Athenian Identity
and Civic Ideology

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Civic Ideology and Counterhegemonic Discourse: Thucydides on the Sicilian Debate

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For a number of scholars (myself included), the subjects of Athenian citizenship and political identity seem to lead almost inevitably to an investigation of civic ideology. And, as this volume itself demonstrates, civic ideology is a deeply fascinating, if sometimes disquieting subject. I have argued elsewhere that in fifth- and fourth-century Athens the political identity of the citizen was enunciated in a civic ideology that was in turn defined by public discourse. This discourse was hegemonic and thus was the source of genuine political power for the ordinary citizens. But civic identity and ideology are only one half of the equation. As several critical discussions of the work of Michel Foucault have shown, the study of discourse-as-power draws attention to the equally problematic issue of discourse-as-resistance.

Civic ideology thus points to its own dialogical opposite: counter-ideology and critical discourse. With these considerations in mind, I offer here a preliminary reading of how a familiar text, Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War, resists the hegemonic tendencies of Athens' democratic civic ideology and criticizes the apparatuses through which that ideology was formulated and maintained. In brief, I hope to show that if Athenian civic ideology constructed the identity of the citizen by promulgating a specifically democratic way of learning about and acting in the public realm, then Thucydides' history offered its reader a technique for constructing an oppositional identity through mastery of a very different, although equally political, sort of knowledge.

The investigation of counterideologies seems particularly important because (among other reasons) the argument I have made for linking democracy and ideological hegemony might be mistaken as an attempt to demonstrate that democracy is no better—indeed, perhaps much worse—than other forms of government. This was not my intention, nor do I believe that it is correct to draw the inference "hegemonic discourse makes for bad politics" from the historical Athenian experience with democracy. One way to challenge the validity of such a position is to investigate the form and substance of political criticism written under the democratic regime. The limits of hegemonic political discourse can be defined by the ability and willingness of a society's members openly to challenge the central premises of civic ideology. Moreover, I believe that reading classical Athenian texts against the context of ideological hegemony can deepen our appreciation of the achievement of the texts themselves and can further our understanding of the relationship between criticism as expressed in literature and acts of political resistance.

A contextual reading of the sort I am proposing requires a brief description of what is meant by ideology, hegemony, resistance, and discourse. Athenian political ideology was formulated through, maintained by, and revealed by public speech, especially the formal rhetoric of Assembly and law-court debates. This ideology held (inter alia) that (1) political equality was both fundamentally important and compatible with social inequality, (2) consensus among citizens and liberty of citizens (esp. freedom of public speech) were simultaneously desirable, (3) collective decisions of the citizenry were inherently wise, and (4) educated and wealthy individuals were both a threat to democracy and indispensable agents in furthering the political process that permitted public-policy decisions to be made and implemented. Athenian cohesive, if internally contradictory, civic ideology mediated between the reality of social inequality and the goal of political equality, and so it helped to diffuse the class tensions that elsewhere in Greece led to bloody stases.

Athenian civic ideology was founded neither on a formal constitution nor on a set of epistemological certainties, but rather on a socially and politically constructed truth regime that I call "democratic knowledge." The practical functioning of democratic knowledge depended on the implicit willingness of the citizen-participants to accept the truths they lived by as political artifacts, rather than as absolutes denoted by a transcendent natural order. Democratic knowledge was grounded, in the language of J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, in the "conventional effects of conventional procedures," rather than in objective reality. It was created and re-created through the collective processes of public discussion, rather than being given from above by a metaphysical authority or discovered through intellectual efforts.

Athenian political culture was thus based explicitly on opinion rather than on scientific certainty—in Platonic terms, on doxa rather than on...
episteme. The enactment formula of the Assembly, edocei dei demoi, "it appeared right to the citizenry," defines the relationship between democratic knowledge and political action. The Athenian sociopolitical order was relatively stable because popular ideology provided a basis for collective decision-making. On the other hand, democratic knowledge remained flexible and dialectical because the frequent meetings of Assembly and People's Courts allowed contrasting views to be publicly aired. Through the process of open debate, public meanings evolved in response to changing external circumstances.

By responding to elite speakers in the Assembly and courtroom, the Athenian citizenry controlled the language employed in political deliberations. The resulting hegemony of the discourse of ordinary citizens was the real foundation of Athens' political order: Athens was a democracy because the ordinary citizen was a participant in maintaining a value system that constituted him as the political equal of his elite neighbor. This was a boon for the Athenian citizen masses, but a problem for some elite citizens, who saw enforced equality as oppression. Because revolutionary activism was discredited by the deplorable conduct of the ephemeral oligarchic governments of 411 and 404, the most visible (to us) resistance to civic ideology in late fifth- and fourth-century Athens was the creation of a literature critical of the failings of democratic knowledge. Because the educated elites of Athens were subject to, and searched for the hegemony of popular civic ideology, classical Athens generated many texts that struggled against the operations of what Foucault called the regime of truth. 7

Thucydides begins his text by stating that he began his work right at the beginning of the war because at the time he believed (elpisas) that it would be great and worthy of record and because he saw (boron) that the rest of the Greek world was either allied to, or inclining toward, one side or the other (1.1.1). The text, its subject, and the author's work have in this opening sentence a common point of origin, and from the very start Thucydides hints that there is simultaneously a connection and a distinction between inference (what he believed) and observation (what he saw). He was correct in his initial prediction, as we are told in the next sentence: the disturbance (kinesis) caused by the war engulfed almost the whole of mankind (1.1.2). The only emendation of Thucydides' original (prewar) assessment suggested by his second (explicitly postwar) sentence is that the conflict involved barbarians as well as Greeks.

In these opening sentences, the reader is alerted to the greatness of the events, the perspicacity of the historian, and the importance of the text. Thucydides foresaw great events, accurately assessed their importance, and studied them as they happened. Our author is no mere chronicle of past facts, but is possessed of a mantic gift for seeing the general direction of future developments. Having established his bona fides, Thucydides underlines the significance of the events he has recorded, by comparing the Peloponnesian War with previous conflicts. Despite the lack of fully reliable information about these early events, Thucydides used inference and probability (ek tekmerion) to show his readers that the wars and other affairs of the past were really not very great after all (1.1.3).

