratia* was wherever the constituents of Demos, male and female, acted in and upon the world to preserve the life of the *polis*. This might be in their homes or neighborhoods. Or it might be in the assembly, in law courts, at festivals, on the battlefield, or wherever else Athenians convened to act as one in the unitary person of the *polis* itself. When so gathered, they would in effect shed their personal selves as *idiotai*, or household members, and assume their other social personae, as *politai* (male) or *politides* (female), as generic, interchangeable incarnations of Demos, the human essence of the *polis*.[41] As such, these Athenian "civilians" freely and continually ruled themselves, with no need for complex administrative systems, a police apparatus, or expert professional leaders of any kind.[42] This, it seems, is what *demokratia* meant in classical Athens.

Yet it is not what *demokratia* seems to mean to specialists today. Greek historians are of course fully aware that the Athenians lived according to their own world-making truths, including all those just described. But when we historicize their *politeia*, we are instead obliged to use modern, universalizing models and categories, tools that actively refashion this non-modern lifeworld to fit our own modern ontological presuppositions.

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THESE STANDARD TOOLS COMMIT US, first of all, to a peculiarly modern form of ontological materialism. They lead us to believe that the essences of Athens, like the essences of all complex societies, are to be found in a material substrate of self-evidently distinct fields or structures, like the political, the social, and the economic.

For example, they predispose us to think that the Athenian assembly, courts, and other decision-making bodies instantiated a freestanding field of "government" or "state," an intrinsically "political" system or space that was somehow detached from a separate object called Athenian "society." Never mind that these two mutually exclusive categories do not correspond to phenomena in ancient experience. We seldom question their utility, even when it is pointed out that, say, Athenian "government" was run entirely by civilian volunteers, by members of Athenian "society." Instead, we simply infer that the *polis* of Athens must have been some kind of unusual blurring or fusion of state and society, even though the logic that causes us to see these two components as discrete, mutually exclusive objects in the first place, the liberal logic of protecting a free "privacy" from government's "necessary evil," would have been entirely meaningless to the Athenians.[43]

[41] For more on the realization of Demos in practice, see Anderson, "The Personality of the Greek State," 10–17.

[42] On self-policing by male and female Athenians, see Hunter, *Policing Athens*.

[43] See, e.g., Robin Osborne, *Demos: The Discovery of Classical Attika* (Cambridge, 1985), 7–8; Ian

Likewise, our science leads us to presume that activities such as farming, trading, and moneylending must have together constituted something called an "economy." Apparently it matters little to us that the Athenians could not have imagined such a system, because theirs was a world where there were no abstract "markets," capitalist-style corporations, or private property as such. It matters little that theirs was an environment where hereditary household units were expected to supply the daily material needs of all, where each individual *oikos* was its own self-sustaining miniature life "system," where free people by definition worked only for themselves. Again, for historians, ancient obliviousness to the presence of a modern social object like an economy does not mean that said object was not really there in antiquity. It means only that its presence must have been somehow blurred, hidden, or "embedded" elsewhere in experience.[44]

In short, when we historicize the *politeia* of classical Athens, our accounts invariably translate the evidence of non-modern experience into modern social objects such as government, society, and economy. While we presume these accounts to be God's-eye, "etic" (outsider) representations of objectively real, material phenomena, the objects in question would have meant little or nothing to the Athenians. They remain materially self-evident only to us, not least because it is the very tools of our practice that are causing us to see them there in the first place, by imposing modern ontological presuppositions upon the ancient data. As for the Athenians' own ontology, the non-modern ontology that actually conditioned their *politeia*, our historicist tools would have us reduce this to a body of insubstantial, freestanding ideas, to a pre-scientific, "emic" (insider) account of the material world that we ourselves have been busy constructing. Thus, like all the gods, myths, and other "imaginary" or "ideological" phenomena that seemed all too true and real at the time, the contents of this ancient ontology obviously have no place in history proper. They belong instead to the separate ambit of "cultural history," along with all the other non-modern figments of the Athenian mind.[45]

Morris, *Burial and Ancient Society: The Rise of the Greek City-State* (Cambridge, 1987), 5; Christian Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, trans. David McLintock (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), especially 20–22; Josiah Ober, "The *Polis* as a Society: Aristotle, John Rawls and the Athenian Social Contract," in Mogens Herman Hansen, ed., *The Ancient Greek City-State* (Copenhagen, 1993), 129–160, here 129.

