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THUCYDIDES ON THE CAUSES OF ATHENIAN IMPERIALISM

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Thucydides' investigation of Athenian imperialism is in part an investigation into whether imperialism as such is based on universal human compulsions, and hence cannot simply be condemned. It is generally recognized that for Thucydides, Athenian imperialism is connected to the Athenian national character, but it has not been widely appreciated that Thucydides provides a detailed account of the foundations of the Athenian character in human nature itself. That account revolves around what he calls "daring" and the human impulse of eros. The erotic and daring character of the Athenians is connected by Thucydides both to the unique democracy of the city and to its unique experience in the Persian Wars. The unique Athenian character stems from an unprecedented liberation of certain impulses of human nature. This produces Athenian imperialism and dynamism, but also destroys the city in time.

The conspicuous theme of Athenian imperialism in Thucydides forms a crucial part of his broader investigation into the place of justice in relations among states. The phenomenon of imperialism poses what is surely the threshold question concerning the place of justice in international affairs: If the unprovoked subjection and rule of weaker states by stronger cannot be unambiguously condemned, the applicability of moral categories to international politics altogether must be seriously compromised. Imperialism is ordinarily considered a grave injustice in those who practice it, but there is an argument in Thucydides, championed most vigorously by the imperial Athenians, that imperialism cannot be blamed, because it is only a reflection of certain universal compulsions—compulsions of power and of human nature. The Athenians assert that, in acquiring and maintaining their empire, they have done no more than any other state in their position would have done,

indeed would have been "compelled" to do by these universal forces (e.g., 1.75–76, 5.105).¹ Thucydides' investigation of Athenian imperialism, especially its causes, is in large part an attempt to explore and test this notorious Athenian thesis on justice and empire, and turns very much on the question of whether or to what extent Athenian imperialism is rooted in deeper principles of human nature. Thucydides' presentation of Athenian imperialism in fact represents a prototypical study of political psychology in foreign and domestic politics, and of the ramifications of this psychology for the question of justice in international politics especially. To explore the deeper levels of Thucydides' analysis of Athenian imperialism is the primary object of the present study.

Daring and the Athenian Character

When we ask the question about the

causes or roots of Athenian imperialism in Thucydides, we are immediately thrown into a consideration of what we can only call the Athenian character (Bluhm, 1962, p. 22; Connor, 1984, p. 39; Cornford, 1907, p. 167; Ehrenberg, 1947, p. 47; Finley, 1967, p. 143; Romilly, 1963, p. 77; Shorey, 1893, pp. 72-73; Thibaudet, 1922, pp. 113-14). Friends and enemies alike speak of the Athenian character and Athenian manners when called upon to explain Athenian imperialism; Thucydides, in his own portrayal, appears to do likewise. If we bring together all that is said about the Athenian character in the course of Thucydides' History, whether by Thucydides himself or by his speakers, we get what is in fact a remarkably consistent portrait of the Athenians, revolving around certain commonly acknowledged core traits. The most prominent of these, and the one most widely held to separate the Athenians from other men, is called "daring" (*tolma*) by all who broach the subject. This becomes almost a technical term in Thucydides.² The Athenians are daring in the History; the Spartans are the opposite (cf. 8.96.4-5). Brasidas is the single Spartan exception that proves the rule (cf. 5.7.2; 2.87; 2.89.5). The Syracusans alone succeed in countering the Athenians by becoming, like them, daring (6.69.1; 7.21.3-4; 8.96.5).

The Corinthians are the first to emphasize this trait, in their famous description of the Athenian character in Book 1 (1.70.3). Daring is closely linked by them and by others in the History to Athenian restlessness and expansiveness, and hence to Athenian imperialism. It seems to describe precisely the frenetic, astoundingly bold, even reckless quality the Athenians display in their many far-flung enterprises. As a character trait, however, it is rather enigmatic, not only because it is virtually unique to the Athenians, but because it seems to replace other, more ordinary or traditional qualities, in par-

ticular courage.³ Daring is the first puzzle presented by the Athenian character in Thucydides.

Our investigation of this peculiar Athenian trait may appropriately begin with the most famous description of the Athenian character in Thucydides, Pericles' Funeral Oration. Pericles' speech is given over primarily to praising Athenian greatness, including the empire, and he rates the Athenian character as highly as such things as laws and institutions in attributing the cause of that greatness. Yet when it comes to describing the Athenian character, "courage" is barely alluded to by Pericles, who speaks instead of the "virtue" of his countrymen, or, more pointedly, of their "daring."⁴ The men who have died, he says, showed a daring that should be the model for those who survive (2.43.1). The Athenians as a race are characterized by a native daring that allows them, without toil, to be the equal of others who take great pains to cultivate virtue (2.39.4). The greatness of the empire, which makes the city of Athens uniquely worth dying for, was built, according to Pericles, by the daring and dutifulness of the present Athenians' ancestors (2.43.1). Pericles goes so far as to boast that the Athenians have "compelled" every sea and every land to yield access to their daring, enabling them to leave "immortal" monuments of themselves "everywhere" (2.41.4).