Having run through a brief précis of the more distant Greek past, Thucydides returns to the issue of the reliability of historical knowledge, launching (1.20.1) an attack on those who believe whatever they happen to hear about the past, including things about their own country, without subjecting the accounts to rigorous testing (abasanistos). His case in point is the belief, held by "the majority (to plethos) of the Athenians," that Hipparkhos, who was killed by Harmodios and Aristogeiton, had been the tyrant of Athens. This is no casual example: many Athenians assumed that the assassination of Hipparkhos set into motion the chain of events that led to the establishment of the democratic government. By showing that Hipparkhos was a minor figure, Thucydides undermines a foundation myth of the democracy and so robs popular rule of a "usable" aspect of the polis' past history. The word Thucydides uses for the ignorant Athenians who supposed Hipparkhos to have been tyrant— to plethos—refers to the mass of ordinary citizens. Thus, we are alerted to the text's critical project: it will present facts that have been "tested" and so are more reliable than the hodgepodge of erroneous beliefs that constitute democratic knowledge and underlie Athens' civic ideology.

Thucydides implies that the general (and specifically popular Athenian) unwillingness to test the truth is bad enough when it has to do with the distant past. But he goes on to show that "the many" are equally credulous when it comes to affairs unobscured by the passage of time. Thucydides cites as examples two errors regarding Sparta. He then sums up: "Such is the degree of carelessness among hoi polloi in the search for truth (aletheia) and their preference for ready-made accounts" (1.20.3).

Having chastised the many for their ignorance and laziness in regard to truth, Thucydides (1.21.1) proclaims the trustworthiness of his own history of the distant past: the reader will not go too far wrong in believing Thucydides' account, which is based on the clearest possible sources of evidence (epiphanestaton semeion). His compressed history is, he says, more reliable than the accounts of poets or logographoi. The former try to make the events of which they sing seem greater than they actually were. The latter are more concerned with persuading listeners than with hewing close to the truth. The events they relate are too distant in time to be checked (anexeleugktai) and, indeed, "have won their way into the realm..."
of the fabulous” (epi to muthodes eknenikekota). This last phrase introduces the idea of a contest. Thucydides locates the quasi-historical accounts of poets and (other) writers of logoi in the context of a tournament of words; the victor’s reward is public acclaim and the easy belief of the gullible many.

Of course Thucydides himself has introduced a competition between the “greatest of all. Here Thucydides introduces a conception that is taken to its own internal logic) shown to be incompatible with, and indeed how did Thucydides (1.2.2..1-2), and presenting to his readers the objective facts about the war they are engaged in while they are fighting it, and then to fall back into naïve wonderment at the glories of the distant past, this war will demonstrate to anyone who is willing to pay attention to the actual facts (ho polemos houtos . . . ap' auton ton ergon skopousi delosei) that it was the greatest of all. Here Thucydides introduces a conception that is central to his critical project: the superior importance and the self-evident significance for the interpreter of the past of what actually happened, of the brute facts about what was really done (ta erga). It is the war that demonstrates, by the facts themselves, its own greatness.13 The historian has disappeared: historical truth is no longer a matter of words, of verbal persuasion or interpretation, but a self-evident matter of seeing.

Facts (erga) occupy a privileged place in Thucydides’ narrative in relation to speech (logos). Words (especially those spoken in public by politicians) and facts often collide in his text. As we shall see, individual men and states (i.e., men acting collectively) who attempt to impose their own speech-dependent meanings on brute facts come to bad ends. This pattern in the text is significant from the perspective of criticism of democracy. As Thucydides has explained, most Athenians believe silly things about their own past and about the institutions of their opponents. They came to believe these errors through listening to pleasing poetry and equally pleasing speeches.14 Assemblymen whose understanding of the past and present derives only from poets and public speakers—whose aim was not correspondence with “facts,” but rather the pleasure and acclaim of the audience—cannot possibly decide rightly in regard to the future. If sustained by the empirical evidence of an objective historical narrative (which Thucydides’ text is often taken to be), this chain of reasoning would be a devastating criticism of democracy.15

Athenian Assembly speakers based their arguments on democratic knowledge, which took for granted both a citizenry with a good grasp of past and present political practices and the validity of public opinion.16 When Thucydides removed facts from the realm of affairs that could properly be understood through listening to public speakers, or by reference to examples drawn from the ordinary citizens’ knowledge of the distant past, or by surface appearance and collective opinion, he also removed facts from the realm of things that could be adequately understood (and hence dealt with) by the existing procedures of the Athenian Assembly. Thucydides’ version of historical knowledge is thus (according to its own internal logic) shown to be incompatible with, and indeed superior to, democratic knowledge.

Thucydides is not a simple sort of critic, and he recognized that the problem of perspective presented a challenge to his goal of understanding and presenting to his readers the objective facts about the past.12 He complicates the reading of facts as objective entities that can exist in a pure realm beyond perspective: “My investigation proved very laborious, because the witnesses to each of the things that actually happened (tois ergois) did not relate the same things about these things, but rather [each spoke] according to his individual preference (eunoia) for one side or the other, or according to individual memory” (1.2.3). In his prior discussion on how he treated speeches and events (1.2.1-2), Thucydides had established a hierarchical relationship between logoi and erga. There he stated that, while speeches neither could be nor need be reported exactly, he subjected all reports of events (as well as his own perceptions) to the most rigorous scrutiny. But here he reminds the reader that his own knowledge of the facts about the war was largely a product of listening to things others said about what had actually happened in the war—that is, Thucydides’ account of the erga is built up from logoi recounted by multiple witnesses who had imposed their own ideological perspectives on their narratives, and whose memories were imperfect.