[44] For the "market economy" in Athens, see, e.g., Edmund M. Burke, "The Economy of Athens in the Classical Era: Some Adjustments to the Primitivist Model," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 122 (1992): 199–226; Edward E. Cohen, *Athenian Economy and Society: A Banking Perspective* (Princeton, N.J., 1993). For the "ancient economy" as an "embedded" or "partially embedded" phenomenon, see, e.g., M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, Calif., 1999); Darel Tai Engen, *Honor and Profit: Athenian Trade Policy and the Economy and Society of Greece, 415–307 BCE* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2010). For all his well-intended efforts to question liberal presuppositions about humankind's innate propensity for competitive economic acquisition, Karl Polanyi's familiar claim that economic life in premodern societies was "submerged" or "embedded" in "social relations" still perpetuates the peculiarly modern idea that "economies" themselves are quasi-natural objects, phenomena that occur more or less inevitably across all human experience, even if their presence remains unobserved at the time. See Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York, 1944), especially chap. 4.

[45] Seminal works on Athenian imaginaries and ideologies that have helped to define and perpetuate this analytical dichotomy include Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass., 1986); Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton, N.J., 1989); Boegehold and Scafuro, *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology*.

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Next, by authorizing us to divest Athenian reality of its constituent "culture" in this way, our historicist tools of course require us to secularize Athens. As mere cultural constructions or representations, as self-evidently unreal objects rather than real subjects, Athenian divinities can be summarily excised from the world they once ruled. It makes no difference, apparently, that the Athenians premised their entire *politeia* upon the assumption that gods controlled the outcomes of most if not all human activities, devoting huge quantities of their social resources to the cause of maintaining the divine favor upon which their entire ecology depended. Our historicism presumes that we can make meaningful sense of this *politeia* only if we study it as an essentially disenchanted construct, as if the Athenians were really just there all by themselves. It thus encourages us to abstract their vital engagements with divinity from the rest of their experience, which is thereby effectively secularized. And it bids us to bundle all their non-secular beliefs and rituals conveniently together in a field we call "religion," which it inclines us to regard as a phenomenon of minor, largely antiquarian interest, an unfathomably irrational backdrop to the real business of history that was going on elsewhere.[46]

And then the anthropocentrist premises of our historicism oblige us to dismantle the ecology of the *polis* still further, to sunder the Athenians from their ancestral land, from mother Attica herself. Where they saw a loving parent who actively and continually nurtured and sustained them, making them whatever they were, we tend to see only a passive "environment," an assemblage of landscape, livestock, and climate that existed to be exploited by acquisitive individuals. Where they saw a consanguineous communion of land and people, we see division, the primordial cleavage that our historicist science requires us to inscribe between a human realm and a non-human "nature." Accordingly, we write the history of their *polis* as if they were its only agents and subjects, as if they imagined themselves the masters of their world rather than its grateful products. As for the contributions to this story made by mother Attica and all the other non-human agents and subjects in this ancient life system, these must be demystified and studied under the specialist rubric of "environmental history," if they are to be studied at all.[47]

Finally, after encouraging us to strip Athenian reality of its gods, its Attic motherland, and its "culture," our historicism would have us complete the disintegration of the Athenians' ecology by insisting that we dismember Demos itself, the human essence of the *polis*. Simply put, the individualist premises of our models and categories cannot accept the reality of a natural social body or self. So they force us instead to reduce a perpetual, pre-given corporate subject, a free superorganism of households, to an ever-changing aggregate of pre-given individual subjects, turning it into a male-only, quasi-liberal association of free "citizens." And of course these

[46] For an attempt to write a history of Athenian "religion," see Robert Parker, *Athenian Religion: A History* (Oxford, 1996). For an influential specialist treatment of religion as the "central ideology" of the *polis*, see Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "What Is *Polis* Religion?," in Oswyn Murray and Simon Price, eds., *The Greek City: From Homer to Alexander* (Oxford, 1990), 295–322.

[47] Even nuanced studies of Greek ecology still take for granted modern ontological divides between, say, "humankind" and "nature," "population" and "environment." See, e.g., J. Donald Hughes, "Ecology in Ancient Greece," *Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1975): 115–125; Robert Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991).

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free, rational, quasi-modern subjects seem entirely at home in the world that our categories have made for them, a disenchanted world of quasi-modern social objects.