In Pericles' presentation, the daring of the Athenians is not only one of their most praiseworthy traits, but one very closely connected with their empire. The primary effect of Athenian daring seems to be the empire, and both are treated by Pericles as uniquely glorious Athenian achievements. Yet there was a time, in fairly recent historical memory, when Athens did not have an empire. Pericles remarks that the empire was built only by the previous generation, a feat for which that generation deserves greater praise than any that preceded it in the city

(2.36.2). If that is so, however, we are forced to wonder if not only Athenian imperialism but Athenian daring was born with that generation.

Thucydides' presentation of the rise of the Athenian empire appears to bear out this hypothesis. In Book 1 of the History he shows elaborately how the Athenian empire first grew out of circumstances connected with the second great Persian invasion of Greece, an invasion in which the Athenians were driven, in order to help defend the Greeks, to abandon their homeland and fight the enemy at sea. Before that time Athens was not even a particularly great power in Greece; after that time the Athenian naval power and empire grew dramatically and with astonishing rapidity. Pericles, in a speech prior to the Funeral Oration, ties together this general sequence of events in the following way: The Athenians of that time, he says, beginning literally with nothing, not even their homes and possessions, succeeded in both defeating the Persians and building the empire by dint of resolve and daring more than by luck or power (1.144.4). Thus, in Pericles' view, the Athenian deeds in the Persian Wars are of the same stuff as the Athenian imperialism that followed, at least so far as the fundamental character traits that made them possible are concerned. As to the pivotal moment of the Persian Wars itself, the first time Thucydides mentions it he says that as the massive Persian force advanced, the Athenians resolved to abandon their city, and packing up their goods, embarked upon their ships and "became sea-men" (*nautikoi egenonto*, 1.18.2). The formulation connects this moment and these deeds somehow with a transformation in the character of the city itself.

Thucydides and Pericles are not the only ones to attribute special significance to the Athenian feat of abandoning the city to fight the Persians. Their attitude

was, in fact, the common one at Athens, as Thucydides indicates by giving perhaps the fullest description and greatest praise of those deeds to certain anonymous Athenian envoys who speak at Sparta before the war (1.73-78).⁵ What they say is relevant to the question before us. These anonymous envoys, like Pericles, dwell on Athenian daring. Their presentation, however, places greater emphasis on the period of the Persian Wars; they imply that the Athenian actions at that juncture were paradigmatic—that is, those most illuminating for anyone desiring to know what kind of a city Athens is.⁶ It required the most extreme daring,⁷ the envoys correctly say, for the Athenians to abandon their city when all up to their borders had been enslaved, to rely on themselves as their last, slender hope, and face the Persian throng at sea (1.74). This Athenian action, as the anonymous envoys note, was the most important contribution to the Greek cause, as it was the most amazing. As such, it could not but be welcomed by the other Greek cities. Thucydides indicates, however, that there was something in this daring action that aroused apprehension in the other cities as well. When the Athenians were returning to an Athens devastated by the Persians, and were undertaking to rebuild its walls, the other cities opposed it, fearing, Thucydides says, not only the size of the newly enlarged Athenian navy, but the daring the Athenians had displayed in the war as well. More specifically, Thucydides says that they feared the daring that had "come into being" in the Athens during the Persian invasion (1.90.1). The Athenians were not alone in viewing their own actions during that crisis as a great watershed in Athenian experience, and in the development of the Athenian character. The Athenian character—in particular its daring side—was formed, or at any rate came into its own, only at the time of the Persian Wars. The

cities saw this, and were not heartened by the sight. The great period of Athenian imperialism followed.

Daring and Athenian Imperialism

The question that arises on the basis of this account of the birth of the Athenian imperial character is how we can understand the traumatic moment of the second Persian invasion to have shaped the Athenian character, and given it in particular the volatile and expansive daring that became its hallmark. To recur to Thucydides' terse, early formulation, at that moment the Athenians packed up their things, got into their ships, and became sea-men (1.18.2). That Athens was a naval power is sometimes taken to be sufficient explanation of the Athenian character and Athenian imperialism (Finley, 1967, p. 143, and 1963, p. 90; Romilly, 1963, pp. 67, 69, 70; Thibaudet, 1922, p. 79, cf. pp. 84-85), but other cities, such as Corinth or Corcyra, were maritime or sea-faring cities as well, and none of them resembled Athens in the crucial respect. It is not just that Athens was sea-faring, but the manner in which it was sea-faring that explains the Athenian character and imperialism. Of no other city could it have been said that "becoming nautical" involved such a baptism, or that its citizens became sea-men in so complete or literal a sense.

In order to grasp the political significance that this has in Thucydides' account, we need first to think about all the things that a fixed location means to a political community, and what it means to give that up. It seems that the least we would have to say is that in becoming, however briefly, men without place, the Athenians in some way severed connections with all the fixed things around which the life of a community normally revolves, and that normally serve as its stable, conservative base.⁸ There is, however, another aspect of the matter to

which I believe we must give equal or greater weight, an aspect to some extent peculiar to the Greek cities, and which has to do with Greek piety.

