This theoretically supple and surprisingly timely book probes overlooked tensions internal to both the reality and the ideal of ancient Athenian democracy. Specifically, it highlights incongruities between Athenian democracy’s denial of citizenship to foreign residents, or metics, on the grounds that they lacked pure Athenian ancestry; the embeddedness of metics in Athenian economy and society; and the elision of the metic and other immigrants by democratic theory from the classical period to our own. The book’s ingeniously counterintuitive claim is that a tragedy revealing the shared Athenian identity of a mother and her son, a speech testifying to the purity of a citizen’s Athenian blood, and an argument for hierarchical rule can help bring the metic’s centrality to democracy from obscurity to visibility once we learn to read between their lines. While Demetra Kasimis attends to historical events and writings in or about the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, only readers who are utterly obtuse to current migration crises or utterly romantic about democracy’s potential can avoid concluding that analogous incongruities disturb Western democracies today.

Democratic theory’s signature move always has been to elevate citizens to star positions on the political stage, along with the sovereigns who belong to them, are authorized by them, or are synonymous with them. In turn, dramas about expanding the citizen body have showcased struggles for inclusion by or on behalf of previously subordinated groups within the domestic population. As for foreigners—typically, they have played the role of outsiders here who are insiders elsewhere, thereby illustrating the universality of the particularistic body politic model. This neat theoretical and geographical separation of citizens and foreigners is belied by the real history of political societies, in which strangers often share the same territorial space as natives in shifting, complex, and polity-transforming ways that ultimately call into question any hard and fast native/stranger divide.

Kasimis grapples with the allergy of the Western tradition to either acknowledging the significance of putative strangers inside the democratic polity or according those strangers political agency and rights. Her case in point concerns free foreigners who were drawn to the imperial democracy of Athens by its expanding economic opportunities and gained long-term residence and considerable stature in society through enhancing the wealth and influence of both Athens and themselves. Their children born on Athenian soil inherited their metic status as the result of Periclean laws limiting citizenship to offspring of two Athenian parents who could trace their ancestry back to the founder of that city-state. Ironically, long-term metics developed such an intimate understanding of Athenian life that the most logically and verbally adept among them were able to teach rhetorical skills to citizens so
that they could sway other citizens to their side in domestic political contests that metics were forbidden to enter. One of the paradoxes that Kasimis notes is that the metic’s political exclusion from the citizen body, in combination with the metic’s and the citizen’s social resemblances to one another, made both figures potential objects of suspicion, as it became simultaneously imperative and difficult to make sure that metics were objectively distinct from Athenians and that citizens were not metics in disguise.

To probe the stake that egalitarian modes of rule have in citizen/stranger distinctions, Kasimis turns to Euripides’s Ion, Plato’s Republic, and Demosthenes’s Against Euboulides, with supplemental references to Pericles’s Funeral Oration and Plato’s Menexenus. She argues that the liminal figure of the metic can be seen to haunt those texts, once they are read against their proper historical backdrop. In the Ion, a series of masquerades reveals the dubious facticity and inherent instability of the citizen/metic distinction. Ion, who comes to think he is the biological son of non-Athenian parents, refuses to move with his putative father from Delphi to Athens because he does not want to be assigned metic status there. After discovering that he is in fact the son of an Athenian mother raped by Apollo, he agrees to return to Athens as a fraudulent metic in order to inherit his family’s wealth and contribute to the city’s colonial settlement of the Cyclades. In Against Euboulides, the blood-based criterion for political membership that awarded free Athenians of every class equal political standing proves insufficient to protect the citizenship status of Euxitheus. His father having been enslaved while fighting in the Peloponnesian War, his mother impoverished, and he himself forced to work alongside metics in the agora, Euxitheus is charged by fellow-citizens with being a secret metic, too. In the absence of modern bureaucratic recordkeeping, Euxitheus’s kinship lines are impossible to prove, while his economic performances are visible enough to threaten him with disenfranchisement.

The textual centerpiece of The Perpetual Immigrant is the Republic, which Kasimis dubs “a metic space.” Philosophical dialogues about justice and the ideal city occur in the house of a metic in Piraeus, a harbor filled with merchants, immigrants, imported goods, and the gains of imperial wealth. They contest the citizen’s essential difference from the metic by describing a number of bidirectional mimetic relationships between the two figures in practical life. Finally, they expose the fact that a lie legitimizes every type of political order. Socrates declares that the division of the population into gold, silver, and iron types is a fable that convinces all members of the hierarchical republic to accept as natural the socially produced class differences among them. Kasimis contends that Plato means us to extrapolate the lesson that Athenian democracy rests on another social fabrication that naturalizes not the vertical distinctions of social rank but the horizontal distinction between native and metic blood.

The Perpetual Immigrant traces convolutions of political and social identity in an imperial democracy in which, because no difference is what it seems
to be, anxieties about authenticity abound. I did find myself wondering at times whether Kasimis could have clarified these identity entanglements without getting quite so caught up in all the tangles. I also wondered what classicists would make of Kasimis’s textual interpretations and especially whether they would find the idea of a medic-centric Republic too much of a stretch. From the vantage point of contemporary political theory, however, peering in on the celebrated origins of Western democracy through Kasimis’s lens is sharply illuminating. That lens allows us to see how democracy’s valorization of the citizen not only comes at the expense of those deemed strangers inside the polity but also occludes the contributions of different varieties of strangers to democratic societies. In our own period of inflamed nativist politics, blood-based notions of citizenship threaten to triumph over more capacious birthplace-based notions, while even birthplace-based notions have proved problematic for asylum seekers, destitute migrants, and those fleeing political violence or ecological catastrophe elsewhere. But whether the stranger is a peasant crossing borders out of brute material necessity or a capitalist chasing new opportunities for profit making, a climate-change refugee or a beleaguered minority on the run from persecution, a settler pushing indigenous peoples out of the way or indigenous inhabitants scattered into the diaspora, the citizen/stranger relationship is pivotal to politics today. Demetra Kasimis’s The Perpetual Immigrant and the Limits of Athenian Democracy presses us to make that relationship pivotal to political theory, too.

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Edmundson has written an admirably concise yet powerful book. It blends a critical account of Rawls’s work with an original case for democratic socialism hewn from Rawlsian stone. In my opinion, this case has some flaws but it remains a timely contribution to the enduring quest for justice and social stability.

The initial chapters dispatch the common misconception of Rawls as a supporter of welfare-state capitalism, unpack the Rawlsian case against private property in the means of production being a basic liberty, and examine