The net outcome of our mainstream historicist efforts to render the Athenian way of life intelligible is thus a distinctly materialist, secularist, anthropocentrist, and individualist account, a consensus account that we might call "democratic Athens." Here the Athenian *politeia* is summarily reduced to a specialist "political" system or field of "government." Because liberal presuppositions associate "the political" with power and "the social" with freedom, this "government" is invariably seen as a kind of central command structure from which all order in Athens duly radiated. And because the Athenians knew their *politeia* as *demokratia*, we invariably call this structure "democracy" and generally assume that it was premised upon much the same individualist, egalitarian principles as inform our own liberal governments today. In other words, the primary essence of Athens was not a social body of households that was intent on preserving its life-sustaining ecology with the gods and land of Attica, as the Athenians themselves believed. It was, rather, a power structure that was monopolized by self-interested male equals.[48]

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THIS ORTHODOX HISTORICIST ACCOUNT of the Athenian *politeia* is troubling for at least three fundamental reasons. First, on a basic ethical level, there is something deeply troubling about a historicism that would re-engineer non-modern social being to fit our modern ontological presuppositions. As the Athenian instance well demonstrates, our conventional practice is hardly the innocent exercise in impartial, God's-eye analysis that it takes itself to be. It is altogether more like a thought experiment. In its well-intentioned efforts to render past worlds commensurable and mutually intelligible, it ends up homogenizing the very contents of all past experience along modern ontological lines. It systematically isolates its historical subjects from all the conditions of their existence, divesting them of their thought, their gods, their ecologies, and what they took to be their real selves. It then reprograms their subjectivities along individualist lines, inserts them in a world of our making, one that presupposes their individuality, and then tries to explain how they themselves might once have created and sustained such a world. The end result of all this is a strange kind of counterfactual history, an "as if" or "what if?" form of history, one that will always end up figuring past worlds as imperfect premonitions of our own.[49]

In other words, our standard mode of history-making authorizes us to engage in a kind of retrospective political violence, a historicist imperialism that would forcefully impose the realities of our liberal capitalist present upon peoples who can no longer speak for themselves. To a point, of course, this kind of imperialism is inevitable in any form of modern historical practice. But our current practice comes

[48] See especially Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*; Josiah Ober, "The Nature of Athenian Democracy," in Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton, N.J., 1996), 107–122.

[49] Cf. Chakrabarty's point that "European" histories of non-modern experiences will always be stories of "incompleteness," "absence," and "lack." See *Provincializing Europe*, especially chap. 1.

at much too high a price for our subjects, effectively depriving them of the power to determine the essential truth of who and what they really were at the time.[50]

Presumably, the most immediate justification for this ethically questionable practice would be that it at least produces accounts that are genuinely "historical." And this brings us to the second problem with the consensus account of classical Athens, for the closer one looks at the "democratic Athens" of our textbooks and scholarship, the more historically questionable it seems to be. Even when taken on its own historicist terms, it is an account that seems to be riddled with improbable paradoxes and contradictions.

For example, if the Athenians ordered their world according to something like egalitarian post-Enlightenment principles, how could they have denied native-born adult females their civil right of self-determination and excluded them from political life? Can we even speak meaningfully of female "citizens" in Athens at all? For that matter, why did male Athenians never apparently question the pronounced inequalities of wealth among them? Why did they simply accept the fact that a tiny minority (approximately 1 percent) of super-rich citizens were hundreds if not thousands of times wealthier than the average, allowing them effectively to monopolize all positions of influence and leadership within the *polis*?[51] More obviously, if they were such idealistic democrats, how could the Athenians have tolerated the mass importation of slaves into Attica from non-Greek regions such as Thrace, Scythia, and Anatolia? How could they have accepted the open exploitation of as many as 80,000 unfree workers in their midst at any given time?[52] And what, exactly, are we to make of the empire that the Athenians established in the Aegean basin circa 454–404 B.C., a ruthless imperialist project that required the domination of and extortion of vast revenues from around 170 other Greek city-states?[53]

Needless to say, specialists are hardly unaware of these and other such issues. All are routinely seen as "problems," as examples of the "contradictions," "anomalies," or "exceptions to the rule" that are allegedly endemic in any complex society.[54] But at what point do the sheer number and significance of these "anomalies" cause us to question whether any such "rule" was actually there at the time? Was Athens really so improbably conflicted, so continually at odds with the "democratic" essence of its social being?

More serious still is a basic problem of evidence. The ontological conditions for this strangely self-conflicted Athens are simply missing. There is no evidence that the Athenians knew any precise equivalents of our state-society divide, our freestanding systems of government and economy, our public and private spheres, our sacred and secular realms, our legalistic citizenship, our rights, our natural individuality, or any of the other essential phenomena that are presupposed by a proto-liberal order. And

[50] Cf. Carol Symes's observation that modern historicism's "colonization" of the Middle Ages means that "there is no way to study 'medieval' people for their own sake or on their own terms"; "When We Talk about Modernity," 716.