Generalizations about Greek piety are always difficult to make, because that piety consisted of numerous elements that were often inconsistent with one another and are not fully known to us.⁹ Nonetheless, some of its most significant elements, especially for the life of the city, were inextricably bound to place—to sacred ground, to temples or shrines, to ancestral graves. From the point of view of this piety, the city was in effect constituted by common rites and sacred festivals, inasmuch as citizenship was identical with competence to participate in the common cults. These festivals and rites included the city's guardian divinities as well as its generations of ancestors, divine and spiritual beings believed to inhabit more or less immovably the places associated with their cults. When the Athenians abandoned their city to the Persians, therefore, they would also have abandoned their holy places, the abodes of their gods and their ancestral graves. It would be a real question within the conventions of Greek piety whether a city could have any being at all under such circumstances. This is the thought that seems to be in the background when the anonymous Athenians emphasize at Sparta that part of what was amazing about Athenian behavior at the time in question was that they did not simply disperse (1.74.2), did not consider the city to have been ruined or dissolved (1.74.4), and joined the common fight although they were in effect issuing from a city that was no more (1.74.3).¹⁰ The Athenians did not disband, and went on instead to glorious victory. However, the principle or foundation of their community could not help being altered in some way by the experience.

From the point of view of the other Greek cities, the unexampled zeal

exhibited by Athens in the Persian Wars would thus have not only an admirable, but a terrible or shocking quality as well. The astonishing deed of the Athenians, which seems to display the greatest courage, seems also to bear a certain tincture of impiety. It might go beyond what merely human courage is permitted. It is audacity; it is daring. In any event, it would certainly be mistaken to assume, as the Athenians sometimes seem to (e.g., 1.74.4; 6.82.4), that the cities that refused to abandon their land as the Persians advanced surrendered to them purely out of cowardice.

It is sometimes said that the defeat of the Persian hordes ushered in a new era of Greek self-assurance by giving apparently indisputable proof of the superiority of the polis and freedom over barbarism and Persian despotism (see Bury, 1909, p. 44; Ehrenberg, 1968, p. 77). Thucydides suggests that in the case of the Athenians in particular, the self-assurance gained from this experience was of a revolutionary, not to say hubristic, kind. It is the peculiar character of this self-assurance that leads the Athenians from the desperate, defensive action against the Persians to the offensive explosion of imperialism that followed. For one might say that what the Athenians discovered as a body on their ships is the enormous potential of purely human power—that is, human power standing on its own and bereft of its traditional supports, terrestrial or otherwise. It would be difficult to overestimate the political significance of such a discovery for a community, for traditional piety acts not only as a support, but as a restraint on the activities of men and states. Therefore, insofar as daring among the Athenians represents a transformation of and a replacement for traditional courage, it is an innovation predicated in part on overcoming the inhibitions imposed by piety. Those inhibitions include restrictions on the accumulation of power and on its exer-

cise, in the name of justice. Amoralism is at the core of what daring signifies in Thucydides' Athenians.

The speech of the anonymous Athenians at Sparta is a good index of this. What those Athenians say shows that they have liberated themselves in thought as well as action from the restraints that the Greeks and others had thought applied to cities in their relations among themselves. The Athenians at Sparta are the first to voice the thesis that, in establishing their empire, they were simply acting in accord with certain universal compulsions that affect nations: fear, honor, and profit (1.75–76). These Athenians, it is true, temper their argument with assertions to the effect that they hold their empire “not inappropriately” (1.73.1), that they are in some sense worthy of rule (1.76.2), and that their rule is “more just” than necessary. These things are undeniably important to the Athenians' vision of their empire, but they do not disguise—and are not meant to disguise—the fact that the empire and their speech about it represent at bottom an unapologetic overturning of the principles of justice ordinarily supposed to apply to relations among states (cf. 1.76). They altogether refuse to submit to judgments stemming from the supposed precepts of justice. In that respect, at least, their position does not differ from that later voiced by the Athenian envoys on Melos (5.85–113).¹¹

Pericles, the premier statesman in Athens at the time of the anonymous Athenians' speech, is in accord with the new Athenian manner. He has nothing but praise for Athenian daring. His Funeral Oration is devoid of any serious reference to the gods, which is particularly striking given that it is, after all, a funerary speech over those who have died in war. Moreover, Pericles shows by deed that he is willing to abandon Attica, doing so for the first time since the Persian Wars. In connection with that policy,

Pericles in effect tells the Athenians that they should consider the land as something of no significance to the city: human beings are what make the city what it is (1.143.5). In the Funeral Oration he depicts Athens, Athenian power, and Athenian greatness as monuments purely of human endeavor. His reduction of the city to its human beings—and even the present generation of its human beings (cf. 2.36.1–3)—is, to be sure, typical of this imperial Athens; but that is only to underscore its revolutionary character. Pericles' "humanism," of which these remarks are primary examples, is often noted by commentators. The radically anti-traditional and even impious implications of this humanism have received much less attention, yet they are as important as any other facts in Thucydides' understanding of Periclean Athens. They also prove to be crucial in explaining the problems with Pericles' policy and the fate of Athens after his death.¹²

Individualism and the Policy of Pericles

There is one other aspect of Athenian humanism or liberation that must be explored before its full bearing on the subject of Athenian imperialism can be appreciated. When Pericles praises Athenian freedom in the Funeral Oration, he has in mind less the freedom of the city as a whole from traditional restraints on its behavior than the freedom of individual Athenians from the myriad conventional restraints that regulate the lives of men in traditional cities. This unprecedented internal freedom at Athens has created, according not only to Pericles but to other observers in the History as well, a novel political form (cf. the remarks of the Corinthians, 1.70.6). This form represents perhaps the nearest approximation to what we could call "individualism" in all of ancient politics.¹³ The liberation of

individual talent and initiative at Athens is one source of the city's great power and dynamism, as Pericles correctly points out (2.41.2). Athenian individualism is for this reason one of the things that made Athenian imperialism possible. Athenian individualism and imperialism are also connected—and more intimately so—through their common abandonment of traditional restraints. If the city is willing to dare so much, it is in part because the Athenians individually have freed themselves from conventional inhibitions. Athenian individualism represents, in that sense, the domestic correlate to the city's daring in its relations abroad. Not surprisingly, it is also the point at which important problems with the whole Athenian project begin to appear.

