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The Seeds of *Penia*: Radical Democracy's Roots in the Athenian Social Imaginary of Poverty

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Poverty is a grievous thing, an ungovernable evil.[1]

Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime.[2]

[1] Alcaeus, *Fragment 364.*
[2] Aristotle, *Politics,* 1265b.

1.1 Introduction

> *Ah wretched Penia, why do you lie upon my shoulders and deform my body and mind? Forcibly and against my will you teach me much that is shameful, although I know what is noble and honourable among men.*[3]

In his *Symposium*, Plato calls love the child of want and resourcefulness.[4] Love, he says, is in a constant state of need. The desires of love are never fulfilled, and so love wants for all eternity; it is forever poor, forever unsatiated. But love is also endowed with a sense of expediency, with the ability and ambition to satisfy its eternal want. The combination of need—or, for the Greeks, Penia—and resourcefulness—or Poros—gives birth to Eros, romantic love, the continual slaking of a constant thirst.

Desire is thus an intrinsic part of Athenian spiritual and social life. Need is the progenitor of love, tempered by expediency. But need and ambition are also fundamental elements of the Athenian experience of democracy. Thucydides suggests, via his mythic mouthpiece Pericles, that Athens is a *desiring city*, a city with political—perhaps, as some scholars have suggested, even tyrannical[5]—needs and the resourcefulness to meet them. Indeed, many of Athens' major democratic reforms can be seen as the need to reconcile two diametrically opposed concepts: on the one hand, an egalitarian ethos that advocates for equality among all citizens; and on the other, the necessary division of society into discrete economic groups to ensure social and political stability. Social division combined with the pursuit of equality results in a distinct political landscape: a landscape of political equals who remain necessarily socially and economically unequal. What emerges is a stable society, the very stability of which is based on the precariousness of its people. A society, in other words, that owes is prosperity to the poor.

Both the conceptual nature of poverty as Penia and the political role of the poor—or *penêtes*—thus stand out as significant factors in Athenian democracy. What is more, Penia's sociopolitical importance suggests that the question of the *penêtes* played a substantial role in shaping the Athenian democratic ethos. Castoriadis insists that societal changes emerge through what he calls 'the social imaginary,' a terrain of collective subjectivization without strict linear, spatial, or temporal determinations. His work can elucidate the role of the *penêtes* by articulating

[3] Theognis, *Fragment 1*, 649.
[4] Plato, *Symposium*, 203b-e.
[5] Gloria Ferrari, "The Tyranny of Eros in Thucydides' History," in *Donum natalicium digitaliter confectum Gregorio Nagy septuagenario a discipulis collegis familiaribus oblatum* (Washington, The Center for Hellenic Studies, 2012).

vital links between poverty, political participation, and the agentic space of the social imaginary. For Castoriadis, knowledge of political and social change can only be ascertained by enunciating "significations" of this social imaginary—that is, ephemera that indicate ruptures and discontinuities out of which society self-institutes through change.

Castoriadis suggests that democratic Athens offers "fecund germs for all [who are] thinking about the project of autonomy."[6] This paper posits that these germs can be found most readily in the conceptual nature of Penia and the political role of the *penêtes.* I argue that Penia and the *penêtes* are central significations of the Athenian social imaginary, and therefore foundational aspects of its democracy. By naming poverty as a vital democratic concept, I insist upon the necessity of reanimating ongoing discussions of poverty's role in radical democratic projects and thought.

I will begin with an overview of poverty's conceptual and historical significance in democratic Athens. As will be shown, poverty plays myriad contradictory and sometimes unreconcilable roles in the Athenian social, political, and spiritual landscape. What is more, the conceptual nature of poverty will be shown to not always align with its actual experience, resulting in a foundational tension in democratic society. I then move on to demonstrate Penia to be a central signification in the Athenian social imaginary—that is, I argue Penia to be the very "organization of signifiers and signifieds into a system [which] permits the extension, multiplication and modification of this signification."[7] As I will show, this system of signifiers and signifieds is *demokratia* itself—democracy as both an *ethos* and *logos.* As such, poverty will be revealed as the imaginary motor of Athenian society, the "divine origin" of the Greek political institution that organizes and informs its subsequent signification.[8] In so doing, I also demonstrate the profound—and profoundly untapped—potential of a Castoriadan conceptual framework in elucidating the conscious and unconscious self-institutionalization of societies both ancient and contemporary.

2.1 Poverty's Mythic Origins

[6] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions," in *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy*, (Anonymous, 1993), 326.
[7] Cornelius Castoriadis, The Imaginary Institution of Society, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1997), 140.
[8] Ibid, 131.

> *O wretched Poverty, why do you delay to leave me and go to another man? Don't be attached to me against my will, but go, visit another house, and don't always share this miserable life with me.*[9]

As with many sociopolitical concepts in the ancient world, the root of the Greek notion of poverty can be found in mythology. Penia is the goddess of need, the ancient Greek personification of poverty. Penia has two sisters, Ptocheia and Amechania, who respectively symbolize beggary and helplessness.[10] The relationship of sisterhood between Penia, Ptocheia, and Amechania encapsulates much of the Greek's conceptual view of poverty. To be in need or to experience want is to run the risk of, on the one hand, being helpless both materially and in the face of your desires and, on the other, resorting to the morally shameful act of begging, of relying on the belittling charity of others.

Penia's companion is her husband Poros, god of resourcefulness, but her true counterpart is Ploutos, good of wealth and abundance. Originally concerned with agricultural affairs, Ploutos is often depicted holding a cornucopia overflowing with the harvest. As Athenian society developed and urban existence took on a more pronounced social shape, this notion of agricultural abundance expanded to include other notions of wealth and, as a result, social status. Ploutos is responsible for dispensing his gift of wealth but, as he was blinded by Zeus, he must administer this gift at random.[11] Thus, wealth and abundance are characterized as rather arbitrary concepts in Athenian spiritual life. While some may 'deserve' the gift of Ploutos more than others, the very nature of wealth is to be blind to both the merits of the deserving and defects of the undeserving.