[51] On the incomes, expenditures, and influence of this super-wealthy minority, see John K. Davies, *Wealth and the Power of Wealth in Classical Athens* (Salem, N.H., 1981).

[52] For a good general introduction to the topic of slavery in Greece, see M. I. Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* (Harmondsworth, 1981), chaps. 6–11.

[53] For a thorough overview of the subject, see Russell Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford, 1972).

[54] E.g., Cohen, *The Athenian Nation*, 191.

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in the absence of such conditions, it becomes that much harder to defend our "democratic Athens" as a historically meaningful account.

To this, one may respond that it is ultimately immaterial whether the Athenians themselves were aware of the presence of such phenomena in their world. All that matters in the end is that we moderns can see these phenomena, even if we ourselves must actively construct them from the data of a lifeworld that knew itself otherwise. We know these phenomena are there because they are invariably there, always and everywhere, in every complex social environment. Our modern scientific devices tell us so. And in the end, the ontology presupposed by our historicist science is more true and real than all others, because it rests on genuinely objective standards of truth and realness. But does it? This brings us to the third basic problem with "democratic Athens," namely its philosophically questionable premises.

To begin with, it is far from self-evident where any independent confirmation of our modern Western ontological truths might come from. Obviously it cannot come from our own commonsense experience of everyday life, since that common sense is itself already conditioned by precisely the same modern Western truths. Our essential individuality as subjects will inevitably seem to possess the truth of its own material self-evidence in our real world, a liberal capitalist lifeworld that is filled with phenomena such as rights, privacy, democracy, and a free market economy, which all continually presuppose and reproduce the truth of that same individuality. Nor can this confirmation come from our mainstream modern science, since that science also already takes the truth of our prevailing ontology entirely for granted. A knowledge-producing apparatus that draws categorical distinctions between "natural" and "human" sciences, and one that divides human experience into distinct political, social, economic, and psychological fields, has already made its own basic ontological commitments all too clear. Nor, for that matter, can confirmation come from any appeal to some transcendent, objective truth standard, since such a standard likewise has purchase and meaning only within a modern materialist ontology, one that is already inscribed with that Cartesian line in the sand that would forever distinguish thought from matter.

If one then looks beyond the confines of orthodox modernist science, to the thought of those who do not take modernity's ontological truths for granted, the picture becomes even less reassuring. Indeed, one will find a disconcerting number of authorities across many disciplines who have all somehow challenged the universal truth status of modernity's prevailing account of what is really there in the world.

For more than eighty years now, theoretical physicists have recognized that classical Newtonian materialism cannot adequately account for all the phenomenal contents of nature. Its inadequacies are most readily visible at the quantum level, where phenomena such as light and electrons do not possess fixed, intrinsic properties as objectively knowable or observable things-in-themselves. Light, for example, will reveal itself as particles under some experimental conditions, and as waves under others. So in either case, experimenters are not scientifically seeing or knowing a quantum-level object as a mind-independent entity. What they are really seeing or knowing is a quantum effect, an effect produced by the interaction between an observed materiality and their own apparatus of observation. All quantum-level phenomena, like particulate light, are thus materio-cultural effects of this kind. They are

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"whole phenomena," inextricable entanglements of what we conventionally call thought and matter.[55]

And one could argue that this vein of post-Cartesian analysis has effectively been extended from the quantum up to the social level by another group of heterodox thinkers. Influenced by the likes of Marx, Gramsci, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, a formidable array of contemporary theorists have directly or indirectly challenged the ontological foundations of liberal modernity's human sciences.[56]

For example, thinkers from Marx to Foucault, along with many of their disciples, would fundamentally question the self-evidence of the natural, pre-social individual, the proposition upon which all our prevailing social truths ultimately depend. Together, one could say, they have shown at length and in detail that this particular species of human subjectivity is a historical artifact, a novel product of ongoing interactions between modern, liberal social knowledge and the materialities of modern capitalist experience.[57] Along similar lines, others have questioned the material self-evidence of other modern essences, including state, society, and economy, revealing them instead to be complex, historically contingent entanglements of thought and materiality.[58] And postcolonial theorists have repeatedly drawn attention to the unacknowledged Eurocentrism of mainstream social-scientific categories and devices, from religion and the sacred-secular binary to historicism itself.[59]

More generally, posthumanist theorists have documented the implicit anthropocentrism of modern knowledge production, just as theorists of gender, sexuality, and the body have sought ways to move beyond the essentializing materialism of this same knowledge.[60] More generally still, historians and sociologists of science have variously demonstrated the contingent, conditional status of the ostensibly objective

[55] I allude here to the "Copenhagen Interpretation" of quantum physics, formulated originally by Bohr and Heisenberg, which has remained dominant since the later 1920s. On "whole phenomena" and Bohrian epistemology, see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 194–198.

