Direct Democracy in Ancient Athens and Rome

Min Shu
School of International Liberal Studies
Waseda University
An outline of the lecture

- The Classical World at a Glance
- The Political System of Democratic Athens
- The Athenian Direct Democracy
- The Death of Socrates
- Constitution of the Roman Republic
- The Plebs and the Plebiscites
  - *Populus Romanus* (only) in name
  - A clip from *Gladiator*
- Direct Democracy in the Classical World
The classical world at a glance

- The historical period of Mediterranean civilization
  - Began from the Greek poetry of Homer (8-7c BC); ended with the decline of the Roman Empire (5c AD)
  - Centered on Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome

- Some notable events in the Classical World
  - The Ancient Olympic Games (776 BC~393 AD)
  - The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC)
  - Alexander the Great dead (323 BC)
  - Julius Caesar murdered (44 BC)
  - The Colosseum built (80 AD)
The Political System of democratic Athens

- Political institutions → popular sovereignty
  - The Assembly (over 20, about 6,000 male citizens)
  - The Council of 500 (over 30, selected by lot)
  - The Court (over 30, selected by lot)
  - Administrative offices (selected by lot, with limited power: collegiate, term limit and judicial review)
  - Money and military related officials (Elected)
    → State, government, and the people indistinguishable

- Citizenship in Ancient Athens → exclusion
  - Male adults who have been registered as a citizen
  - Female and slaves were excluded
  - Citizenship may be granted to foreigners
The Athenian direct democracy

- **Initiation**
  - Citizen may choose to speak to the Assembly, propose a law, initiate a public law suit, or advice the Council.
  - Initiators must be accountable for their initiation

- **Decision-making**
  - The Assembly, the Court and the Council were all open to ordinary citizens
  - The Assembly was the highest political body with the widest participation, following the rule of simple majority

- **Implementation**
  - Most public officials were chosen through lottery, emphasizing participation more than competence
The Athenian direct democracy

- Compensation for public services
  - Service to the public offices, the Council and the Court was paid
  - For a period of time, participation in the Assembly was also paid

- Public space for the Assembly

- An ‘idiot’ in Classical Athens
  - a private person, one who is not actively engaged in politics (serving public interest)
The death of Socrates

- Socrates (c. 469 BC–399 BC)
  - A classical Greek philosopher
  - The teacher of Plato
  - Sentenced to death by the people of Athens
Constitution of the Roman Republic

- Governing bodies
  - The Senate
    - Senators: rich (owning large lands), autocratic class, serving public office at least once
    - Very influential through *senatus consultum*
  - The People’s Assemblies
    - Electing magistrates, enacting laws, declaring war and peace
  - The Magistrates
    - Office held by two people, each with veto power
    - Including Consuls, Praetors, Censors, Aediles, Quaestors, Tribunes, and (under emergency) Dictators

- In rhetoric, the Assemblies held the ultimate sovereignty of the Roman Republic
The Plebs and the plebiscites

- The Plebeians and the Patricians
  - Patricians: noble aristocrats
  - Plebeians (Plebs): the general body of Roman citizens

- In Rome, popular voting was dominated by elite division

- The plebiscite: popular vote on a specific legislative proposal or showing confidence in a certain political leader
  - A synonym for referendum, but with negative connotations
**Populus Romanus only in name**

- The Roman Forum and others places for public gathering and voting were spatially limited
A clip from ‘Gladiator’

**Some background information**

- The Colosseum and gladiator-fighting became popular only in the period of Roman Empire
- The Senate remained a threat to the absolute reign of the Emperor
- Entertaining the Crowd was a political strategy to win their support against the Senate, a strategy with its own risk

**The triangular power relations**

- The Emperor <-> the Senate <-> the Crowd
Direct democracy in the classical world

- ‘The power of the people’ retained very high rhetorical power
  - Who is the people?; Who stands for the people?
  - Rhetoric: Who is able to persuade the people?

- Direct democracy was more efficiently applied in Ancient Athens than in Ancient Rome
  - From an elaborated form of direct democracy in Athens to mere direct participation in public decision-making in Rome
  - Democracy in name and democracy in reality

- In the Classical World, democracy was only one form of governance co-existing with other political systems
  - In Athens, participation and equality were regarded more important than competence and wisdom
  - Many ancient philosophers were against democracy…
Reading suggestion for next week's class