Ploutos is positioned as the opposite of Penia and Ptocheia.[12] It would be easy to view these figures as diametrically opposed, with Penia and Ptocheia representing the dangers of poverty in contrast with the security and abundance of Ploutos. But as with all Greek gods, their relationship is much more complex. Rather than oppositional incompatibilities, Ploutos, Penia, and Ptocheia are co-constitutive and co-dependent concepts. Indeed, much Greek literature warns of the dangers of Ploutos and of obsession with wealth. In Aristophanes' eponymous political satire, Ploutos is depicted as a blind beggar. Wealth is being distributed to the people randomly, without any regard for merit, virtue, or worthiness. Main character Chremylos, an

[9] Theognis, *Fragment 1*, 351-54.
[10] Aristophanes, *Plutus*, 549; Alcaeus, *Fragment 364.*
[11] Aristophanes, *Plutus*, 87-90, 490-98.
[12] Ibid, 410.

aging citizen discontented with his material lot in life, takes it upon himself to restore Ploutos' eyesight. In classic Greek comedic fashion, this only makes matters worse: Ploutos tries to right the wrongs that this random distribution of wealth has caused, but this only results in even more complaints from the people who now feel robbed by this course correction. This diverts human attention away from the other gods, who become angry at the lack of sacrifices and the social and economic turmoil.

Penia also makes an appearance in Aristophanes' comedy. She arrives in anger to admonish Chremylos, who wants to banish her from the city, thereby eradicating poverty and making everyone wealthy. Penia challenges Chremylos, insisting that without her, society would fall apart. Even wealth distribution would give enslaved people the ability to buy their freedom, which in turn, would flood the citizenship, both diluting the poor citizenry class and dissolving the unpaid slave class upon which Athenian proto-capitalist society was built. Furthermore, without poverty it would be impossible to enjoy the benefits of wealth because lower class citizens would not have to work, diminishing wealthier classes' lifestyles. A society without poverty, Penia argues, is a collapsed society; poverty informs the distinct social environment in Athens. She scoffs at Chremylos, saying "I am the sole cause of all your blessings … you have all that you need in abundance, thanks to me."[13]

The symbiotic relationship between Penia and Ploutos is thus made clear in Aristophanes' text. Ploutos is a desirable and important aspect of living well. But too much focus on Ploutos can cause people to neglect their other responsibilities—either to the gods, their work, or their city. Furthermore, Penia allows people to enjoy the benefits of Ploutos. The case made in Aristophanes' play relates to labour and material gain; through the labour of others, both paid and unpaid, the people can appreciate whatever wealth they may have, and be thankful that they have been spared that labour. But Penia also allows the people to appreciate Ploutos on an ideological level, as both a blessing and a responsibility. Wealth can only be enjoyed if there is poverty, and poverty is what makes wealth desirable; without their interplay, the motors of society will stop. In this equation, all social positions are accounted for—from wealthy aristocrat all the way down to beggar. Everyone's role contributes to the relationship between Ploutos and Penia, between abundance and need, which work together to produce economic, social, and spiritual homeostasis.

[13] Ibid, 469-530.

The conceptual nature of poverty as interlinked with abundance is a cornerstone of Athenian society and social relations. As Claire Taylor argues, poverty acts as "an ideological vehicle for the shaping of moral behaviour."[14] This was achieved, in part, through developing a notion of shared interests between all citizens, which differentiated them from enslaved people and united Athenians in a common sociopolitical purpose. Josiah Ober claims this shaping of moral behaviour was "an example of elite manipulation of ideology, intended to persuade the masses to accept a social order that legitimized and so perpetuated elite rule."[15] Through providing ideological justifications of poverty, Athenian society carved out space for the poor—not as alienated or disenfranchised classes, but as an integral part of the social makeup. In this way, the poor as a category can be seen to emerge out of this legitimation of poverty in the social and cultural *mise-en-scène.* What is more, this ideological justification of poverty takes specific shape in the political sphere, in a manner that troubles the egalitarian ethos of Athenian democracy.

2.2 Poverty for Politicians and Philosophers

> *As for us Andrians, we are but blessed with a plentiful lack of land, and we have two unserviceable gods who never quit our island but want to dwell there forever, namely Penia and Amechania. Since we are in the hands of these gods, we will give no money; the power of Athens can never be stronger than our inability.*[16]

Despite the overwhelming and lasting influence of Plato and Aristotle on virtually all aspects of Western thought, I agree with Castoriadis and Jacques Rancière, that the uncritical supremacy of these decidedly non-democratic philosophers to the analysis of Greek democracy is antithetical to the actual goal of elucidating Greek political systems and ideas.[17] I will therefore, and with apologies to scholars of antiquity, touch upon these two grandfathers of Western philosophy only briefly. At any rate, a comprehensive analysis of Platonist and Aristotelian philosophies of poverty is beyond the parameters of this paper. Nevertheless, such an analysis would show that—despite Plato's veneration of poverty as the necessary condition of guardians in *Republic,* and despite Aristotle's grudging admission that plural voices may on

[14] Claire Taylor, *Poverty, Wealth, and Well-Being: Experience Penia in Democratic Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.
[15] Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 65.
[16] Herodotus, *Histories 8. 111. 1* (trans. Godley).
[17] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary," trans. David Ames Curtis, *Salmagundi* Fall 1993, no. 100 (1993): 106-7; Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics,* trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 37-8.

occasion possess greater access to political truth[18]—both Plato and Aristotle are profoundly suspicious of the effect poverty has on individuals and society at large.