[56] The epistemological implications of some of this "postmodernist" critique for our disciplinary enterprise have been debated quite widely. See, e.g., John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (October 1987): 879–907; Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990); Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader* (London, 1997), selections 21–31. But I would argue that the discipline has not yet fully confronted postmodernism's ontological implications, which seem to be no less consequential.

[57] E.g., Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, 1993), especially 83–85; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977); Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1: pt. 5; Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, chaps. 1–3; Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago, 1991); Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1999).

[58] E.g., Timothy Mitchell, "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," in George Steinmetz, ed., *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999), 76–97; Mitchell, "Rethinking Economy"; Bob Jessop, *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach* (Cambridge, 2008); Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York, 2010).

[59] E.g., Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*.

[60] E.g., Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990); Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993); Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991), 149–181; Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, 2008); Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham, N.C., 2011).

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truths produced by scientific research.[61] And leading heterodox philosophers have on various grounds dismissed the very possibility of any truly objective, truly scientific knowledge altogether.[62]

It may be helpful to think of all these thinkers collectively as anthropologists of our modernity, as ethnographers of the present. Scrutinizing our modern Western experience as if from outside, they variously present us with a critical counter-knowledge of our real world from a kind of epistemological elsewhere. Taken together, they are not suggesting that there is some other, more truly real world lying undiscovered somewhere "out there." On the contrary, they are critiquing the ways we conventionally think about the very nature of realness itself, inviting us to see it as something that is always simultaneously "out there" and "in here," so that one can never definitively say where a subjective inside ends and an objective outside begins. Diverse as their concerns may seem, all thus in some way problematize the primordial Cartesian distinction between mind and matter, between knowing and being, the epistemological and the ontological, that makes modernity's objective standards of truth and realness possible in the first place. And they do this by showing us again and again how the contents of a real world cannot ultimately be disentangled from the contents of the minds of those for whom that world is real, even if those contents happen to include the belief that the two can in fact be separated.

In so doing, the ethnographers of the present encourage us to look past the seemingly fixed, stable ontological framework or architecture of our real world and see the essential fluidity, plasticity, and provisionality of its constitution. Like quantum physicists of human experience, they help us to apprehend this constitution on a kind of subatomic level. They help us to sense the complex microphysical ways in which dynamic observed materialities (practices, institutions, bodies, etc.) combine as reagents with ever-changing "apparatuses of observation" (truth regimes, subjectivities, etc.) to produce quantum materio-cultural effects, "whole phenomena" such as states, economies, and individuals, that appear to be self-evidently there. They thereby help us to see that realness is a process, not a fixed state or condition. And they also help us to see how our knowledge is inextricably and constitutively woven into the very fabric of being, how materialist science, natural and social, actively determines where the ontological cuts in this fabric should be made, and thus how science itself helps to produce the very reality that it purports to be merely describing.[63]

If we are prepared to accept this alternative quantum vision, it then becomes altogether easier to understand why our conventional historicist practice is so se-

[61] E.g., Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London, 1958); Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962); Mary Hesse, *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (Berkeley, Calif., 1974); Andrew Pickering, *Constructing Quarks: A Sociological History of Particle Physics* (Chicago, 1984); Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, N.J., 1986); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York, 2005).

[62] See especially Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 1979); Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989); Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1975); Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth* (New York, 2011).

[63] For a much more fully elaborated account along these lines, proposing an "agential realist" alternative to scientific realism and social constructivism, see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

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riously problematic. If every human lifeworld is the net product of an inextricable, mutually constitutive entanglement between its prevailing body of social knowledge and its particular materialities, one cannot make meaningful sense of one such world with the social knowledge of another. For whenever we use modern terms and categories to "translate" a non-modern lifeworld, converting a "*polis* of the Athenians" into a "democratic Athens," we are in effect replacing our subjects' standards of truth and realness with our own, thereby fundamentally altering whatever was really there at the time. We are modernizing that world, reconditioning it at the ontological level. Which is to say, we are in fact fashioning an entirely new, hypothetical lifeworld in the metaphysical image of our own, a strange kind of never-never-world, where the data we selectively abstract from non-modern experience entangles with our own "apparatuses of observation" to produce phenomena such as economies and individuals, culture and discourse, that are real only to us.