The Athenian experiment with individualism, if we may call it that, produced a city of great energy and many devices, but also had to confront the one great problem always connected with individualism, the problem of political cohesion. The tremendous success of Athens from the time of the Persian Wars through the period of Pericles' ascendancy seems to indicate that Athens solved this problem. Thucydides, on the other hand, draws our attention as early as his eulogy of Pericles to the fact that Athens was later devastated by internal quarrels and factionalism, which were the real reason for her defeat in the war (2.65.7, 10–12). These problems came into the open only after Pericles' death. Nevertheless, Pericles himself, in his Funeral Oration, can be seen to address the problem of the cohesion of the city, in addressing what can make the individualists he has praised dedicate themselves to its good. In the Funeral Oration he is confronted with this problem in its most extreme form, for he must find an argument that can induce Athenians to die for their city, as have those being eulogized in the speech.

Pericles responds to this problem in a very striking way, and in doing so intro-

duces what altogether becomes a very important theme in Thucydides' treatment of Athens. Throughout his speech, Pericles appeals to the Athenians' love of glory: Athens is the most glorious of cities, a monument to the virtue and daring of her citizens. Contemporary Athenians, in serving and even dying for the city, share in that glory (2.42.1, 2.43.3; see also Palmer, 1982b). This argument in itself, however, does not sufficiently meet the problem, if only because glory held in common is scarcely glory at all, especially from the point of view of true individualists. Therefore Pericles, at the climactic moment of his speech, has recourse to quite another appeal, one that appears to be as novel as the problem it is meant to address. It is an appeal to erotic passion. In the passage in question, Pericles allows that calculations of advantage are not, of course, to be excluded in serving the city, but he says, finally, that Athenians should become devoted, willing servants of the city by beholding its power, manifested every day in deeds, and becoming lovers of it (2.43.1).¹⁴ It is by means of a kind of erotic attachment that each Athenian should ultimately become a patriot.

Pericles' sudden recourse to erotic passion as the centerpiece of Athenian cohesion or community is striking because we are not at all accustomed to thinking of patriotism in these terms, although it is a seldom-noticed fact that *eros*, or human eroticism as such, is a significant, if somewhat concealed, theme in Thucydides' work.¹⁵ The word *eros* and its derivatives appear only seven times in the History, but each appearance is at a crucial juncture, and each plays a significant role in Thucydides' treatment of Athenian imperialism and the political psychology of Athens.¹⁶ The Greek notion of *eros* is of course broader than ours, embracing potentially all objects of desire, but it still differs from other kinds of desire, both in its intensity and in its unexpendable

sexual reference. Pericles' appeal to *eros* in this context would be striking and paradoxical to Greek audiences as well as to modern ones, though somewhat less so.¹⁷ With regard to this passage, we might upon reflection agree that an appeal to this kind of passion is appropriate to the Athenian case, particularly given the warmth of Pericles' praise of the city. Erotic passion may, after all, be the one thing capable of attaching even the most individualistic human beings to something outside of themselves. Erotic passion is individualistic, even egoistic, yet leads to the most intense devotion and willingness to sacrifice. In any event, it is clear that Pericles, whose Athens has largely forsaken traditional supports to community and patriotism, must have recourse to extraordinary devices.¹⁸ Patriotism or "love of city" (*philopoli*) of the ordinary kind, based in such things as traditional civic piety and subordination of self, is no longer sufficient grounds for community at Athens. The Athenians have all but abandoned public piety, and Athenian individualism owes its very existence to the abandonment of the kinds of conventional strictures that cement the political community in a city like Sparta. Pericles' appeal to *eros* circumvents or supplants those conventional mechanisms of community, and seeks to bind the Athenians directly or immediately to the city, depicted as a beloved object.

The question is whether this new alternative proposed or supported by Pericles is itself sufficient to the task of holding the city together. For Pericles of course, that includes its ability to keep Athens under his direction and guided by his policy—and his policy, according to Thucydides, was a very measured or restrained one, both in general and with reference to the war against the Spartans (2.65.5). His policy for the war in particular is to resist all temptation to indulge in imperial expansion for the duration (1.144.1; 2.65.7). Thus, when Pericles exhorts the

Athenians in his Funeral Oration to become erotically attached to the city, it is a relatively moderate or restrained policy and vision he has in mind.