Aristotle's considerations on the poor in his *Politics* paints a picture of the poor as both morally inferior and politically dangerous. Aristotle defines democracy as the rule of the poor over the rich, a perversion of the more desirable regime of polity.[19] Importantly—while the poor did account for the majority of Athenian citizens, and majority rule was therefore technically the rule of the poor—Aristotle maintains that democracy would be the rule of the poor even if the poor were the minority.[20] He writes, "wherever some rule on account of wealth, whether a minority or a majority, this is necessarily an oligarchy, and wherever those who are poor, a democracy."[21] As Josiah Ober writes, Aristotle thus identifies democracy "directly with the domination of the political sphere by the poor."[22] That Aristotle views both oligarchy and democracy as perversions of polity suggests that he views both the very rich and the very poor as morally and politically suspect. The dominance of either group in the political sphere leads necessarily, for Aristotle, to the erosion of polity itself.

Plato shares Aristotle's concern about the effects of an abundance or a lack of wealth, most especially because of how a people's character is affected by a society that venerates either wealth or poverty. In *Republic,* he asserts that regimes are both informed by and inform the human character and that the political arrangement of a city always relates to a particular arrangement of "the soul of private men."[23] While he insists that a moderate, thriving society cannot revere wealth, he cautions that the worship of poverty is even worse, and that Athenian society must not make a society that would make "the beggar great in the city."[24] Since an impoverished person must, by default, possess an impoverished soul, a society that idolizes poverty would result in a kind of social flattening, where it becomes impossible to tell the worthy from the unworthy and leaders from followers, and in which it becomes impossible to maintain an ironclad political order.[25] It creates, in other words, a democracy. In such a climate, Plato fears that the poor will triumph over the rich, replacing a veneration of wealth with a fetishistic

[18] Plato, *Republic,* 422a; Aristotle, *Politics,* 1281a—1281b.
[19] Aristotle, *Politics,* 1279b.
[20] Aristotle, *Politics,* 1280a.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 193.
[23] Plato, *Republic,* 544d.
[24] Ibid, 555c-556b.
[25] Ibid, 556a-b.

vindication of poverty; this newly enfranchised poor will take control of all offices of state and run the city into the ground.[26] For Plato, the veneration of wealthy above all else, as is seen in an oligarchy, is in fact the very cause of the social inversion brought about by democracy; the poor's resentment of the wealthy leads to social upheaval, which in turn leads to moral decay, total freedom, and, eventually, tyranny.[27] Thus Plato understands concerns about poverty as explicitly political concerns precisely because poverty leads people to act in specific political ways—such as institute a democratic regime.

Indeed, both Plato and Aristotle understand concerns about poverty to be explicitly political concerns, in that the moral and material conditions of poverty leads people to act in specific political ways—ways that may not always be in line with the betterment of Athenian society and that may in fact pose an active threat to this pursuit of advancement.[28] It is important to acknowledge these philosophical concerns about poverty because Plato and Aristotle's disdain for democracy as the overt rule of the poor does not spring out of nowhere. Indeed, the view that both the rich and the poor were politically dangerous was already embedded within pre-Socratic democratic thought and held by many Athenian elites—even those regarded as champions of democracy.

Solon's reforms to the Athenian constitution in the 590s BCE brought about greater inclusion of the masses in political decision making, but also prioritized economic wealth as the determining factor of social class and political freedoms. It is imperative to understand Solon's reforms as both an expansion of a democratic ethos in Athens and as a reaction to the social and political indeterminacy this expansion would cause. Solon instituted a number of major reforms, but the most important for these purposes are: first, that all citizen debt was forgiven, freeing many citizens from wage-slavery; and second, that the prerequisites for holding major offices of state were modified and developed.[29] Prior to these reforms, it was common for poorer citizens to fall into debt-bondage, essentially working as slaves for wealthy citizens to pay off their debt. By forgiving the debts of all citizens, Solon solidified the distinction between citizens and enslaved people as "unbridgeable."[30] Regardless of a citizen's financial situation, he could never

[26] Ibid, 557a.
[27] Ibid 555b-d, 561c-d, 562a.
[28] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279b-80a; Plato, *Republic*, 544d-61d.
[29] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 57-60.
[30] Ibid, 62.

again fall so low in Athenian society as to be indistinguishable from an enslaved person. Citizenship in Athens thus took on a new economic dimension as a result of Solon's reforms: regardless of personal wealth, a citizen was someone who could not be indebted or indentured to any other citizen, thereby severing any potential kinship between enslaved people and the lower classes.

This debt forgiveness was accompanied by a restructuring of the requirements for holding office. Again, before Solon, only noble-born Athenians were eligible to hold major offices of state, such as sit on the council of archons.[31] Rather than set aristocratic lineage as the marker of political eligibility, Solon divided the Athenian citizenship into four property classes based on individual wealth and agricultural production.[32] Only the top two property classes, the *pentekosiomedimnoi* and the *hippeis,* were permitted to sit on the council of archons. The lower classes, the *zeugitai* and the *thetes,* were much more limited in their political abilities. The *thetes* in particular were permitted to attend Assembly as citizens but were forbidden from speaking or contributing to the Assembly's agenda.[33] Thus, while the implementation of property classes worked to open up high-ranking offices of state to non-aristocratic citizens, it simultaneously reinforced a strict caste system based on individual wealth. The effects of this new economic caste system were felt almost entirely in the political domain.