At the same time, the new quantum vision also helps us to see that a more ethically responsible historicism, one that grants non-modern peoples more power to determine the truths of their own experience, will also be a more philosophically and historically defensible form of historicism. For in order to produce more theoretically robust, more historically meaningful accounts of each vanished lifeworld, we need to suspend our own standards of truth and realness and build those accounts around whatever our subjects took to be the pre-given conditions of their existence. Instead of seeing their ontological presuppositions as freestanding beliefs, ideas, or discourses that existed independent of the "real" contents of their world, separated off by some Cartesian mind-matter divide, we need to reintegrate them into the phenomenal fabric of that world, to see how they continually interacted with prevailing materialities to produce the effect of that world's realness. To be sure, if we are prepared to take this ontological turn in our practice, we will still be producing a peculiarly modern knowledge of the past. We will still be writing "histories." But these histories will better equip us to recognize and represent the irreducible heterogeneities of human experience.

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How, then, might this turn to ontological history change how we make sense of the way of life in classical Athens? First and foremost, an ontological history of Athens would have no place for the phenomenon we call "religion." It would not dichotomize the Athenian lifeworld into entirely distinct sacred and secular realms of experience, each governed by its own sovereign truths, norms, and logics. For all analytical purposes, it would have to objectify the *polis* as the Athenians objectified it, seeing it instead as a single realm of experience inhabited by two entirely distinct populations, the human and the divine. And it would have to objectify the rest of the contents of the *polis* in similarly Athenian terms, carefully distinguishing what belonged to one population from what belonged to the other, whether these were things that the Athenians considered to be theirs to use and dispose of (*ta hosia*), or things that they had consecrated to the gods with whom they coexisted (*ta hiera*).[64]

[64] On this fundamental distinction, see Josine Blok, "A 'Covenant' between Gods and Men: *Hiera kai hosia* and the Greek Polis," in Claudia Rapp and H. A. Drake, eds., *The City in the Classical and Post-Classical World: Changing Contexts of Power and Identity* (Cambridge, 2014), 14–37.

And viewing the *polis* in this new way would profoundly change how we see its mode of life as a whole.

Perhaps above all, it would cause us to radically alter the way we think about the production of order in Attica. Instead of assigning the work of government to a specialist, ostensibly secular field of "the political," we would have to recognize that a very large portion of this work was assumed to be performed by divine agencies. Several hundred different divinities were probably acknowledged in Athens during the period, and between them they governed all of life's essential conditions, processes, and outcomes, from weather patterns and land fertility to wealth creation and battlefield fortunes, from human health and reproduction to assembly and courtroom resolutions. And once we start to take seriously the reality in Athens of all this ongoing divine governance, we would then also have to recognize that the most crucial human contribution to the management of lives and livelihoods in Attica was not in fact the business transacted by the Athenians in the assembly, council, and other such "political" institutions. It was, rather, the business they transacted continually at a multitude of shrines and sanctuaries, the business of transforming *hosia* into consecrated *hiera*, the endless essential business of offering gifts that might induce the gods to secure and perpetuate the vitality of the *polis* as a whole.

Second, this turn to ontological history would require us to abandon talk of any "economy" in Athens. The category makes no sense in a world where largely mysterious, unmeasurable, non-human forces ultimately determined the conditions of all production, distribution, and exchange. It makes no sense in an environment where the land was both a shared birthright and a kind of benevolent parent, one that actively nurtured human vitality. It makes no sense in a context where the prospects for "self-betterment" were perennially limited, where the means of one's daily subsistence were determined largely by one's patrimonial inheritance, where community members as a rule worked only for themselves. Even if the Athenians could somehow have imagined the essential components of an economy, abstractions such as "labor," "capital," "market forces," "growth rates," and "gross domestic product," they would surely have found these metrics to be all but useless for their purposes.

What mattered to them in the end was not a net or a mean prosperity that could be measured by some modern, reductive, economistic notion of "value." What mattered was preserving the primordial ecology upon which the lives of all Athenians had depended since time immemorial. What mattered was maintaining a constant flow of precious life-sustaining resources between the gods, the land, and the household units of the *polis*.

