In defence of the British constitution: theoretical implications of the debate over Athenian democracy in Britain, 1770-1850

Kyriakos N. Demetriou, University of Cyprus
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Author: Demetriou K.

Source: History of Political Thought, Volume 17, Number 2, 1996, pp. 280-297(18)

Publisher: Imprint Academic

Writing a history of ancient Greece, in periods of political turbulence and transition, involved the construction of an edifying platform for civil conduct. Britain, 1770-1850, was one such period. In examining Athenian democracy the British historians of the late eighteenth century, like William Mitford and John Gillies, found a convenient channel to articulate their private political preferences and antipathies, thereby accentuating the ideological antagonism of the post-revolutionary age. Athenian liberalism was deliberately drawn from oblivion only to be set as a constitutional example to avoid, whereas the merits of the mixed British constitution were distinctly exposed. The British Utilitarians, by contrast, produced a case on behalf of representative government that included the basic characteristics of democracy and which witnessed its minimum prototype in ancient Athens. George Grote assumed the task of upsetting the conventional idea of Athens, thus perpetuating the typical association of Greek historiography with contemporary political discussion.

Keywords: Athens; Classical reception; Athenian democracy; modern Greek historiography; Greek history; Utilitarians; Grote

Language: English

Document Type: Research article

Publication date: 1996-01-01