While Solon's reforms enabled more political and social mobility by severing the link between aristocratic birth and political prestige, they nevertheless reinforced the supremacy of wealth as a prerequisite for political participation. The fact that aristocratic Athenians were also some of the wealthiest citizens means that there was relatively little change in who held office, despite the change in requirements for these offices. What is more, the distinction made between citizens and the enslaved by forgiving all citizen debt worked to reinforce the importance of birth—that is, the importance of *Athenian* birth. The eradication of debt-bondage affirmed the rights of Athenian citizens *qua* citizens. No matter how poor they were, they were endowed with

[31] While there were many structural changes over Athens' democratic tenure, its government had three major citizen groups: the Assembly, which was open to all citizens; the Council or *boule,* a group of 500 citizens who set the agenda for Assembly meetings and made recommendations for courses of action; and the archons, an elite group of nine citizens who functioned as city leaders (Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* 57, 95-98). Before Cleisthenes' reforms to the Athenian constitution, only the top two property classes were permitted to serve as archons and they were elected by the Council. Cleisthenes' reforms opened up archonships to all citizens. By 487 BCE, archonships were assigned purely through a lottery system (70, 76).
[32] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 61.
[33] Ibid, 64.

certain inalienable privileges that enslaved people were denied. As Ober remarks, Solon's reforms thus worked to prevent a sense of alliance or solidarity between the lower citizen classes and the enslaved, precluding the emergence of "a homogenous lower class" which might become "conscious of its collective power" and overthrow the existing social order.[34]

The reforms of Solon therefore indicate that, while Penia was viewed as a necessary aspect of Athenian society and spirituality, the poor themselves experienced extreme social and political limitations. But this dichotomy between social importance and political suppression can be troubled even further. In Assembly, wealthy citizens would often claim to have humble beginnings or be poorer than they were to convince others that they were trustworthy and authentic.[35] This contradicts the widely accepted notion that the poor were held in political contempt. Claiming poverty was often a successful political ploy both in Assembly and before the people's court, suggesting that the poor could be viewed as viable political actors.[36] To go into detail about how poverty was used as a rhetorical tactic in politics would be beyond the limits of this paper—but suffice to say, while there existed a difference between the concept of poverty and the poor themselves, conceptions of what it meant to *be* poor were also varied.

Vincent Rosivach offers an account of several other Athenian views of the poor that suggest a medical quality. In Euripides' *Elektra,* King Agamemnon's son Orestes calls poverty an illness that drives people to commit evil out of desperation. Similarly, Plato views poverty as a sickness infecting society.[37] Still others, such as Xenophon, Lysias, and Demosthenes, conceive of poverty as a kind of disability.[38] Importantly, these conceptualizations of poverty as a malady suggest that many Athenians saw the poor as "victims of their poverty rather than responsible for it."[39] Nevertheless, these presuppositions were still patronizing, suggesting that the poor were somehow lesser citizens and incapable of preventing their own poverty.

Some 80 years after Solon's reforms to the Athenian constitution, the city saw another major reform. The context of head archon Cleisthenes' rise to power is also the story of what may very well be called a growing class or social consciousness in Athens and merits some attention here. After Solon's tenure as archon, Athens falls under a tyrannical regime. Pisistratus,

[34] Ibid, 63.
[35] Taylor, *Poverty, Wealth, and Well-Being,* 51-52.
[36] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 221-23.
[37] Vincent Rosivach, "Some Athenian Presuppositions about 'The Poor,'" *Greece & Rome* 38, no. 2 (1991): 190.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

an Athenian general, rises to power and establishes himself as a tyrant. But he grows wary of Cleisthenes, who was a political heavy hitter and favourite among the citizens, eventually exiling Cleisthenes from Athens. Pisistratus dies, at which point Cleisthenes returns and is established as head archon. Yet he is exiled again soon after by Pisistratus' successors Hipparchus and Hippias. He then seeks the help of the Spartan Empire, who he persuades to help him free Athens from tyranny. Cleisthenes and the Spartans overthrow Hippias, but the Spartans then betray Cleisthenes and help establish pro-Spartan Isagoras as head archon. Cleisthenes is exiled for a third time. By this point, however, he is well established as a people's hero and his exile outrages them. This, coupled with Isagoras' attempts to dissolve the *boule*[40], lead to an armed resistance against Isagoras and his followers. The people subsequently run Isagoras out of town and welcome Cleisthenes back, who is reinstated as head archon.[41]

Athens' brief foray into tyranny illuminates some of the dangers of democracy as outlined by Plato and Aristotle.[42] But it also points to an increasing participation by the masses in political affairs and, most importantly, a growing sense of political consciousness among the lower classes. For Cleisthenes, it was vital to harness this consciousness in his favour. While he had returned a hero, it was clear that constitutional reformation was needed to satiate this newfound mass desire for political participation. He thus instituted a series of reforms, working to emphasize and solidify bonds between citizens and enabling "widespread popular participation" in political affairs.[43] This further worked to imbue the Athenian citizenry with a "self-defined" political identity.[44]

The most important of Cleisthenes' reforms, for the purposes of this paper, were the creation of *demes* and the restructuring of the *boule*. *Demes* were artificially constructed social and political communities. All citizens were registered in one of 139 *deme* centres, which functioned as relatively self-sufficient political hubs. All demes-people were permitted to attend Assembly to speak and vote on state-wide concerns.[45] This constitutes a distinct shift in political participation: before, permission to speak in Assembly was reserved for the higher property

[40] A council of 500 citizens responsible for deciding on city-wide matters (Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 138-9).
[41] History of Cleisthenes' rise to power found in Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 65-68.
[42] Aristotle, *Politics,* 1279a-1281a; Plato *Republic,* 555b-d, 561c-d, 562a.
[43] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 68.
[44] Ibid, 70.
[45] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 70.

classes, but with the veritable flattening of political society through the *demes* system, these property classes became less politically relevant. The creation of deme centres also worked to redefine Athenian citizenship on a literal level. Citizens' legal names were now styled "*x* of deme *y*" to track and make sense of voter demographics.[46] This further made the *demes*people reliant on each other for their political identity, fostering a sense of communal citizenship and political knowledge.