This is precisely the part of Pericles' policy that proved most untenable after his death. The Athenians did not follow his advice and in fact, according to Thucydides, after his death they did "everything" contrary to what he had said (2.65.7). Among other things, they proved unable to resist the imperial temptation, and embarked on a vast project to conquer the island of Sicily. They did so, according to Thucydides, under the influence of erotic passion. In what is his only explicit authorial reference to the eroticism of the city as a whole, Thucydides says that when the deliberation concerning the Sicilian expedition finally drew to a close, an erotic passion fell upon all alike to sail for Sicily; the passion was so overwhelming that if anyone still opposed the vote, he was cowed into silence by the "excessive" desire of the city as a whole (6.24).

Pericles appealed to the *eros* of the Athenians in the cause of a general policy of restraint, but when that policy is finally and definitively overthrown by Athenian *eros*, the development, in retrospect, looks all but inevitable. When Athenian passion reaches its height, forces its way to the surface of Thucydides' narrative, so to speak, it expresses itself as a longing for the most spectacular increase of power, the most audacious project of imperial expansion since well before the war. Nicias, in his futile speech against the expedition, pleads with the Athenians, at least the old Athenians, not to succumb to an unhealthy or perverse erotic passion (*duseros*, 6.13.1) for things faraway. His hope is as vain as the hope of Pericles. Indeed, it seems that erotic passion is naturally enflamed more by the splendid, the faraway, and the grand than by any vision of restraint. It powerfully resists domestication, even if a man of Pericles'

stature makes the attempt. And in the Athenian case this passion lies at the core of the city's imperialism.

The Sicilian expedition is the most erotic of all Athenian undertakings during the war—perhaps of all Athenian undertakings—as it is the most daring. It is in this respect a peak of what Athens represents in the History. It is not inappropriate, therefore, that Thucydides should use the sequence of events connected with and surrounding the Sicilian expedition to reveal more clearly than elsewhere his own understanding of the Athenian character and imperialism. The expedition shows the failure of the Periclean policy of imperial restraint, but Thucydides uses the opportunity it provides to record more comprehensively his view of the regime of democratic individualism at Athens. Thucydides' view, as opposed to Pericles', accounts for the decline and eventual failure of the Athenian experiment in politics.

Eros, Daring, and the Athenian Democracy

It appears that for Thucydides, Athenian imperialism is compounded out of a volatile combination of erotic passion and daring, qualities woven into the fabric of the Athenian regime. Thucydides understands the dynamics of this combination better than a man like Pericles, and better, we may add, than the Athenians themselves. The last point is of particular interest because it appears to be the reason why Thucydides, in connection with some of the events surrounding the launching of the Sicilian expedition, inserts a peculiar but very interesting digression on the alleged tyrannicide of Harmodius and Aristogeiton (6.53; 6.54–59; 6.60). The digression, he says, is intended to correct some important defects in Athenian self-understanding. It draws our attention not only for this

reason, but because its subject turns out to be Athenian daring and *eros*; it contains more references to *eros*, in particular, than are found in the rest of the History put together.¹⁹

The Athenian characteristic immediately in question at this point in the History is the excessive suspicion shown by the Athenian democracy toward virtually all outstanding men. The Athenians' suspicion is excessive, according to Thucydides, because of a memory in the city of the hated tyranny of the Peisistratids. It was this tyranny that provoked the legendary attack of Harmodius and Aristogeiton. According to Thucydides, however, the Athenians are mistaken both about the character of the tyranny, which was actually rather mild until attacked (6.54.5-6; 6.59.2), and about the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton itself. Thucydides begins his account by saying that the "daring deed" of Harmodius and Aristogeiton was actually undertaken incident to a love affair (6.54.1; cf. 6.56.3; 6.59.1). Harmodius and Aristogeiton were lovers; when Hipparchus, the brother of the tyrant Hippias, threatened their affair, the two of them plotted to overthrow the tyranny. They failed to kill Hippias but managed to kill Hipparchus, and as a result came to be regarded as champions, and practically as founders, of the democracy at Athens after its reestablishment. Indeed, the remembrance of the "tyrannicide" came to occupy a place in Athenian lore as significant as that occupied by the memory of the city's heroism during the Persian Wars.²⁰ The legend became a keystone of the democracy's self-understanding, and a parable in particular for the city's extreme love of freedom.

One of the first things that strikes us about Thucydides' presentation of this episode is that it controverts in one important respect the impression we get from Book 1—namely, that Athenian daring made its first appearance at the time of

the Persian Wars. Thucydides now speaks of a daring in Athens prior to that time, a daring connected with the foundation of the Athenian democracy. He seems to agree with ordinary Athenians that the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton captures the essence of the Athenian democracy and character. As formulated by Thucydides, the story thus corroborates the view that Athens is a city characterized by a kind of erotically charged daring. However, Thucydides' rendition represents, in precisely that respect, a fundamental correction of the popular understanding. He introduces the digression, once again, for the purpose of correcting the popular understanding; the first and most important of these corrections has to do with the motives that the Athenians attribute to their heroes. The Athenians suppose them to have been public-spirited champions of democratic liberty; Thucydides shows that their motivation, being erotic in nature, was private, even selfish, and aimed at public benefit only incidentally, if at all. Their jealousy toward the tyrants was a purely private, erotic jealousy, and the freedom they sought was primarily what we might call private erotic freedom. Within its context, Thucydides' retelling of the story implies, first of all, that the excessive Athenian suspicion of prominent men in the city is something that presents itself, and understands itself, as a laudable and public-spirited defense of liberty, but is in fact a thing rooted in a rather questionable private jealousy. Thucydides seems to suggest, moreover, that the basis of the jealousy and, altogether, of the devotion to the democracy is not dedication to the common good as such, but rather to a kind of private freedom from restrictions of all sorts, a freedom to follow where one's passion might lead. The force of this passion can inspire those under its sway to acts of the greatest daring on its behalf.