We are now set for the grand revelation: Just how did Thucydides extract objective truth (aletheia) about the erga from multiperspectival logoi? The hoped-for revelation never comes. In its place we get a digression on the probable reception of Thucydides’ text: “When people listen to (kai es . . . akroasai) my account, the very lack of fables (muthodes) will probably make it appear rather unpleasant” (1.2.4). Here the wording draws an explicit contrast between Thucydides’ history and the accounts of the logographoi, which were composed with an eye toward aural reception and which may win their way into the realm of fable. We have now been warned: investigating the facts of the war was not easy, the author does not intend to reveal the alchemical secret of extracting objective historical truth from subjective accounts, and we should not expect to enjoy his narrative. Why should we (the members of his intended audience) bother to read it? The answer comes in the next sentence: “But as many as wish genuinely to understand (to saphes skopoin) that which happened in the past and that which will happen in the future—a future which over time, in accordance with human nature (kata to anthropi-
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CIVIC IDEOLOGY AND COUNTERHEGEMONIC DISCOURSE
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text's opening sentence: they will have learned how to recognize the
significance of great things in the offing. Confronted with the objective
account of great political events, they will come to an empirical under-
standing of complex phenomena that conspire to create future tendencies.19 The text's claim to teach an understanding of both past and future
demonstrates that, despite his initial statement that the war was "most
worthy of recording," Thucydides' account is hardly "history for its own
sake." It is intended as a thoroughly tested, trustworthy, useful, empiri-
cally derived critical theory of political power in the form of a precise
chronological prose narrative. This critical theory is in turn based on
specific understandings of power and human nature.
In the so-called "Archaeology," Thucydides uses examples from ear-
ier phases of Greek society to show that power is both restless and
destructive. The reader concludes from these examples that once a state
has become powerful it has only two choices. Either it will extend its
power and thereby destroy the freedom of others, or the internal inequal-
ities generated by undeployed power will lead to the self-destructive
trauma of stasis.20 The conceptualization of power as unstable and de-
structive in its effects is significant for reading Thucydides as a critic of
popular rule. The two commonest terms for power in fifth-century Ath-
ens were dunamis (national financial or military strength relative to other
states) and kratos. For most ordinary Athenians, kratos, at least in the
political context defined by demokratia, had the positive sense of "legiti-
mate authority." The demos' kratos, the people's political power, was
regarded as a natural political good. But in Thucydides' much darker
vision, kratos is the violent flip side of dunamis: either raw military
might, or the forceful measures by which control over others is gained.21
The Athenian demos was powerful because the common people were
many and were well aware of their collective strength. If the kratos of the
demos is a sort of power, and power destroys freedom and produces civil
strife, the implication must be that, for Thucydides, demokratia is the
power of the demos to destroy the freedom of others and, unless con-
trolled by some external force, demokratia will embody a tendency to-
ward the horrors of stasis. This reading is strengthened by a considera-
tion of the other leg on which Thucydides' critical theory stands: his view
of human nature.
Thucydides assumes throughout that human beings will, by nature,
act according to perceived self-interest. But this does not necessarily mean
narrowly selfish personal or individual interest.22 He seems to regard
circumstances in which each individual acts to further his narrow, per-
sonal interests as a pathological extreme. For example, despite their
power, the tyrants of archaic Greece never accomplished much of note
because each was interested only in his private household (idion oikon,
1.17). In plague-stricken Athens the ordinary bonds of family, community,
and friendship were shattered by a force beyond human ability to control
or comprehend. Thucydides' description of the hedonistic behavior of
individual Athenians who had contracted the plague might be read as an
explanation of how human "nature" (physis) asserted itself in a condi-
tion free of the artificial bonds of social "custom" (nomos). But Thucydides
claims that the effects of the plague were "beyond the capacity of
human nature (ten anthropoeian phusin) to endure" (2.50.1). Thus, we are
to suppose that the plague overcame humanity and the behavior of the
plague-stricken went beyond the realm of acting according to human
nature. The plague narrative describes the ghastly end point of a contin-
um of behavior whose middle range is, for Thucydides, "human nature.
For Thucydides, the selves that naturally act to further their perceived
interests are collectivities: poleis or groups within the polis.23 The stress
of horrible circumstances has the potential to fragment society so individu-
als act only to further individual self-interest, but life under those condi-
tions is not truly "human."
The demotic Athenian view of human nature was probably not so
different from that of Thucydides, but Athenian civic ideology tended to
put a great deal of emphasis on the Demos as a whole as the "self" that
naturally acted to further human interests. The Athenian political ideal
was for all of the citizens to decide and to act collectively in the interests
of the polis as a whole.24 In Athens the discontinuity between actual
political actors (those who attended the Assembly, made proposals,
served as jurors, implemented decisions, etc.) and the corporate whole
(hoi Athenaioi) was deeply concealed behind the elaborate ideological
structure that was maintained in turn by the hegemonic language of dem-
ocratic politics. The functioning of the democracy was dependent on
maintaining the illusion that the part of the citizen body that made policy,
in the Assembly stood in the place of the whole polis. For the Athenians,
the enactment of a decree in the Assembly represented the collective will
of the (imagined entity) Demos. Imagined Demos, identified with the
state, naturally (in Athenian ideology) acted in the interest of the state.25
Thucydides' text attempts to expose this construct as a fragile political myth by demonstrating the existence and function of much narrower interests that were concealed by the language of Athenian politics. His text suggests that under the stress of war the myth of Demos often broke down and that, in light of the majoritarian decision-making mechanisms of the democratic state, this had serious consequences: Athenian political life after the death of Perikles is depicted as tending toward the selfish extreme typified by poleis beset by tyrants or plague. Alternately, the myth of unity was from time to time revived during the war, and Thucydides suggests that the consequences of this revival were, if anything, even more destructive to the polis.

For an ordinary Athenian, the term demokratia meant something like "the monopoly over legitimate public authority is held by the whole of the citizenry." For Thucydides, the same term denoted something like "the lower classes possess the raw power that gives them the means to constrain the rest of us." Thucydides does sometimes use the term demos to refer to the abstraction citizenry, but his primary use of the term is to denote a large, sociologically defined, and self-interested political faction within the state. Demos in this narrower sense means "the mass of the poor" and is equated with to plethos and hoi polloi. If demos means "the masses as an interest group or faction," then demokratia is reenvisioned as an unstable system likely to promote the spread of destructive, narrowly defined self-interest, and this instability will unleash the great destructive potential innate in the dunameis of both Athens and Sparta.

The only way around this reenvisioning is for two conditions to be met. First, the demos of Athens must be not only "the many" imagining themselves as Demos but also "the many and the few united in fact." Second, that unified demos must have an accurate understanding of the effect of its present decisions and actions on the future. This second condition requires that public decisions be grounded in objective facts. Thucydides depicts the Athenian process of linking (or failing to link) facts with speech in a number of passages of the History, notably in the Funeral Oration scene, and the three debate scenes (debates over Corcyraean alliance, the fate of Mytilene, and the Sicilian expedition) in which sets of speeches are delivered in the Athenian Assembly. These passages lead the reader to form certain judgments about the failure of the Athenians to fulfill either of the conditions noted above. Here I will touch on only the final scene, the Sicilian Debate.