Cleisthenes also made reforms to how citizens were granted prestige positions in government. In particular, he updated the *boule,* increasing the likelihood of councillors representing diverse citizen interests. Each deme voted on which of their own citizens would serve on the council. Ober emphasizes that this was a profound and unprecedented shift in council politics. Before, the council would be mostly populated by "urban political specialists."[47] By emphasizing the role of the individual deme centres in selecting councillors, Athenian offices of states began to be populated by many different types of citizens, both urban and rural. Cleisthenes did not stop there, however. To prevent the council from simply reverting to self-interest groups, he further organized councillors into "tribal" subgroups of 50 called *prytanies.*[48] These subgroups represented a "broad geographical cross section" of the citizenry, and emphasized deliberation and cooperation across social, cultural, and economic divides.[49]

The social and political implications of Cleisthenes' reforms cannot be overstated. Through establishing self-reliant deme centres and revolutionizing council elections, he introduced the lower classes onto the political playing field in a way no one had done before him. As Ober says, "The symbolic value of ordinary citizens conducting all levels of state business must have been considerable."[50] Cleisthenes' reforms thus constitute the single largest political phenomenon informing how the Athenian poor engaged in politics. Nevertheless, Cleisthenes' reforms did not address the actual material disparity of wealth in Athens, despite his championship of the people. While the importance of property classes in the political domain was diminished, Cleisthenes did not lead Athens into a classless society of equals. Indeed, economic inequality remained a vital component of Athenian life, as did political exclusion.

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid, 72.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid, 80.

2.3 Can the *Pênetes* Speak? Looking for the *Ptochoi*

> *Penia: It's not my life that you describe; you are attacking the existence beggars lead.*
> *Chremylos: Is beggary not poverty's sister?*[51]

Claire Taylor emphasizes the need to understand poverty in ancient Athens as relative, rather than absolute. Poverty, she claims, should not only be considered in terms of economic "differentials," but should also be viewed "in relation to socially approved behaviours, customs, and lifestyles among society at large."[52] This is epitomized most clearly in the transition from property to social class verbiage. While *pentekosiomedimnoi, hippeis, zeugitai,* and *thetes* are easily distinguishable economic classes, the terms *penêtes* to describe the poor and *plousioi* to describe the wealthy speak to how poverty was perceived in Athens as a social condition.[53]

As the relevance of the Solonian property classes dwindled, Athenian society was divided into two general categories: the rich *plousioi* and the labouring *penêtes.*[54] Taking after the gods Penia and Ploutos, the division of society into *penêtes* and *plousioi* reintroduced a mythic quality to Athenian considerations of wealth and status. The difference between the classes was marked solely by the need to work; those who were able to leisure and live off the labour of enslaved and employees were *plousioi,* whereas *penêtes* had to work for a living.[55] A *penês'* living could be comfortable or meagre, with vast differences between the individual experiences of *penêtes.* They were nevertheless unified as a social class through the act of labour.

As both Ober and Taylor note, these categories were not firmly fixed and possessed a certain relative meaning. A citizen could be called *plousios* simply because he was wealthier than his counterpart, who became a *penês* in comparison.[56] For this reason, Taylor argues that poverty and wealth should be viewed less as "static conditions" and more as "dynamic states."[57] Regardless of whether these categories were fixed or fluid, however, Ober maintains that the terms *penêtes* and *plousioi* were used to demarcate a fundamental difference in social and economic condition between citizens: "The terminology of wealth, whether used in an absolute or relative sense, always implied inequality, regardless of whether that inequality was general

[51] Aristophanes, *Plutus,* 548-49.
[52] Taylor, *Poverty, Wealth, and Well-Being,* 19.
[53] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 194.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid, 195.
[56] Ibid, 196.
[57] Taylor, *Poverty, Wealth, and Well-Being,* 22.

and corporate, or particular and individual."[58] Indeed, the perceived fluidity between *penêtes* and *plousioi* may speak to the resilience of these social categories, and their lasting ability to divide the rich from the poor. Above all, they indicate that, despite centuries of egalitarian political reform, economic inequality was seen as an indelible fact in Athenian society. Concern over political and legal equality never gave rise to "the wisdom of economic equality for the citizens."[59] The fact that small efforts were made to redistribute wealth[60] does not change the fact that, for the Athenians, class difference based on economic inequality was simply not seen as "innately undemocratic."[61] While modern values may lead one to view this as a failure of Athenian society to achieve true equality, it is important to remain in the context of the past: for Athenians, wealth inequality often looked more like the difference between leisure and labour, rather than opulence and destitution. This is not to say that there existed perfect harmony between the *penêtes* and the *plousioi:* no doubt the *penêtes* often felt a certain degree of unease or avarice when faced with the more glaringly obvious manifestations of social inequality. Nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that this discomfort ever evolved into a full-blown economic class consciousness.[62] It is for this reason that Taylor insists that we must look at poverty in Athens through the lens of social inclusion and exclusion, rather than as a purely economic phenomenon.[63]

While the *penêtes* were undoubtedly poor, this did not prevent them from participating in political affairs, especially after the reforms of Cleisthenes. The namesakes of Penia experienced a relative amount of political freedom, unfettered by their economic status. But, as Aristophanes reminds us in *Plutus,* Penia has a sister—Ptocheia the Beggar—and *her* namesakes were not so fortunate. While *penêtes* could be any and all citizens, from wealthy craftspeople to subsistence farmers, the title *ptochoi* was reserved for paupers and beggars, the lowliest members of Athenian society. *Ptochoi* experienced extreme social exclusion, even after Cleisthenes' reforms.[64] Not surprisingly, then, there are few references in Greek literature to actual *ptochoi,*

[58] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 196.
[59] Ibid, 198.
[60] Notable examples include pressures placed on the wealthy to use their money for the betterment of the state, either through liturgies, war taxes or *eisphora,* or punitive fines handed down by the people's court, as well as the implementation of state pay that enabled lower class citizens to attend Assembly more frequently or hold prestigious political positions (Ober *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 80, 199).
[61] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 199.
[62] Ibid, 198.
[63] Taylor, *Poverty, Wealth, and Well-Being,* 24.
[64] Ibid, 37.