Thucydides' rendition of the Harmodius and Aristogeiton story provides

us with a vivid and revealing image of Athenian individualism and the intense love of freedom that characterizes it. It also provides us with a specific link between the character of the Athenian regime and Athenian imperialism, inasmuch as their psychological foundations now appear to be the same. We may speculate about the historical transition from private *eros* and its ancillary daring to the collective *eros* and daring of Athenian imperialism. The Athenians loved freedom with unequalled passion, and there is a genuine sense, appreciated by all the Greeks, in which rule over others is simply the most perfect form of freedom (see Romilly, 1963, pp. 80–82; Thucydides, 8.68.4). In this sense the empire does represent the crowning emblem and achievement of Athenian freedom. The empire also represents the greatest guardian of Athenian freedom against external attack, a fact the Athenians never lost sight of (e.g., 1.75; 6.82). This consideration may have been particularly important in the historical transition from the democratic love of freedom to the imperialistic impulse forged at the time of the Persian Wars. Reflection on the experience of foreign invasion may have led the Athenians to the conclusion that, just as their heroes Harmodius and Aristogeiton eventually were compelled to enter the public realm merely to safeguard their private freedom, so would the city have to expand externally in order to safeguard its own freedom and the freedom of its citizens (see especially the reflections of Themistocles, 1.93.3–8). Thucydides, at any rate, concludes his narration of the Harmodius and Aristogeiton story with the following terse summary of events: after three years the tyrant Hippias was deposed and fled to the court of the Persian king, whence he returned many years later with the Persians on their expedition to Marathon (6.59.4). Thus the fight against Hippias and tyranny was trans-

formed literally, at least, into the fight against the Persians and its aftermath.

Decline and Fall

It is a long way, of course, from deciding that imperialism is advisable for the safety of the city to justifying it openly for that reason—to say nothing of the justifications from honor and profit that the Athenians simultaneously offer for their empire (1.74–75; 2.63–64). The audacious amorality required for these justifications or exonerations, and thus for the uninhibited development of the imperial project as a whole, is the specific ingredient that Thucydides appears to trace to the daring of the Persian Wars. The unique democracy at Athens provided or bred intense and excessively jealous attachment to freedom; such erotic love of freedom may always verge on simple hatred of all restraints, sacred or profane. Consequently, the democracy also tapped a tremendous source of human energy, but it took the catalyst of the city's experience in the Persian Wars, as well as the opportunities opened up by the Persian defeat, to set the Athenian character definitively on the imperial course. This combination of things produced a city of unprecedented vitality and power, but also a city that in effect destroyed itself within three or four generations after the Persian Wars. The decay of Athens and Athenian imperialism must be traced to the same causes that brought the city such great success in its prime.

We already know from Thucydides' eulogy of Pericles that Athens was eventually consumed by factionalism and internal decay (2.65.7, 10–12). In Pericles' time the city was still a solid and cohesive community, due in significant part to the influence of Pericles himself (cf. 2.65.8). It was Pericles' belief that the Athenians had a kind of native respect for law and for each other (2.37.2–3), and that deference to good leaders was their charac-

teristic trait (2.37.1). Thucydides' view, epitomized in the Harmodius and Aristogeiton story, is that excessive suspicion and jealousy toward leaders was Athens' most characteristic attitude, one derived from the core traits of the Athenian character. It is much easier on the basis of Thucydides' digression than on that of Pericles' Funeral Oration to understand how Athenian erotic passion could lead to faction and internecine strife. Pericles could exhort his fellow citizens to focus their erotic passion on the city as a whole, and with a certain measure of success, but the fundamental character of that passion was private, individual, or individualistic. This is apparent not only from the digression, but from Thucydides' description of the city's erotic passion for Sicily. Thucydides' description indicates that the motives of that passion were widely different for three different types of people in the city (6.24.3). For at least two of those types, comprising the great majority of the population, it was a desire motivated by the prospect of some kind of gain or personal gratification: the prospect of far-away sights for the young, the prospect of present and "eternal pay" for the majority (6.24.3).²¹ The pronounced trifurcation of erotic passion at this point, as well as its predominantly private thrust, shows how ambiguously it is related to the common good. In that respect it is a genuine heir to the tradition of Harmodius and Aristogeiton.

Daring plays a more sinister role in the history of Athens and its imperialism. Pericles praises daring without qualification in his Funeral Oration, but in the plague at Athens, which Thucydides describes immediately after the Funeral Oration (2.47-54), daring shows itself in the city in a rather more questionable light. With an eye to the dissensions that later devastated Athens, Thucydides says that greater lawlessness was first introduced into the city by the plague, as men dared more openly to pursue their own

private pleasure in contravention of all restraint (2.53.1). This imperial quality proves conspicuously less praiseworthy when directed against fellow citizens than against outsiders. Even more to the point is Thucydides' description of the civil wars that destroyed a great many cities during the war. In a famous passage detailing how all the moral categories and the words that denote them were turned on their heads during these upheavals, the first, and perhaps controlling, transformation is said by Thucydides to be the supplanting of loyal courage by "irrational daring" in the minds of the citizens (3.82.4; cf. 3.82.6).²² The passage that begins this way culminates in Thucydides' pronouncement that respect for the divine law then ceased any longer to be a basis of trust or community among men, as oaths lost all their force under the pressure of almost universal lawlessness (3.82.6-7).