Book 6 begins: "In that ... winter the Athenians decided ... to sail against Sicily and, if possible, conquer it," although "hoi polloi were ignorant (apeiroi) of the great size of the island, of the numerousness of its Greek and barbarian population, and that they were undertaking a war not much smaller than that against the Peloponnesians" (6.1.1). Thucydides then describes the island's size, population, and early history (6.1.2-6.5) in order to demonstrate that "it was against such an island that the Athenians were eager (hormento) to make war." They intended, we are told, to rule the entire island, although they wanted to make it appear that they were offering aid to allies and kinsmen (6.6.1). Thucydides' sober and detailed description of Sicily contrasts sharply with the transparent duplicity and pathetic ignorance he attributes to the Athenian masses. In the three speeches by Nikias and Alkibiades that follow, as in other Assembly speech scenes, Thucydides establishes a contest between his historical way of knowing and democratic knowledge, between his text and public speeches, between his readers and Athenian assemblymen.

The scene is set: Sicilian Segesta has asked for Athenian military aid; the Athenians dispatched a fact-finding mission (6.6.1-2) that returned with accounts of Sicilian resources "both encouraging and untrue" (ouk alethe, 6.8.2). On the basis of this misinformation, which they evidently believed, the Assembly voted to send a force of sixty ships to Sicily (6.8.2-3). Five days later, a second Assembly was held, to vote on any additional material the generals felt would be necessary (6.8.2-3). As the debate opens Nikias, who had been designated a leader of the expedition, has come to feel that the slight and specious pretext of the alliance is inadequate to the monumental reality (megalou ergou) of attempting to conquer the entire island of Sicily (6.8.3-4). He hopes to persuade the Athenians to rescind the decree authorizing the expedition, in effect to "undo" the speech act performed at the previous meeting of the Assembly (6.9.1). This is a tall order. Nikias admits that his logos is unlikely to prevail against the Athenian character (tropoi) and that it will be difficult to dissuade his audience from taking risks in regard to "the still-obscure future." But he nonetheless tries to teach (didaxo) his audience that it will not be easy to accomplish that which they are eager to do (hormesthe, 6.9.3). Nikias' language recalls Perikles' comments on speech and action in the Funeral Oration, but Nikias hopes that, "instructed by speech," the Athenians will be willing not to act.28

Nikias establishes his political credentials with a claim never to have spoken in public "against his own opinion" (para gnomen, 6.9.2). He points out that he has no personal interest in blocking the expedition (6.9.2), thus setting up a contrast to Alkibiades' great personal interest in having the expedition sail. But ever-moderate Nikias qualifies his statement: I do, however, believe that a good citizen takes forethought for his own body and goods because this man will sincerely wish that the affairs of the polis should prosper so that his own will (6.9.2). Like other Authen-
nian public speakers, Nikias hopes to show that there is no necessary gap between personal and public interests. But his comment undercuts the contrast between himself and Alkibiades and leaves his opponent with a deadly rhetorical counter. 29

Nikias attempts to show the Athenians that the expedition is dangerous in light of the continued antagonism of the Spartans. The plots of certain Athenians and our enemies have made the peace treaty into "merely a name" (onomata). He correctly predicts that the treaty will not stop the Peloponnesians from attacking should Athens suffer a defeat abroad. But, like other Assembly speakers in Thucydides' history, Nikias also resorts to dubious arguments from probability and vague maxims. 30 He also appeals to Athenian fear of antidemocratic conspiracies. 31 Thucydides' forthcoming description of Athenian hysteria over the affair of the Herm-smashers will show his readers how very dangerous this last line of argument could be.

Like other public speakers, Nikias emphasizes the need to concentrate on national interests. 32 He points out the Segestans' national interests lie in telling plausible untruths; they have nothing to contribute but logoi (6.12.1). This leads to his attack on Alkibiades' narrowly personal and selfish motivation (to beautou monon skopon): Alkibiades hopes to profit from the command, but the Athenians must not endanger the polis in order that Alkibiades may appear brilliant in his private life (idias). Nikias claims to fear Alkibiades' supporters; he calls upon older citizens to counter their claim that voting against the expedition is a sign of cowardice (6.13.1). Nikias appeals again and again to polis and patria (6.13.1-6.14), and in a key passage he argues that forethought (pronoia) is the best thing for the state, intense desire (epithumia) the worst (6.13.1).

Alkibiades is epithumia personified. 33 Grabbing the thread of Nikias' linking of private and public interest, he unravels his opponent's argument by evoking an Athens in which the successful risk-taker is freed from the constraints of egalitarian mores. Alkibiades trumpets the propaganda effect of his recent triple chariot-racing victory at Olympia: as a result of my victory the other Greeks have come to believe our dunamis is great. The reference to Olympia underlines the agonistic nature of the current speech competition in the Assembly, and Alkibiades confronts Nikias' charge of self-interest head on: "It is a useful sort of folly if, by expending private means, someone profits not only himself, but also the polis" (6.16.3).

Alkibiades admits that because of his desire for great personal fame he has been criticized in regard to his private affairs (ta idia), but he asks the Athenians to look around and see if there is anyone better than himself at public administration (ta demosia). 34 The proof? I brought about a useful anti-Spartan alliance in the Peloponnesos which "entailed no significant danger or expense for you" (aneu... kindunou kai dapanes, 6.16.6). This sounds good, but is it true? Alkibiades' "alliance" is the "plot" that Nikias claims rendered the peace treaty a mere name and too insubstantial to restrain Spartan aggression. Readers may remember the Corcyraeans' confident and erroneous prediction that their alliance would make Athens stronger "without danger or expense" (aneu kindunon kai dapanes, 1.33.2). Thucydides' readers should by now have extracted from his historical examples (e.g., Epidamnos and Corcyra) the rule that every alliance is a potential source of danger and expense, for every alliance redirects the flow of power.

Readers will be even more dubious when they come to Alkibiades' follow-up: it was by means of appropriate logoi that I found a way of dealing with the dunamis of the Peloponnesians, and by stirring up passion (orge) I won their trust (6.17.1). Alkibiades' naïve confidence that logoi could tame dunamis is unlikely to persuade the reader who has got this far in Thucydides' narrative, and who has learned Thucydides' core lesson: the all-important difference between mere words and brute fact. The blithe expectation that orge could be the basis for a sound policy smacks of Kleon's demagogic appeals to righteous anger in the Mytilenean Debate (3.40.7).