though there are plenty of fictional depictions of them, most notably in the works of Aristophanes and Homer.[65] The real *ptochoi* were often discouraged or even barred from attending Assembly and were assumed by most to carry out nomadic lives, effectively living in exile within the city limits. Due in equal parts to their material social exclusions and literary depictions as nomads without family or polis ties, the *ptochoi* were routinely considered as *apolis*, falling "outside the developing institutions of authority."[66] This fueled a perception of *ptochoi* as foreign and non-Athenian, regardless of where they were born.[67]

I argue that this rendering of the beggar class as non-Athenian by virtue of their very Athenian class status points to the still-present conflation between citizenship, wealth, and social and political participation. The *ptochoi* were undeniably social outcasts—something that could not be said of the *penêtes*, who made up 90-95% of the Athenian citizenry.[68] Yet there seems to be little, beyond this social exclusion, to distinguish the *ptochoi* from the *penêtes*—except wealth. Thus, despite the dismantling of, first, the supremacy of the Athenian aristocracy by Solon and, second, the Solonian property classes by Cleisthenes, the continuing existence and experiences of the *ptochoi* suggest that wealth remained a major factor in both social inclusion and political participation. As Taylor notes, the experience of Ptocheia—not simply Penia—therefore plays a significant role in the rhetoric of poverty in Athens, in that it separates and demarcates the *penêtes* from the *ptochoi*, the workers from the beggars, the citizens from the outsiders, and the *demos* from the riffraff.[69]

The social division induced by Ptocheia plays out on the political field in ways that trouble the egalitarian ethos of democratic Athens. There is, to my mind, no logical explanation for the profound social exclusion of the *ptochoi* that does not come back to their economic status. While Taylor argues persuasively that poverty should be considered as a social condition more than an economic condition, the fact remains that the social condition of the *ptochoi* is a result *of* their economic condition. In ancient Athens, social and political exclusion still teeter on the fulcrum of wealth, despite efforts to flatten the political terrain. It is important to remember that

[65] Ibid, 39.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ober estimates that the *plousioi* were 5-10% of the citizen population, while the *penêtes* were the remaining 90-95%; interestingly, the *ptochoi* do not even make it into these census numbers, which further emphasizes their tenuous citizen status (Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 129).
[69] Taylor, *Poverty, Wealth, and Well-Being*, 42.

the *ptochoi* were not technically classified as noncitizens—of which there were undoubtedly many in Athens, including all enslaved people, women, and non-Athenians. Yet they were denied even the most basic rights granted to citizens on account of their poverty.

The political exclusion of the ptochoi suggests not only that was poverty an intrinsic aspect of Athenian society—as Penia herself makes clear in Aristophanes' play—and not merely that the boundaries between wealthy and labouring citizens were fluid and relative—as Taylor and Ober point out. More than this: the political exclusion of the ptochoi suggests that, despite ongoing and practically revolutionary constitutional reforms to democratic Athens, true political equality was not only unattainable for the Athenians, but it was also undesirable. True political equality would involve opening up politics to the dregs of society. It would mean opening up politics to the poor. Historical and political analyses of poverty and the Athenian masses, like those of Taylor and Ober, still do not do enough to grasp at the profound political implications of these undesirable citizens. What is needed, beyond mere historical accounts, is an understanding of the underlying organization of conceptual and institutional power, of the signifiers and signifieds that imbues Penia and Ptocheia with such profound symbolic power—in other words, of the Athenian social imaginary. As I will demonstrate, Penia is the core signification of this imaginary, and thus a core signification of democracy itself.

3.1 The Athenian Social Imaginary

> *As to origin, Eros is son of Poros and Penia, and partakes of the nature of both parents—the fertile vigour of the one, the wastrel neediness of the other. As he is a mean between the mortal and the immortal, so he is a mean between the wise and the unwise.*[70]

Cornelius Castoriadis is perhaps most well-known for his work on what he calls the social imaginary. Echoes of Castoriadis' more devout Marxian days can be heard in his notion of an imaginative, spectre-like force that informs social history and imbues human action with distinct meaning. Yet the social imaginary goes far beyond the foundations of historical materialism and semiotic linguistics that serve as quasi-launching pads for Castoriadis' project.

A core tenet of the social imaginary is the understanding that social institutions are not purely functional. As Castoriadis explains, 'functional' is a relative term, defined or shaped by an outside force to which the functioning society aspires.[71] A society can only be understood as functional "in relation to tensions, orientations, chains of significations, which not merely escape

[70] Plato, *Symposium*, 201e-204c.
[71] Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 135-6.

functionality but to which functionality is in large part subservient."[72] Social institutions are not purely symbolic either, however. Institutions form a symbolic network but, as with their functionality, the institutional symbolism defers to something that resides outside the symbolic network yet still remains within society itself. Castoriadis calls this 'something' that powers both a society's functional materiality and symbolic normativity the imaginary of society. This social imaginary can in turn be deciphered via the autonomous significations that imbue society with its immanent symbolic meaning.

Importantly, these significations are not simply symbols; rather, they operate "independent" of symbols and signifiers and even "play a role" in their choice and organization.[73] Castoriadis uses the example of God to illustrate his point. God, he explains, is not a signification of something real, nor is God merely a symbol—which, of course, would inevitably point to a heteronomous concept being symbolized. Yet, despite being neither real nor symbolic, God is foundational to many societies and institutions. Castoriadis calls God a "central signification" that organizes societal signifiers and signifieds into a coherent system.[74] In other words, God is that which renders religious symbols both *qua* religious and *qua* symbolic. It is the core signification that transforms two interlocked wooden planks into the Cross or transmutes red wine into wine that can be further transmuted into blood. As a central signification, God is what supports "the intersecting unity" of signifiers and signifieds and shapes the "extension, multiplication and modification" of itself as signification.[75] As such, God is an imaginary signification, in that it cannot be rationality qualified or quantified, yet remains central to the institution of society.

