

BOOK REVIEW

Dangerous Counsel. Accountability and Advice in Ancient Greece. By MATTHEW LANDAUER. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019. Pp. viii + 240. Paperback \$30.00. ISBN: 9780226653792.

A political philosopher explores the “asymmetrical obligations” of classical Greek advisers and sovereign powers—whether democratic or autarchic—in four genres of Greek literary texts from Herodotus to Aeschines via Aristophanes, Xenophon and Plato. Landauer also examines actual Athenian institutions (less so, Spartan or Boeotian) that limit the sovereignty and liability of law-courts, legislative or executive powers.¹ Landauer’s startling thesis (Chapter 1) holds that ancient critiques of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy converge on questions of advisers and deciders, whether Aristophanes mocks his monster Cleon and his dupe Demos (*Kn.* 752-755), or Herodotus describes Cambyses readying himself to execute his adviser Croesus.² *Symbouloi* exist across all regimes, but run different risks (11). After chapters on democracies and tyrannies in the historical record, the latter focusing on the unaccountability of Athenian law courts and assemblies, Landauer offers chapters on the ubiquitous advisers to autocrats in Herodotus, Thucydides’ debate on the Mytilene rebels (and non-rebels), *parrhesia* (in its good and bad valences) and Plato’s acerbic *Gorgias*.

Aeschines describes Athenian government as one of laws and their administrators as subject to prior scrutiny, later audit and anytime examination (*dokimasia*,

¹ Landauer might well have included inscriptional evidence that in word and image present the demos’ self on stone. He should have engaged substantively with Jennifer Roberts’ book, *Accountability in Athenian Government* (Madison 1982), a more comprehensive historian’s analysis of this difficult topic, essential for culpability in the trial of the generals after Arginusae.

² Herodotean irony shapes incident: Cambyses’ lesser advisers do not carry out his order to kill Croesus when they find him. They hide and produce him when the autocrat reverses his bizarre decision. Irony multiplies when Cambyses, glad to have his councilor back, executes his preservers for their insubordination.

euthynai, eisangelia: 3.22, quoted on page 25). No exceptions, noble thought. But nothing held the *ekklesia* and the dikasteries accountable, the central democratic “deciders.” We cannot say, however, and *pace* Landauer, how often obligatory pre- and post- accountings brought down a magistrate. Only some discretionary *eisangeliai*³ and *graphai paranomon* left records. Just the threat was intimidating as the examples of Miltiades or the Arginusae Six show. For example, review the case of Admiral Chabrias after the 377/376 battle of Naxos (Diod. Sic. 15.35.1). Oligarchies, such as the Spartan and Theban, had boards of *nomophylakes* with veto power that may have been more active, but we cannot document them in action. Accountability there was not owed to the demos whose role was pre-emptively restricted (37). Any system designed to prevent bad or ill-intentioned (traitorous) counsel could be perverted to prosecute unsuccessful (but wise) counsel. Am I right, Pericles?

The tyrant (Chapter 2) personifies unaccountability and its unpleasant consequences for others. Arbitrary power corrupts, as the Persian liberationist Otanes (Hdt. 3.80) first makes explicit in Greek political theorizing. Persian Cambyses illustrates the far side of autocratic cruelty. Landauer off-ramps to Plato’s Ring of Gyges (*Resp.* 2.359d-360b), an instrument rendering unaccountable the happily misruling, even murdering, wearer. Aristophanes’ Mr. Demos (*Kn.* 1111-1130) also holds a tyrannical power. Rather than pliant victim of the demagogues, he claims firm control over them—intended as more than a kicker laugh-line. Feroocious Philokleon (*Wasps* 158-160, 278-280) boasts that he never acquits a courtroom defendant. Like a tyrant he takes pleasure in anger and harm (*W.* 106, 320-322). His addiction to judging men guilty follows from enjoying the Zeus-like empowerment arousing fear in others and unique impunity (*W.* 587, 619-630). Aristophanes presents Philokleon as a satire of the ordinary Athenian enjoying a tyrant’s prerogatives. Landauer rightly treats Aristophanes as a serious public thinker.