Analyzing the Athenian ecology on its own terms in this way would then help us to see, for example, that the most essential "exchanges" in the *polis* were those transacted between the human and the divine populations, whereby tithes, sacrifices, libations, votives, temples, and the like were "traded" for vital resources such as sunshine, rainfall, agricultural fertility, bodily health, and effective decision-making. Gifts to the gods were like taxes rendered to maintain the infrastructure of the cosmos. At the same time, this analytical move would also help us to see more clearly the many crucial contributions made by females to Athenian social being. By leaving their own ancestral lineages to marry into their husbands' households, Athenian wives did not just reinforce the bonds between the self-supporting "cells" of an en-

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dogamous social body. They also served to perpetuate the ongoing circulation of vital resources within that body, bringing with them the natural capacities for reproduction, child-rearing, and household management that allowed Athenian *oikoi* to function as self-supporting entities in the first place. And it would help us to see even more clearly than before how the life of the social body as a whole came to depend upon the surplus resources produced by the tiny minority of super-wealthy *oikoi*. As the most conspicuous beneficiaries of the *polis* ecology, members of these affluent households were obliged to assume a proportionately large responsibility for its perpetuation, to use their superior wealth, leisure, and education to advise, lead, and if necessary fund the actions of Demos on a consistent basis.[65] And with elites duly discharging such duties, there was no express need for Demos itself to generate large revenues, levy regular taxes, or educate its constituents.[66]

In turn, this enhanced recognition of the contributions of females and elites to the welfare of the *polis* should further encourage us to eschew any use of the modern "state-society" and "public-private" binaries in our accounts of the Athenian *politeia*. Instead, as these examples suggest, we need to recognize that Athenian *demokratia* presupposed an essential interdependency between the corporate self of Demos and its member households, between the life of the social body and the lives of its constituent "cells."

Hence, it was taken for granted in Athens that households and neighborhoods could largely govern themselves, administering all manner of ostensibly "public" concerns, from basic necessities of education and healthcare to ritual activity, police work, marriages, and even admissions to Demos membership, which were managed by local district associations (demes).[67] Hence, too, the Athenians saw no need to preserve any realm of "privacy" with a device like a bill of rights. In Athens, it would have been ontologically nonsensical to insulate households from the social body upon which they all depended and which they all collectively composed and sustained. Likewise, the presumed interdependence between the *polis* and its households helps to explain why behavior that threatened the "private" well-being of a particular *oikos*, like squandering a family inheritance, mistreating one's parents, laziness, and adultery, was seen as a legally actionable threat to the well-being of the *polis* as a whole.[68] And of course it also helps to explain why it seemed natural to the Athenians that all formal "governmental" roles in the courts, assembly, council, and elsewhere should be performed by "civilian" householders, not by expert "state actors."

If there was a dividing line in Athens between a human rule-making agency and the subjects of its rule, it was thus not a cleavage in the very fabric of experience

[65] The principal societal obligations of elites included paying the *eisphora*, a monetary levy for wartime emergencies, and performing "liturgies," major services to the *polis*, such as funding costly triremes and festival choruses. See Matthew R. Christ, *The Bad Citizen in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 2006), chap. 4. On the critical role played by elite "advisers" in the Athenian assembly, see, e.g., M. I. Finley, "Athenian Demagogues," in Finley, ed., *Studies in Ancient Society* (London, 1974), 1–25.

[66] On the limited "public property" of the *polis*, see, e.g., David Lewis, "Public Property in the City," in Murray and Price, *The Greek City*, 245–263; Nikolaos Papazarkadas, *Sacred and Public Land in Ancient Athens* (Oxford, 2011).

[67] On these demes and their many local functions, see Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica*.

[68] For a list of attested *graphe* ("indictment [for harming the *polis*]") procedures, including those mentioned, see Todd, *The Shape of Athenian Law*, 105–109.

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between any bounded realms of state and society. It was a line inscribed within the very subjectivity of each Athenian, between a *polites* personality and an *idiotes* personality, a line that allowed that same Athenian to be in different circumstances both a particular member of a particular *oikos* and a generic incarnation of the sovereign Demos itself.

Finally, if we are prepared to accept that Athenian *demokratia* had nothing to do with modern-style individualist freedoms and equalities, and everything to do with corporate self-management by a social body of households, our accounts could safely dispense altogether with various other stock modern categories, including "democracy," "rights," and "citizenship." And if we abandon such categories and instead try to make sense of the Athenian *politeia* on its own terms, we can then see that all those notorious alleged contradictions of "democratic Athens" are really problems of our own making.