For Castoriadis, the imaginary is the nucleus of society and history. He insists that the social world in its entirety is "constituted and articulated" by a system of significations, which "exist" in the mode of the imaginary.[76] As a modality, the social imaginary moves beyond both historical materialism and semiotics to perceive, receive, and conceive social history as the product of a boundless "creative imagination" that nevertheless takes shapes and is bound up in in the putative "'choice' of symbolism" made by a given society.[77] Castoriadis insists that it is

[72] Ibid, 136.
[73] Ibid, 139.
[74] Ibid, 140.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid, 146.
[77] Ibid.

indeed impossible to understand human history except through the imaginary: "We cannot understand a society outside of a unifying factor that provides a signified content and weaves it with the symbolic structures."[78] As such, while the social imaginary exists outside of both a society's functionalism and symbolism, it is not heteronomous to that society. The imaginary is immanent to the society of which it is the core signification. In this way, it is always already autonomous, continuously "present 'at the start'" of social institution and signification.[79]

Much of the conceptual inspiration for the social imaginary can be found in Castoriadis' fascination with—and, in some ways, devotion to and even idolization of—Ancient Greece. There is not time here to go into every detail of how Ancient Greece, and specifically Athens, acts as a seed of inspiration for Castoriadis' social imaginary. I will instead focus on the relationship between, first, myth and politics and, second, politics and tragedy. In both instances, stories and epic history play fundamental roles in Athenian democratic self-institution.

For Castoriadis, Athens is the originary site of the struggle for social and individual autonomy.[80] What is more, it is the site of two major "creations" or moments of advancement: the creation of the *polis,* followed by the creation of democracy itself.[81] Castoriadis claims, not unproblematically, that these socio-historical creations set Ancient Greece apart as the origin the "only" philosophical tradition where the question of "judging and choosing between different institutions … arises and becomes thinkable," if not solvable.[82] This is due in part to the "heritage" of mythology that exists "upstream" from the creation of the *polis*.[83] As Castoriadis notes, Zeus only became master of the heavens "by chance" when drawing lots with Hades and Poseidon after defeating the Titans.[84] The concept of the agora can be found in Homer, he continues, as can the notion of a self-instituting *polis,* evidenced by the colonial exploits of Odysseus. More than these individual examples, however, Greek mythology was a foundational and inextricable aspect of Athenian political life. In Athens, the world of politics was not separate from the social world of the people. There was no "State as apparatus" that existed to

[78] Ibid, 160.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary," 106.
[81] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions," 316.
[82] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy," trans. David Ames Curtis, *The New School Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 9, no. 2 (1983): 94.
[83] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions," 314.
[84] Ibid.

separate politics from the political collectivity.[85] Laws were literally immanent to society, engraved on stone or marble in the agora.[86] Greek myth and spirituality were equally immanent, both linguistically—with many god names serving double duty as social categories or conditions—and politically, in the Athenian self-mythologization best characterized in *Pericles' Funeral Oration*.[87]

Myth—not just mythic tales but the act of mythology itself—can thus be seen as a core signification in the Athenian political imaginary. Myth organizes various societal signifiers and signifieds into a coherent system: *demokratia,* the Athenian way of life. Democracy and the *polis* are shaped by an implicit signifying power that straddles the space between the 'real' and the 'imaginary,' informing both human action and the very historicity of myth. This, of course, is not a revolutionary claim, nor even a very surprising one. Cultural myths are foundational to every society across time and space, and I have no doubt a Castoriadan approach would reveal myth to be a similar core signification in each. What is distinct, however, is the way these mythic significations congealed in Athens in such a way that what emerged was a society bent on producing and safeguarding its autonomy from the very myths that serve as its signification.

We can turn to tragedy to elucidate this seeming paradox. Tragedy is marked by its relationship to *hubris,* what has been rather inaccurately translated as dangerous or fatal 'pride.' As Castoriadis notes, hubris is less about challenging the gods or cheating fate as it is about the necessity of self-limitation in the face of ontological limitlessness. Tragedy is a uniquely democratic artform, he argues, because its ontological grounding is informed by this definitively political signification.[88] Tragedy reveals that "Being is Chaos," felt through both the absence of a rational order that would objectively organize the people, and through the absence of orderliness within each person, the feeling of *hubris* that encourages us to embrace the boundless chaos of an unlimited world.[89]

Self-limitation, and *hubris* as its disavowal, are in turn distinctly democratic because they operate from a conceptual premise that denies the existence of any norms, laws, or constitutions outside of the society that creates them. Democracy, Castoriadis writes, is "a regime that knows

[85] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary," 109.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War,* 2.35-46.
[88] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary," 112; "The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy," 107.
[89] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy," 107-8.

no external norms; it has to posit its own norms, and it has to posit them without being able to lean on another norm for support."[90] In this way, democracy is a thoroughly tragic regime, in that it is subject to *hubris.* Despite its mythic dimensions, democracy is beyond the veil of the "sacred world," beyond the "imaginary signification of a transcendent foundation" of law or society.[91] And indeed, we can see this in the way Athenian law functioned: in the practice of *graphe paranomon*—in which a citizen accuses another citizen of forwarding an 'illegitimate' law—and in *ostrakismos,* or ostracism, the famous Athenian expulsion of would-be tyrants. Yet the seeming rationality of these laws is continually buffeted by a democratic wind that ceaselessly reminds the Athenians of the lack of an objective *logos* that would confirm this rationality, and that cautions against the *hubris* at the very heart of the democratic ideal.