Xenophon attracts attention for the grim aftermath of the Athenian naval victory at Arginusae (406 BCE; *Hell.* 1.7). The final and capstone event of this oligarch’s *Hellenica* I, continuing Thucydides, records the 5th-century democracy’s abandonment of law. A major achievement turned sour when many Athenian

³ M. H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (1991, Norman 1999: 213-218) observes that generals over time fell more frequently to *eisangeliai*, one demonstration of diachronic change. This author also plays down variations in genre discourses about people-leaders and accountability, greater variety than those for tyrants.

sailors drowned in a storm, and Callixenus proposed an illegal collective trial of the admirals for dereliction of duty. Euryptolemus indicted him by the *graphe paranomon*. Six of the eight Athenian *strategoi* were anyways tried together, condemned and executed contrary to law. Soon the demos recanted its judgment,⁴ but the culprit escaped during the regime of the Thirty. Landauer points out that the demos wanted to prosecute and condemn the proposer Callixenus, not itself, the body that had determined the generals' guilt and punishment.⁵

Advice is a common and commonly futile activity in Herodotus (Chp. 3, 83), although Landauer finds no "political theory of its practice." Not a surprise, given his genre of history, although Otanes at 3.80 sketches consequences. Indeed, "advice... misfires as often as it succeeds" (84), many times more so, I'd add, since much of it comes from flatterers. Bottom-up advice, the norm for Persian and Greek autocrats, is dysfunctional. Landauer distorts this political, non-ethnic point. He reviews how advisers "construct ... alignment[s] of interest and trust" (87). The *Magoi* priests (1.120-128) attempt this arrangement with Astyages but die impaled. Likewise, Croesus with Cambyses (3.36), Demaratus with Xerxes, etc., suggest terms but find themselves dismissed—at best. Landauer wishes to demonstrate that advising "tyrants" (the term is too loosely applied) is not always futile, but Queen Tomyris' "advice" to Cyrus (1.206) acknowledges in advance the dire futility of proffering him wise counsel.

Advice among equals (*isegorie*) is often ignored (e.g., Ionians at Lade, 6.11) or misconstrued (e.g., Hellenic commanders, 8.57-63, 79-82).⁶ Landauer resists "pessimistic readings of advice in Hdt" (85, 98, but why?); his examples confirm them. Notably successful leaders in this text deceive or persuade their "deciders" with dubious arguments. Themistocles "reinterprets" oracles for fellow citizens, propagandizes and disinform enemies and allies (Euboean "inscriptions," rumors, Salamis shenanigans), and hoodwinks future protectors (post-Salamis telegrams to Xerxes).

Croesus persuades Cyrus to effeminize his Lydians in order to preserve them from annihilation at any cast. If their docility will benefit Croesus' sovereign, that

⁴The crabby Ps.-Xen. (*Const. Ath.* 2.17) lists excuses that individuals could offer to shift responsibility for the people's bad decisions. I wish Landauer had mined this text further.

⁵The successfully seditious oligarchs of the Four Hundred and the Thirty did worse—executing summary "justice," annulling laws, and erasing constitutional protections.

⁶Rare but not unknown in the top-down Eastern monarchies or the Western tyrannies, e.g., Cambyses and Polycrates, Thrasyloulos and Periander.

was not his purpose. It's another trick. Monarchs too can be persuaded (1.155-156) but not by transparent arguments. Xerxes' ludicrous war council, "a travesty of debate" (7.8-11, 95), ends nearly incoherent. The other councilors flatter the despot and/or keep silent (7.10). His only frank (and thereby nearly executed) adviser, Uncle Artabanus, reverses course and tells him to do what he does not *wish to appear to do*, to take counsel by himself—*idiobouleuein*. Landauer concedes that this exotic, self-canceling, paradoxical neologism was Artabanus' best option.

The perplexity for those speaking truth to power climaxes when ex-king Demaratus inquires before battle at Thermopylae whether Xerxes wants to hear truth or pleasant words (7.101). Xerxes reassures him, but he laughs at the truth. Landauer oddly asserts that Artabanus' frank interventions (also 7.45) "have partially transformed the King" (99). Really? Although Xerxes spares and dismisses Demaratus here and later (7.236), he never believes or follows his (good) analysis and advice. Demaratus therefore clams up (8.65) and advises others to do the same. After ignoring Artemisia's advice to avoid battle before his defeat at Salamis, he summons her for a consult. He agrees with her advice to decamp for safety to Persia (8.101). Herodotus, however, describes this resolution as one he had already decided on. If this is learning or progress in *symbolia*, what is failure?