Alkibiades then argues, "on the basis of what I hear from my informants" (ex hon akonei aisthanomai, 6.17.6), that the Sicilians are lightweights who will not put up much resistance. 35 This is patently false, but Alkibiades' ignorant listeners accept the speaker's words as adequate representation of the men they will soon be fighting. Alkibiades concludes his portrayal of Sicilians by suggesting that it is hardly likely (ouk eikos) that such a mob (homilos), unable to listen to a logos as if with a single mind (mia gnome), will be able to engage in communal erga (6.17.4). By implication, if the Athenians do listen to him with "a single mind," if they ignore or forbid opposition, they will be able to initiate a great project in common. The danger of this line of argument will soon become apparent.

Alkibiades brushes aside the charge that the expedition will be risky, offering a specious historical analogy with the Persian Wars (6.17.7), and then he fires off a string of highly questionable maxims, predictions, and arguments from history and probability. 36 He concludes with appeals to national unity and to Athens' innate nature: a polis active by nature will ruin itself if it becomes passive, so it is better to stick to our active ways, even if they are imperfect (6.18.7). The sentiment, the context, and the vocabulary all recall Kleon. 37 Thucydides' readers have by now learned that one must be skeptical of this sort of oration. Not so the Athenian...
assemblymen. Having heard Alkibiades’ speech, they were much more eager (homento) than before for the expedition (6.19.1). Nikias now made a momentous decision: because his previous argument had failed to deter the assemblymen, he would attempt to alter their resolution by grossly overestimating the size of the force that would be needed (6.19.2, cf. 6.24.1).

Nikias begins his second speech by acknowledging that it is the will of the Assembly to sail, and he claims that he will now inform them of what is needed (6.20.1). Thucydides’ readers know that this acknowledgment is insincere and that Nikias is drifting perilously close to saying one thing in public while believing another—a form of political dishonesty that he proudly renounced in his previous speech. He contradicts Alkibiades’ overconfident assessment of the Sicilian situation: “According to what I hear from my informants” (hos ego akoei aisthanomai), we will be going against poleis, many of them Greek, which are large, not at odds with one another, not likely to want a new government, or willing to give up their freedom in order to be ruled by (bebaiotata) our soldiers, and safety (soteria) for our soldiers (6.23.3).

Nikias’ seemingly clever rhetorical plan, to deter enthusiasm by means of hyperbole, backfired badly: the assemblymen’s desire (to episthumoun) for sailing was in no way dampened by the greatness of the necessary preparations; the Athenians, now convinced that the expedition would be completely safe if they voted for it all, do all this, I believe that there will be maximum security (bebaiotata) for the polis, and safety (soteria) for our soldiers (6.23.3).

Nikias’ second speech from 6.24.1 to 6.31.6 is the quintessential model speech by Thucydidean standards. But then, at the end of the speech comes the rhetorical kicker that Thucydides’ subsequent narrative confirms as factually correct.38 So far, this fact-oriented presentation of realia seems a model speech by Thucydidean standards. But then, at the end of the speech comes the rhetorical kicker that Thucydides’ prior discussion of Nikias’ intentions had prepared us for: the invading forces will have to be immense, but if [only if!] we do all this, I believe that there will be maximum security (bebaiotata) for the polis, and safety (soteria) for our soldiers (6.23.3).

The verb that traces the upward spiral of Athenian enthusiasm is uyfiioj (bebaiotata) for the polis, and safety (soteria) for our soldiers (6.23.3).38 So far, this fact-oriented presentation of realia seems a model speech by Thucydidean standards. But then, at the end of the speech comes the rhetorical kicker that Thucydides’ prior discussion of Nikias’ intentions had prepared us for: the invading forces will have to be immense, but if [only if!] we do all this, I believe that there will be maximum security (bebaiotata) for the polis, and safety (soteria) for our soldiers (6.23.3).

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material necessities. He imagined that the Athenians would be sobered by a confrontation with the facts (huge expense, tactical difficulties) to which his words referred. But he forgot that in the context of the Assembly language was less referential than performative: the Assembly was a battleground of speech in which words were, through felicitous speech performances (i.e., the enactment of decrees), transmuted into social and political realities. The distinction between words and facts melts away. The Funeral Oration ideal, which elides the difficulty of moving from political speech in a democracy to effective action, here reaches its telos: speech becomes more than a spur to action; with the enactment of the decree authorizing the great expedition, speech is isomorphic with action. The distinction between words and facts melts away predictably (in Thucydides’ realm) bad results.

Thucydides’ explanation of why Nikias’ hyperbole fanned the fires of public desire is implicit in his depiction of how the Assembly “processed” the knowledge presented in verbal arguments. In the debates over Corcyra and Mytilene, the assemblymen were forced to choose between two positions. Thucydides’ text suggests that in neither case was the final choice completely rational, because the assemblymen had no independent means of judging or testing the accuracy of each speaker’s factual statements. But Thucydides also showed that even self-interested speeches might contain some truth, and so the decisions made by the Assembly did not necessarily result in bad outcomes. The Sicilian Debate might have followed the same scenario. Nikias tries to refute Alkibiades’ facts with his own better facts, but the Athenians refuse to choose between the two competing descriptions of external reality. They solve the political/epistemological dilemma posed by Thucydides—democratic decision-making as typically based on misinformation because of the agonistic nature of Assembly debate—by rejecting contradiction and combining Alkibiades’ argument that there must be an expedition with Nikias’ argument that it must be almost impossibly huge. As Thucydides told us at the beginning of the scene, they are still ignorant of the realities of Sicily, but, through their speech act, they have created an imaginary Sicily as an opponent for the imagined Demos. This imaginary Sicily cannot be strong enough to hurt the great dunamis that the assemblymen have called into being by the authorizing decree. And thus, in Alkibiades’ dangerously optimistic and exclusionary formulation, the only outcomes they can foresee are the conquest of Hellas, or helping their friends and hurting their enemies.