3.2 Penia in the Void

> *I am one that will punish you this very day for having wanted to make me disappear from here … I am Penia, who have lived with you for so many years.*[92]

I agree with Castoriadis' characterization of tragedy as a major, perhaps even central, signification of democracy. But I find it curious that he fails to follow these imaginative breadcrumbs further, to peak behind the tragic curtain of *hubris.* If *hubris* is indeed the failure to self-limit in a world devoid of transcendent law, then there must be a 'something'—either real or imagined—that drives one to forego self-limitation. As Castoriadis says, the instituting power of the "collective-anonymous imaginary" remains largely "hidden within the depths of society."[93] Tragedy and hubris are not hidden significations of Athenian society; indeed, they are two of its most "explicit" signifying powers, which are "menaced" by the very social imaginary they emerge from.[94] Another signification, cloistered further within the bowels of the Athenian imaginary, must be at work. I insist that this covert imaginative power is none other than Penia, the impoverished self-consciousness of lack. Penia is the great motivator of tragic *hubris,* and thus it is the core signification of both Athenian tragedy and democracy itself.

Castoriadis' favourite Greek play, *Antigone,* demonstrates the centrality of Penia to tragic and democratic imaginary significations. He claims that the traditionally received interpretation of Sophocles' play as "a tract against human and in favor of divine law" is misguided and

[90] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary," 112.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Aristophanes, *Plutus,* 433-37.
[93] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary," 103.
[94] Ibid.

ignores a more profound tension between its major players, King Creon and his titular niece.[95] What *Antigone* demonstrates is not the validity of one form of law over the other, but is rather that "contrary reasons can coexist … and that it is not in obstinately persisting in one's own reasons *(monos phronein)* that it becomes possible to solve the grave problems that may be encountered in collective life."[96] Castoriadis emphasizes that the supposed impasse between Antigone's petition of divine law and Creon's upholding of city law is less stark when one takes into consideration the fact that either standpoint could be defended by appealing interchangeably to divine or human law. To bury the dead is a human law for the Greeks as much as it is a divine one, just as defending one's city and ensuring stability is a divine imperative.[97] Antigone's conviction is thus just as political as Creon's, while his decision is equally informed by a spiritual *ethos.* The "deepest spirit of tragedy" is the undeniability of the logical, political, and ethical deadlock between niece and uncle—not because one is right and one is wrong, but because such an overarching judgement is ultimately an impossibility in the eyes of Sophocles' democratic audience.[98] As Castoriadis writes, *Antigone* thus "addresses itself" entirely to the democratic framework and reveals hubris to be not only the transgression of norms but also the zealous devotion to norms: "It exhibits the uncertainty pervading the [democratic] field, it sketches the impurity of motives, it exposes the inconclusive character of the reasoning upon which we base our decisions."[99]

This cautiousness in the face of absolute certainty is, Castoriadis says, the "fundamental maxim" of democratic politics.[100] But as his own theories specify, any such fundamental maxim is powered by an imaginary force and a central signification that organizes societal meaning-making. Castoriadis implies that *hubris* is the core signification of the democratic imaginary because it demonstrates the need for self-limitation. Yet he also claims that one of the major takeaways from *Antigone*—the democratic tragedy *par excellence*—is the need to temper *monos phronein*, one's own rationality and reasoning. While *monos phronein* is undeniably a form of *hubris,* the self-limitation Castoriadis presents as its foil is also a hubristic act. Self-limitation must by definition rely on one's own reason, which leads to *hubris.* Therefore, a contradictory

[95] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy," 108.
[96] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary," 112.
[97] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy," 108.
[98] Ibid, 109.
[99] Ibid, 110.
[100] Ibid.

tension exists at the conceptual heart of *hubris:* one can never be sure if one's self-limitation is adequate because it is measured against a normative void. To self-limit is to self-institute, and to self-institute is to flirt with *hubris.* We are left with the unavoidable fact that democratic self-institution will always lack legitimacy and will always be in want of the very normative transcendence it eschews. This tension gestures in turn to another, more central signification, one that endows *hubris* with its twisted significant. This central signification that organizes and fuels the democratic imaginary must be Penia.

The democratic imaginary insists that there are no forces external to society that demonstrates a righteous or true path. Yet the democratic project is bound up in the collective pursuit of what is right, what is true, what is just, what is desirable. These are unknowable imperatives; we cannot know what they are, but we know that we need them. We know that we are impoverished without them. We know, thus, that the democratic imaginary is characterized—is signified—by this eternal poverty and the decision, despite it all, to step into the void and take up a cause.

4.1 Conclusion: For Want of Love

PENIA: One day you will recall me.[101]

At the tragic root of democracy can be found a desperate desire, an endless want for an outside force granting the legitimacy democracy must continually deny. I argue democracy is characterized by an unshakeable awareness of this lack, an unshakeable awareness of Penia. Yet Penia is also what powers the continual development, reformulation, and revitalization of democratic society. This democratic self-institution precludes the idea of transcendence even as it lays bare a profound desire to fill the immanent social space with mythic heteronomous legitimacy. In this way, Penia can be seen as a powerful force against the emergence of tyranny—a force that maintains democracy because it is the very core signification upon which democracy's imagination is built. And the *penêtes* and *ptochoi*, so despised by the Athenian political and philosophical elite alike, are in fact keepers of democratic signification in its barest form.

Returning, finally, to Plato, his rather dismissive description of Penia as the mother of Eros takes on a new significance in this light. Plato describes Penia as a wretched, manipulative figure, who tricks Poros into copulation: poverty hoodwinks resourcefulness, giving rise to

[101] Aristophanes, *Plutus*, 607.

endless desire. We can understand Penia a little differently, however, as mother to the thirst for the impossible. It is the thirst that would be needed to power an autonomous society's desire to self-institute its way into heteronomous transcendence, while knowing that it will never, under any circumstances, forfeit its autonomy. But Penia also produces love, not for societal norms or imperatives, but romantic love for another human being, another mortal. Penia bestows upon us the desire for one another, a desire that must always remain immanent within autonomous, mortal society. Our desire, our love, for one another marks us as *penêtes*, wanting-subjects that can turn nowhere to satisfy our needs but to ourselves, and to the self-institution endowed to us by our mythic, impoverished, autonomous imaginary.

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