Landauer correctly observes that Herodotus is neither a Hellenic cheerleader nor a shill for democracy. Herodotus only once applies that term to Athenian government (6.131). Neither Herodotus nor present scholars know how the Persian Shah and his "staff" actually determined their campaigns, strategy, or tactics in any conflict. Landauer desires to track political processes in Herodotus' exposition, but Darius' "autobiography" at Bisitun,⁷ while it probably informed his narrative, does not inspire our confidence in his disingenuous "take" on crusading for righteous "Truth" against the LIE (*drauga*). Few scholars, if any, now believe that Herodotus is either philo-barbaros or phil-Hellene. His cooler estimation and his Peloponnesian War generation perceived and critiqued the "power asymmetries" of large and small states and the superpower leagues built on them. Landauer also notes (103-104) that the "school of Hellas" Athenians too, when infuriated, could stone fellow-citizen Lycidas to death, and his wife and children also, when he recommended bringing Persian proposals to the assembly, and

⁷ DB, trilingual; A. Kuhrt, 2007. *The Persian Empire. A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*. London and New York: Routledge, 141-157.

they crucified Persian Artayntes and his son (9.5, 9.120). Even when calmer, they could vote to execute all a rebel town's male citizens.

The more nomothetic Thucydides betters suits political theory (Chapter 4). The debate over reconquered Mytilene has immediate feel-good consequences, leaning toward prudent Diodotus' less executionary argument, but also producing disconcerting long-range consequences. The orators debate likely outcomes for the clobbered "subject-ally" in the dock and the *ekklesia* provides judge and jury. Landauer credits Cleon with prosecutorial coherence (107) and a slippery "rhetoric of anti-rhetoric."⁸ Cleon's punitive counsels for deterrence, pushed but defeated for the Lesbian rebels (3.36.2), are legislated in Book 4, then impend and occur in Book 5 (32, 116), where Scione and Melos suffer that annihilation. His policies survived his death. Thucydides' moral inclination seems clear, but which of the antithetical political positions he thought would be more effective remains opaque.

Deterrence requires the "tyrant polis" (3.37.2) to show both strength and the perceived will to use it, the author argues, not merely the first and a pleasure in emotion-churning *logoi* (3.40.2, "the pathologies of assembly debate," 119). Risks and rewards (3.38, 43; 8.1.2) occupy both speakers and later Nicias (6.12.2). Another book might explore deterrence theory in the Greek historians, comedies and oratory. Thucydides' war renders it dubious, especially the part of it that he did not complete. Landauer's key insight (123) highlights Diodotus' counsel (3.47.4): propagate the view that fewer Mytileneans are guilty of secession than actually were, to promote the loyalty of the rest—a useful fiction, prudent concession.

Ignorance of Sicily's size, population and distance prevailed in the *ekklesia's* decision to launch the near-fatal expedition. Reason opposed to greedy passions fell silent in fear of appearing disloyal (6.24, page 125). The collective decision-making Athenian assembly, like the autocrat Xerxes and the Samian tyrant Polycrates, and like other successful empires, experienced bad incentives, not only because they are unaccountable, but because sudden accesses of power and wealth invite

⁸ Landauer's sondages are insightful but one wants him to tackle, e.g., the Athenian revolutions of 411 for how oligarchs could hold the democracy responsible for defeat, overthrow it by terror, and yet lose control again. Armies too ran amok: Th. 3.29-30, 4.130.6: murder for plunder.

abuse (Hdt. 3.39-40).⁹ Thucydides labels the pathological condition *pleonexia*, grasping for more—land, silver, statues and the leisurely pleasures of a Master-City. The Exceptionalist polis gestalt recognizes no limits.¹⁰