The result of this “solution” is that the Athenians become (in Alkibiades’ words) a being with a single mind (mia gnome) and a single purpose, a being that embodies the ideological dream of an end to all the complex contradictions, distinctions, and uncertainties that led to political friction. The idealizing discourse of Perikles’ Funeral Oration is actualized: the agon of politics becomes a love feast where “everybody wins.” Individual self-interest and desire to excel unites with the public good. Social unequals and political equals, the many and the few, old and young, dissolve into an ideological “all.” The future is no longer unknown because the huge dunamis called into existence by the Assembly’s decree has transmuted uncertainty into a sure thing. Justice and expediency go hand in hand because Athens will help its Sicilian allies through the self-serving act of conquering Sicily. The demos, freed from the braking tendency of sociopolitical friction, driven by desire, impatient with delay, is angered by any hint that contradictions or impediments remain. This unity is of course false. But it is highly dangerous to oppose the consensus in public, and so all critics of unanimity are gagged. Political criticism of the political myth becomes impossible in the face of the hegemonic will of the mass.

The tragic outcome is practically foreordained. The expedition, a product of false words and personal interests, crashes into the complex and harsh realities of war in the real world, and sinks; fragile unity devolves into stasis. Books 6 and 7, with their detailed and vivid descriptions of the initial successes, subsequent crumbling, and final collapse of the Athenian expeditionary force in Sicily, present Thucydides’ strongest case for the priority of erga over logoi and for the instability of democracy when it is reenvisioned as government by competing speeches.

Thucydides’ summation of why Athens lost the Peloponnesian War (2.65) begins with the statement that under Perikles’ leadership Athens was a democracy only in logos (2.65.9). The implied inverse is that, after Perikles’ death, demokratia existed as an ergon and that this led to disaster. Real demokratia meant that democratic knowledge was the epistemic authority undergirding decisions about actions the state would undertake. As a result, decisions were predicated on speech-contests rather than on fact and foresight. Speech-contests were the result of, and in turn exacerbated, selfishness and factionalism. As the contests became fiercer, there was a growing tendency for speaker and audience to confuse political enactment with reality. In Thucydides’ text, the public performance of a speech act in the democratic polity does not felicitously call into being sociopolitical realities, it evokes a false and fragile vision of reality that is shattered by its inevitable collision with brute fact. Perikles’ inferior successors competed through public speech for the “leadership” of the demos—a leadership that the text now reveals as the spurious privilege of using lies in order to persuade the demos to enact fictions. These fictions were dangerous first because the contests reflected and inflated the selfish ambitions of individuals and sociopolitical factions, and second be-
cause they involved a mighty dunamis and the communal kratos wielded by a numerous and increasingly willful demos, a demos that tended to confuse ideology with truth and political speech with reality. When this kratos was unleashed by unrestrained speech-contests, Athens' dunamis was misdirected and lost in Sicily, and Athens fell into the stasis of 411/40.

Here, with the apparent demise of demokratia, Thucydides' text abruptly ends. His critical argument, if not his historical narrative of the twenty-seven-year (5.26.1) war, is complete. The text as we have it empirically demonstrates the validity of his historical counterepistemology, by showing how and why the linkage between democratic knowledge and democratic political power led to the destruction of both democratic Athenian political life and Athenian dunamis. It is, however, worth noting that Thucydides' critical project, compelling (if chilling) as a logos, was not fully sustained by the erga. Demokratia bounced back after 410, Athens rebuilt its military power, and the conflict with Sparta lasted a good deal longer than twenty-seven years.48

Because of its vulnerability to falsification on the empirical basis of observable realities, a political theory that claimed to explain the probable future on the basis of accurate knowledge about the recent past was perhaps, in the long run at least, a flawed vehicle for literary resistance to Athenian civic ideology. We certainly need not accept Thucydides' pessimistic conclusions about public speech and collective action. But the fact that Thucydides could conceive, execute, and find an audience for such a profound and sustained criticism of Athenian democracy should help us to define the limits of the hegemonic tendencies of democratic discourse.

Notes

This essay is adapted from parts of two chapters of a book-in-progress, tentatively entitled "Athenian Critics of Popular Rule." I wrote drafts of the chapters while I was a Junior Fellow of the Center for Hellenic Studies. I thank the Director and Fellows (both Senior and Junior) of the center for the year 1989–90. Along with the administration of Montana State University (who helped support my stay at the center), they made it possible for this study to be undertaken in the pleasantest of circumstances.


2. Power-as-discourse: Foucault 1980, 78–133. Although Foucault refers briefly to the possibility of resistance (e.g., 1980, 82–83, 108, 134–45), several of Foucault's critics have pointed out that his theory fails to give an adequate account of the phenomenon of resistance (including the resistance to power-as-discourse implicit in his own writings); see essays by Taylor and Said in Hoy 1986, 69–102, 149–53.

3. See, for example, Bloom 1987, who argues that the supposed hegemony of democratic egalitarianism is among the evils of modern American society.

4. Importance of context: Skinner in Skinner et al. 1988, 56–63. The notion that these two analytic modes are compatible is important to my argument. Although Skinner and Foucault may seem far apart on (esp.) the issue of intention, the sharpness of the contrast can be overdrawn. Cf. Skinner 1984, 88 (esp. 271–73), where the hermeneutic scope he allots to authorial intentionality is considerably scaled back.

5. This is among the central arguments of Ober 1989a; see esp. 293–339.


Thucydides' political viewpoint is far from transparent. The loci classici are 2.65 (praise of Perikles, see below) and 8.97: praise of the broad-based oligarchy of the Five Thousand. Modern readings have had Thucydides all over the political map, e.g., Finley 1942, 237: Thucydides was by nature a democrat incapable of conceiving a great progressive city except as a democracy. Woodhead 1970, 34–35: Thucydides did not approve of democracy. De Romilly 1976, 93–105: Thucydides was an advocate of a "mixed constitution." Connor 1984, 377–42 (with review of literature): Thucydides was neither a simple antidemocrat nor a proponent of oligarchy. Pope 1988, 276–96: Thucydides was not esp. antidemocratic but regarded both democrats and oligarchs as contributing to the breakdown of community during the Peloponnesian War.

My argument looks at the text as a whole and offers no contribution to the "Thucydidean question" of composition. For this long, largely sterile, debate, see Rawlings 1988, 250–54.

9. The Athenian ignorance of the facts regarding the tyrants has tragic political consequences during the affair of the Herms (660.1); see Rawlings 1981, 256–59; cf. Euben 1986, 561: the tyrannicide story "reveals human beings as creators of meaning in the context of political struggle."