First, while Athenian females may not look like full members of the *polis* to us, because of our own narrowly politicized, individualist notion of "citizenship," their full, integral membership in Demos in Athens would surely have seemed self-evident to any Athenian. As binding agents between the lineages of Attica, as enforcers of behavioral norms in families and neighborhoods, as regular ritual actors, and of course as wives and mothers who managed and reproduced the household cells of the social body itself, female Athenians were quite obviously as essential to the life of Demos as their male counterparts, even if nature had decreed that their respective contributions to that vitality should be complementary, not identical.[69]

Second, there was no contradiction between the great wealth disparities among *oikoi* and *demokratia* as the Athenians understood the term. This *politeia* presupposed the presence in Attica of families who possessed the resources and know-how to, say, "advise" Demos and recommend courses of action in the assembly, to prosecute fellow Athenians in the courts, to serve as military commanders and maintain ships and horses for the navy and cavalry, and to maintain and fund the traditional cults of the *polis*. In other words, *demokratia* was entirely unthinkable without those few hundred super-wealthy families, who alone possessed the means to make such contributions. So long as the contributions of elites to the life of Demos were commensurate with their resources, material inequalities were unproblematic. Athens and its *demokratia* were *sustained* by these inequalities, not threatened by them.

Third and last, if Athenian *demokratia* was in fact a pragmatic exercise in corporate self-preservation, not an idealistic exercise in political egalitarianism, the Athenians' exploitation of non-Athenians as slaves and imperial subjects becomes somewhat easier to apprehend. In an environment where citizens generally worked for themselves, not for each other, the exploitation of persons outside the social body was the only way of accumulating a significant surplus in classical Athens. Thus, without slave labor, there would have been few if any rich households. And without rich households, as we have seen, Athens would have lacked many of the material

[69] Other works that variously make a case for a female "citizenship" include Marilyn Katz, "Ideology and 'the Status of Women' in Ancient Greece," *History and Theory* 31, no. 4 (1992): 70–97; Katz, "Women and Democracy in Ancient Greece," in Thomas M. Falkner, Nancy Felson, and David Konstan, eds., *Contextualizing Classics: Ideology, Performance, Dialogue* (Lanham, Md., 1999), 41–68; Hunter, *Policing Athens*; Patterson, "The Case against Neaira"; Patterson, *The Family in Greek History*; Cohen, *The Athenian Nation*, 30–48.

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and cultural resources necessary to sustain *demokratia*. The only feasible alternative was to extract the necessary surplus from the social bodies of other *poleis* using the coercive mechanisms of empire, which is precisely what the Athenians did in the latter half of the fifth century. Either way, the celebrated Athenian *politeia* was unthinkable without the exploitation of non-Athenians.[70]

OF COURSE, THIS PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE to translating lifeworlds would come at a certain price. Most obviously, an ontological turn would require us to relinquish our conventional historicism, along with its reassuring sense of continuities and commensurabilities between all human lifeworlds, its sense of a unitary species experience lived in a single spatio-temporal dispensation. It would also mean, *inter alia*, severing forever the proverbial umbilical cord that has hitherto bound the Greeks, the Romans, and other extinct "predecessor" peoples to us. That said, this alternative practice would still permit other, more nuanced, more qualified forms of intermundane comparison, especially between the heterogeneous ontological materials from which different real worlds have been made, between the past's many personhoods, human natures, modes of freedom and authority, meanings of life, and so forth. And if this is the price that we have to pay for histories that are at once more ethical, more philosophically robust, and more historically meaningful, then it seems to be well worth paying.

No less important, this alternative historicism could also yield more valuable "lessons of the past" for our present. A modern academic discipline that takes seriously the ontological heterogeneities of human experience would hopefully help nurture greater sensitivity to the alterities of lifeworlds that have yet to be fully subsumed by Western modernity. And in so doing, such a discipline just might encourage us to think more critically about the ontological commitments of that same modernity, perhaps even help us to imagine less exploitative, more equitable, more sustainable lifeworlds of the future.

[70] It is quite commonly argued by specialists that the presence of non-Athenian slaves helped sustain a sense of equality among rich and poor Athenians. See, e.g., Robin Osborne, "The Economics and Politics of Slavery at Athens," in Anton Powell, ed., *The Greek World* (London, 1995), 27–43. But if the riches of the wealthy few derived largely from slave labor, one could also fairly make the opposite case.

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