Free speech (Chapter 5, *parrhesia*) might exist in non-democratic regimes, but rarely does. In autocracies, a limited liberty serves remedial purposes more than a norm for deliberation (132). Isocrates recommends that King Nicocles and Antipater, Philip's viceroy, encourage and heed frank advisers, not flatterers. Landauer claims that this pamphleteer—who admittedly avoided any political role in Athens' democracy (12.10, 5.81)—addresses counsellors risking harm from non-accountable authorities in all regimes. Demosthenes, an active *rhetor*, also describes dangers of presenting prudent but unpopular advice to the sovereign demos (e.g., 9.3-4, 8.34). Like Aristophanes, he carefully blames the orators, while Aristotle blames both (*Pol.* 1292a; 77), correctly. Aristotle acknowledged that in some cases a collectivity might decide a matter better than one wise man (52, citing *Pol.* 1281b). Free of political ambition, the amateur *idiotes*, remains open to disinterested, sound advice.¹¹ The *politeuomenoi* and *strategoï*, *per contra* and *ipso facto*, deserve suspicion, as Socrates notes (54; cf. Dem. 26.4, Ag. Aristog. B). One discerns few or no philosopher kings, *megalopsychoi*, or even Diogenes' honest man.

Chapter 6 reviews Plato's *Gorgias* and its take on rhetoric and demagoguery. Any regime can produce a demagogue (Ar. *Pol.* 1305b24-27). Is Pericles Thucydides' statesman or the *Ath. Pol.*'s demagogue? Is a *rhetor* a manipulating master of—or malleable slave to—Demos? Does a democracy enable demagoguery or do demagogues usurp power in every democracy (150-152)? Both critiques emerge in *Gorgias* (169) where Socrates, as often, fails to convince incredulous interlocutors. Calicles asks him if he is joking (481b-c). Gorgias' paeon to the power of rhetoric goes over the top and crashes on Socrates' usual premises about knowing and doing just things (460b). Socrates embarrasses Gorgias into

⁹ Landauer does not reach this conclusion, perhaps because it sounds moralistic, but historical examples support it, not only for the mentioned entities but also for the Roman Empire, the Spanish monarchy, the German Reich; and American post-war efforts in south-east Asia.

¹⁰ See Th. 3.45.4, 3.82.6 and 8, 6.39.2, eleven examples in all. When Solon obliquely characterizes the tyrant Croesus' overconfidence (Hdt. 1.32), the autocrat regards him as a fool (*amathes*). No one else in the *Histories* receives this dismissal.

¹¹ Lysias built a career after the fall of the Thirty defending other men who "did not meddle in politics." See D. Lateiner, 1982. CW76: 1-12.

claiming he knows what justice is (482d, page 163). Callicles, following the oligarchic line,¹² acknowledges that Pericles made his Athenians “lazy, cowardly, babbling and money lovers” by pay for public service (515e, quoted 166). But their power and stature all met harsh punishments (516d-e), Socrates notes. So successful rhetoric does not ensure advisers’ safety and honor; meanwhile, democracies have no assurance of sound advice.

In sum, philosophy is for youth (young Callicles claims, 484c-e), but political engagement produces limited positive returns for the aggressive adviser and his community. Landauer resists this deflating conclusion, but Plato already foreshadows Socrates’ trial and its outcome (526d). Our author reads Plato as imagining the demos might learn from its mistakes after losing a great empire and eating its children. Plato and Aristotle’s lived experience, however, points pessimistically to the opposite outcome. Dionysius, Philip, Alexander, his diadochs and epigones embodied it.

The conclusion reprises the embarrassing, apropos video (12 June 2017) of Donald Trump’s advisers fawning over the irresponsible Grand Panjandrum: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYS4vg7Phlw> *Ostrakismos, dokimasia, euthynai, eisangelia*, and *graphe paranomon* “incentivized” loyal service to the democracy (181). The author concludes cheerfully: human institutions result from processes and those processes can improve them (184). This thoughtful analysis considers objections and honestly responds to them. It recognizes irresolvable tensions between power and accountability (58). Landauer succeeds in complicating—his favorite word—our awareness of ancient political practices and ideologies. He searches in vain for a coherent Greek theory of counsel and responsibility in the public sphere. His “cross-regime analysis,” however, demonstrates a “portability” of ancient theorizing. Generic pressures don’t faze him, but his careful readings reveal enlightening consistencies. His study will benefit all students of ancient democracy and political responsibility.

DONALD LATEINER

Ohio Wesleyan University, dglatein@owu.edu

¹² Landauer observes (of *Gorg.* 483b-e) that Callicles debuts as contemptuous of egalitarian conventions and societies—and sophists.