11. The suppositions that each Spartan king had two votes in council and that there was a Spartan battalion called the Pitanes.

12. This criticism has (at least) two targets: Herodotus, whose Histories...
contain these two errors, and the Athenian masses, who are implied by the term hoi polloi. Herodotus and the errors on Spartan kings and Pitane: Gomme in HCT 1, ad loc. Hoi polloi as term for citizen masses: Ober 1989a, 11. Hornblower 1987, 155-90, points out Thucydides' authorial self-certainty and the rarity of this stance in ancient historiography.

13. In translating ergon as "fact," I am following the lead of Parry 1981, 13, 76-89, and esp. 92-93: ergon can mean anything wrought or done, or deeds of war, or the whole business of war. "But then there is a slightly different direction in the meaning of ergon, whereby it stands for fact, or reality, the thing that was actually done. It is this side of the word that makes it appropriate for the logos/ergon antithesis." As Parry points out, the two meanings of ergon as fact and as deed are quite close and are often conjoined in Thucydides. Thus, ergon in the antithesis means "external reality, but then it also means the deeds of war, and so war; and by insisting on this, Thucydides presents war as the reality, the complex of external forces within which the human intellect strives and operates."

14. The ranks of the logographoi must include the political orators of Athens. Logographos is not used again in Thucydides' text; for the translation here, cf. Connor 1984, 28. Logographos as a term for speech-writer in later Greek rhetoric: Laventz 1964. As Aristotle points out (Rhet. 1418a 21-29), speeches presented in Assembly deal with the affairs of the future, and speeches were the basis of decision-making in the democracy.

15. True historical objectivity, if defined as the absence of perspective, the "view from nowhere," is, of course, simply impossible; see Novick 1988. Yet it is important to keep in mind that Thucydides' motive for claiming to be "objective" was not the same as that of the "scientific" historians of late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries who attempted (and attempt) to follow von Ranke's dictum that it was the historian's duty to relate history "wie es eigentlich gewesen war." Thucydides was not writing within the confines of an established discipline, or for a disciplinary audience. Thus it seems relatively meaningless to criticize him for not being "truly" objective by Rankean standards (cf. n. 18 below). Objectivity is a rhetorical stance for Thucydides, one that offered him a needed poynt d'apppui for his critical project.

16. Rhetorical appeals to the validity of public opinion and to historical examples: Ober 1989a, 156-70, 177-82.


18. For this much-discussed claim that history should be useful, see, e.g., Rawlings 1981, 254-63; and Connor 1984, 243-48. Gomme in HCT 1.149-50, argues the "future things" are future still to Thucydides, but assumed to be past to the reader. Thus, Thucydides does not suggest that his work will be of any help to one who hopes to understand what is still in his own future; and therefore Thucydides is not to be taken as giving practical advice for political agents. Gomme's argument strains the sense of the passage and is predicated on seeing Thucydides as a historian, with a modern historian's interests. The other side of the "modernist Thucydides" coin is the view of him as a dishonest historian, who knew that historians should be objective, but willfully decided not to be: e.g., Wallace 1964; and Hunter 1973, esp. 177-84. Cf. Rawlings 1981, 263-72: no meaningful line can be drawn between the historian as reporter of events and historian as artist; Connor 1984, esp. 235-36: the text is complex and forces the reader to challenge positions the text itself seems to establish.


21. Kratos as domination: 1.143.4, 4.98.2, 8.46, 8.76.4; the strength to carry out a war: 3.13.7; violent means used to take a city: 1.64.3, 1.118.3. For other examples, see Béant 1843, s.v.

22. See, e.g., Pouncey 1980, xi: Thucydides' "assumption is that human nature remains relatively constant." But contrast Farrar 1988, 135-37, 139; who claims that Thucydides' view of human nature is not static; Flory 1988, 43-56; Thucydides' view of human nature is neither rigid nor strict.

23. Plague and individual selfishness: 2.3. Contrast 2.51: examples of selfless care of others. Late-fifth-century Athenian political writers were very interested in the issue of what is "natural" (phusis) and what is a product of human society (nomos); see Ostwald 1986, 260-73. Because I do not accept the postulates of methodological individualism as universally valid, I cannot agree with Pouncey 1980, xii, that Thucydides' view is that in times of crisis (e.g., stasis) human nature is "tracked to its proper ground in the human individual." On Thucydides' emphasis on groups rather than individuals, see Pope 1988.


25. Imagined Demos: Ober 1989b, 329-32. The citizens in the Assembly were not, of course, in any formal sense "representatives" of their fellow citizens, for every Athenian citizen had the right to attend any Assembly. For a review of Athenian governmental procedure, see Ober 1989a, 53-55.

26. Ober 1989a, 4 with n. 2 for bibliography on this distinction. Sealey 1973, 28-90, unsuccessfully attempts to show that demos in Thucydides has no class meaning.

27. The three sets of speeches: 1.31-44 (Corcyraean Debate), 3.36-49.1 (Mytilenean Debate), and 6.8-26 (Sicilian Debate). I exclude Assembly scenes in which speeches are given in indirect discourse, and those in which only one speech is presented. Bibliography on speeches in Thucydides (to 1970): West III in Stadter 1973, 124-61. Useful discussions of the Sicilian Debate include Tompkins 1972; Stahl 1973; and Connor 1984, 162-68, 237.

28. By referring to the revoking of a decree as "undoing a performed speech act," I am consciously casting the political process of the Assembly in terms of Austin's theory; see above. The relationship between persuasive public speech
and collective action is of key importance in Perikles' Funeral Oration (3.40.2–3) and in the Mytilene Debate (3.38.1–4, 3.42.2).

29. For comments of other Athenian speakers on the issue of personal and public interests, cf. 2.37.1–3 (Funeral Oration) and 3.38.2–3, 3.40.3, 3.42.3–6 (Mytilenean Debate).

30. We should not fear the creation of a Syracusan empire, for it is hardly likely (ouk eikos) that an empire would attack another empire (6.11.3); it will impress our enemies more if we do not sail because “we all know” that people are most impressed by that which is most distant and least testable (6.11.4). Examples of other Assembly speakers' maxims: Corcyraeans (1.33.4, 1.34.3, 1.35.3), Corinthians (1.41.2–3, 1.42.2, 1.44.4), Kleon (3.37.4, 3.39.2, 3.39.5, 3.40.4), and Diodotos (3.43.3–6).