These remarks, which represent Thucydides' most systematic pronouncements in his own name on the character of daring certainly give us pause when it comes to considering the case of Athens. Athens has replaced courage with daring in the precise sense of disembarassing itself of the traditional restraints of justice and "divine law." The resulting freedom is what has allowed Athens as a city to accumulate such vast power and such an empire—to run circles, so to speak, around its more traditional and more inhibited opponents, in particular the Spartans. Daring undeniably represents the discovery of an "effectual truth" about the character of international politics. It also represents, however, a very corrosive incubus at the heart of the Athenian regime, though it is one that takes its time to develop.²³ It takes its toll not only on the internal cohesiveness of the city, but on the character of Athenian imperialism itself.

The question as to whether, in what sense, or to what extent Athenian imperialism changes over the course of

Thucydides' History is a very vexed one.²⁴ The foregoing analysis suggests that it remains constant, inasmuch as amorality and impiety are at its core from the moment of its inception. On the other hand, the Athenian consciousness of and attitude toward this amorality undeniably changes, giving Athenian imperialism a much different cast over time. Thus the anonymous Athenians who speak at Sparta before the war proclaim that justice does not apply to their empire, and yet maintain that their rule is "appropriate," that they are "worthy," even that the empire is an expression of their powerful love of honor (1.73, 75–76). In the Funeral Oration, Pericles' very theme is the worthiness of Athens and the appropriateness of the position she holds. In his third and final speech, under the sobering influence of the plague and the continuing war, Pericles concedes that the empire is a tyranny or is like a tyranny (2.63.2); however, he still holds that it is a glorious and honorable thing to maintain (2.63.1; 2.64.5–6). It is precisely the argument or belief that the empire is somehow honorable, however, that decays and finally disappears under the impact of the harsh reality of imperial rule—under the dawning awareness of what it really means to dare to rule over others in defiance of justice, and to admit that one's rule is a tyranny. The amorality of such a project destroys in the long run any claims to higher motives or sanctions, because empire and tyranny simply are not an honorable business. This is the logic that is starkly revealed in the Melian dialogue (cf. Jaeger, 1939, pp. 401–402; Finley, 1963, p. 89; and n. 11). Even at the moment of Sicilian enthusiasm, which seems a much more generous manifestation of the imperial impulse at Athens, we note that, according to Thucydides' description, there was no group that was in love with the glory or "honor" of the enterprise (6.24). Their only goals were safety or profit understood in one way or

another. In that respect, at least, the Sicilian episode is legitimate kin to the Melian dialogue, which Thucydides juxtaposes it to. The extractive and exploitative elements in the imperial impulse and the empire in the end undo all the higher pretenses that Pericles and the Athenians liked to pride themselves on. The reality of imperialism is much harsher than that.

Our final question—that with which we began—concerns whether Athenian imperialism, based on the impulses Thucydides traces to it, reflects a universal compulsion of human nature, as the Athenians argue, and if so, whether its compulsive character, as the Athenians also argue, exonerates imperial powers from moral blame. That communities that follow the impulse to empire are likely thereby to destroy themselves does not alter the state of this question on the level of principle. Thucydides, in tracing Athenian imperialism to human erotic passion, does indeed ground it in the deepest strata of human nature. That the Athenians, in their daring, have to an unprecedented extent unleashed this erotic impulse from traditional restrictions makes them unique, but does not alter the naturalness of their imperial impulse. What is unprecedented about the Athenian regime in general is precisely its liberation of human nature.

There is one passage in Thucydides uniquely relevant to this point, containing the one reference to erotic passion we have not yet discussed, and that is the speech of the Athenian Diodotus in the debate over the rebellious Athenian ally Mytilene (3.42–48). The central portion of Diodotus's speech is a highly theoretical discussion of the relation of human nature to law and restraints of all kinds. It is, in fact, the most sustained theoretical treatment of this issue in Thucydides, and both *eros* and daring figure prominently in it (3.45).²⁵ Diodotus argues that human nature is irrevocably hostile to restraint, because it is governed by a powerful and

promiscuous erotic impulse (3.45.5). This impulse is responsible, according to him, for human *hubris* and human daring (3.45.4). Although his argument points in the first instance to an erotic impulse that has led the Mytilenaeans to revolt, he makes it clear enough that his argument applies to Athens and Athenian imperialism in equal or greater measure: the human erotic impulse, he says, is the more irresistible the greater the objects it has in view; the greatest of these objects is independence for some, and rule over others for those who have the power (3.45.6). Diodotus's implicit account of the basis of Athenian imperialism and its relation to human nature in general is fundamentally the same as that of Thucydides. It also seems to endorse the Athenian conclusion that moral blame cannot attach to this imperialism, any more than the Mytilenaeans can be blamed for revolting from the empire.²⁶ Both are equally compulsive. The world of recurring, equally justified or unjustified domination and revolt that emerges from Diodotus's speech is indeed a world where traditional notions of justice and law among nations are suspended or greatly restricted.