31. If we are soberly realistic (sophronomen), we will realize that the contest (agon) is not against the barbarous Sicilians, but against Spartan plots to impose an oligarchy upon Athens (6.11.7).

32. Other Assembly speakers on the priority of Athenian interests: Corcyraeans (1.33.1), Kleon (3.40.4), and Diodotos (3.44).

33. In Thucydides' one-paragraph introduction (6.15), Alkibiades is first called “most-ardent” (prothumotata) for the expedition, and desirous (epithumias) of the generalship. His desires were greater (epithumias meiosis) than his means, and eventually the demos came to believe that he lusted after (epithumoiounti, 1.54) tyranny. Cf. Hunter 1973, 180 on Alkibiades; she seems to go too far (8–9) in arguing that “Thucydides' characters...are not real people at all but mere [my emphasis] personifications of one quality or another.”

34. This claim is supported by Thucydides' narrative comments on Alkibiades: 6.15.4.

35. The Athenians will not be facing a big dunamis in Sicily (6.17.1); like all Greeks, the Sicilians falsify their numerical strength (6.17.5). Each Sicilian is just out to get what he can for himself by making clever speeches, or by stirring up a stasis so that he can take from the common store; if unsuccessful, he will simply move to some other land (6.17.3). This last does not accurately describe the real Sicilians whom the Athenians will encounter in the invasion, but it could be taken as a succinct (if hostile) posteventum description of Alkibiades' own career: he is just now making a clever speech, he will soon defect to Sparta, and he will benefit by the Athenian stasis of 411/0. Thucydides' readers will learn all this in due course.

36. All empires were gained by helping those in need; inactivity is more risky than action; if we do not expand we risk being conquered ourselves (6.18.2–3). Don't worry about the Peloponnesians, our sailing to Sicily will befuddle them. Anyway, the expedition can have only two possible outcomes: either we conquer Hellas, or we'll hurt Syracuse and help our allies (6.18.4). Don't be fooled by Nikias' attempt to create social unrest (diastasis) by appealing to the elders; let's do as our fathers did and stand united, young and old. Keep in mind that, like all things, a polis can wear out if it is inactive, but if it engages in contests (agoniothenen) it will gain experience and will be able to defend itself, not just in speech (logoi) but in fact (ergo, 6.18.6).

37. Vocabulary: Alkibiades: gignosko...nomois...kheiroi...Kleon (3.37.3): gnosometha...kheirosi nomois.

38. Sicilian cavalry will be a big factor; the Athenians cannot expect to recruit cavalry in Sicily; they might need to send home for more supplies; the money promised by the Segestans exists only in logos; if we don't conquer the whole island quickly, we'll be surrounded by enemies.

39. The old men thought such a great dunamis was likely to succeed or at least to be invulnerable; the young hoped to see wonders and felt they could do so safely; the mob (homois) looked forward to military pay.

40. Dia to plethos hekaston hon heoron, tei opsei anetharsons. This example of the masses' false confidence resulting from seeing demonstrates that visual perception can be just as misleading as verbal persuasion. Cf. Stahl 1973, 73–74; Brittan, "History, Testimony, and Two Kinds of Scepticism," in Chakrabarti, ed., Testimony (n.d.). The inability of visual perception alone to overcome the illusions of speech within the context of the democratic regime is an important issue for the Athenian antidemocratic "critical enterprise"; it recurs in Aristophanes (Ecclesiazusae) and, of course, in Plato's epistemology.

41. The location of this edoei moi-type construction in the sentence fits the methodological scheme Thucydides laid out in the proemium. According to Thucydides' categories, it was a demonstrable fact that the defeat was the greatest ergon of the war. But because ancient history is knowable only by inference, it can only be his (informed) opinion that this was the greatest ergon of all Greek history.

42. However, cf. 6.47–50 (victory in Sicily seems possible); 6.63.11: Thucydides here claims that the error was not so much ignorance about what to expect in Sicily (ou tosouton gnomes harmatena en pros boous epeisam), as a failure by those at home in Athens to support the expedition. This claim is contradicted by Thucydides' narrative; see Gomme in HCT 2. ad loc.

33. See above: 6.6.1, 6.9.3, 6.19.1, 6.24.2. The chronological context of 6.6.1 (hoi Athenaioi strateuwin hormento) seems to be after the second Assembly, but before the launching of the expedition.

44. Felicity (successfulness) of speech performances (as judged by the subsequent behavior of the relevant parties): Austin 1975, 14–24, 176–17; and Petrey 1988, 31–48.

45. Truth, that is, as judged by conformity to the erga, or to Thucydides: see Gomme in HCT 2. ed loc.

46. Athenian ideal of consensus: above n. 24. Mia gnome, vel sim. in (later) Athenian rhetoric: Dem. 19.298; Din. 1.99; And. 2.1; Lys. 2.12, 17, 24; and Aeschines 3.208. Idealizing discourse of the Funeral Oration (Perikles' and others): Loraux 1986.
Works Cited


Personal freedom—“to live as you wish” (zen hos bouleiasai), “to say what you wish” (parrhesiazesthai)—is cited by many ancient sources as an outstanding quality of the Athenian democracy. At a moment of crisis outside Syracuse in 413, Thucydides’ Nikias sought to encourage his soldiers by reminding them that their country was “the most free of all states” (eleutherotate) and that “all who lived there had the liberty to live their own lives in their own way” (7.69.2, trans. Warner). Both Plato and the Old Oligarch complain that in Athens even animals or slaves do just as they please.1 Most famously of all, in the Funeral Oration Thucydides’ Perikles remarks that “just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next-door neighbor if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people’s feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives, but in public affairs we keep to the law” (2.37.3, trans. Warner). Thus, perhaps as a consequence of the history of fifth-century Athens, personal freedom has come to be associated with the democratic form of government.2

As traditionally conceived, however, there are at least two outstanding categories of exceptions to this principle of personal freedom; first for those citizens who took part in city government, and second in the area of the freedom of thought, especially in connection with prominent intellectuals and in religious matters. Among many examples in the first of these categories were the official state examinations into the personal conduct of Athenians who were selected to hold public office. These examinations concerned issues such as whether they treated their parents badly. Candi-