The only conspicuous vindication that justice or divine law receives in Thucydides, then, is the unhappy spectacle of Athens destroying herself after daring systematically and self-consciously to deny that law in its dealings with others. That does not in retrospect alter the truth of the Athenian denial, and certainly does nothing to help cities in the position of Melos, or even to justify their resistance. It invites compassion more than condemnation for those overcome by the hubristic impulses of human nature, but also yields a counsel of prudence to future statesmen. Thucydides is best understood as an educator of statesmen (see Bruell, 1974, p. 11; Connor, 1984, pp. 12-13; Finley, 1963, p. 309; Romilly, 1956; Strauss, 1977, p. 202n;

Wettergreen, 1979, p. 93; White, 1984, p. 88) and statesmen who have been enlightened by Thucydides will not, to be sure, adhere foolishly to the pious hopes and moralistic illusions of the Melians or of Nicias; neither will they heedlessly praise and advance qualities like daring and unbridled erotic passion in their states, like Pericles did. The conventions that restrain these impulses do not have the divine sanctions they were once supposed to have, and they do represent restrictions on or suppressions of powerful elements of human nature. As Diodotus says, such conventions can never be wholly effective, especially when great temptations to empire arise. We nevertheless learn from Thucydides that the integrity of political communities and the maintenance of those human values that culture or civilization does serve are in the long run dependent on those conventions. To the extent that culture or civilization represents a genuine peak of human flourishing—and Thucydides clearly thinks that it does—those conventions could even be said to have a grounding in nature themselves.

Notes

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1. I cite Thucydides by the standard form: book, chapter, and, where appropriate, section. For convenience, I will refer to Thucydides' work as the History, capitalized but not italicized, to reflect the fact that Thucydides never himself gave his work this or any other title (cf. Edmunds, 1975, p. 6; Finley, 1963, p. 3n; Strauss, 1977, p. 143).

2. The patterns of the use of this word can be traced with the help of any word index to Thucydides, for example, that of Bétant (1961). The patterns, as indicated, are quite striking, though to my knowledge they have gone virtually unnoticed in the literature. See e.g. Huart (1968, pp. 431-36) and Hunter (1973, p. 26). Interpreters have often noted that Thucydides' presentation of Athens revolves

around certain significant words—e.g., *polypragmosune* (Ehrenberg, 1947) and *gnome* and *techné* (Edmunds, 1975)—and all with justification. *Tolma* is one of these and, I believe, in some respects the most important.

3. It should be noted that the Greek word *tolma* covers the same range as the English word “daring,” from courage to rashness (courage proper is in Greek *andreia*). In fact, the rarity with which the word “courage” is applied to the Athenians is quite as striking as their corner on “daring” in Thucydides, a distinction lost or blunted in all translations I am aware of, which are as likely to translate “courage” as “daring” for *tolma*.

4. Pericles does speak of the “courage” of the Athenians once, when he is developing a specific contrast to the Spartans (2.39.4; cf. 2.39.1). This, if I am not mistaken, is the sole instance of the direct application of this word to the Athenians in the History (cf. also 2.64.2).

5. Their anonymity seems designed to indicate that they speak for the city as a whole (cf. Pouncey, 1980, p. 62; Romilly, 1963, pp. 108, 242). For a different view, see Jaeger (1939, p. 393).

6. This seems to be the reason for the peculiar way they introduce their account of these Athenian actions. They will refrain, they say, from speaking of ancient things that are not to the point, but are “compelled” to mention the deeds of the Persian Wars (1.73.2): they are repeating the story because it is indispensable to the point of their speech, which is to show how great or formidable a city Athens is (1.72; 1.73.1). Narrations of quasi-mythic ancient deeds were, in fact, common in speeches of a certain kind—e.g., the Scholiast mentions possible tales about the Amazons or the Heraclids. See for example Isocrates *Panegyricus* 20–32; 68–72.

7. This appears to be the only occurrence of the superlative “most daring” in the History.

8. The traumatic character of the abandonment of the land can be judged in part from 2.15. For interpretations of that passage relevant to our present purposes, see Thibaudet (1922, p. 199) and Palmer (1982b, p. 827). For an ironic but also important view of it see Pseudo-Xenophon *Athenaion Politeia* 2.14.

9. See e.g. Dodds (1951, chs. 2, 6, et al.), Grundy (1948, vol. 2, pp. 87, 88), and Glotz (1904). The following discussion owes much to Fustel de Coulanges (1980).

10. It should be noted that dispersal was a common (though not a universal) fate for peoples ejected from their cities in the war.

11. Cf. Adkins (1960, p. 222), Connor (1984, p. 153), De Ste. Croix (1972, p. 14), Ehrenberg (1947, p. 52), Gomme, Andrewes, and Dover (1945–1970, vol. 4, p. 184), Romilly (1963, pp. 65, 250), White (1984, pp. 77, 81), and Woodhead (1970, p. 17). The Athenian remarks on Melos are of course much meaner in tone than the earlier statement, which

does reflect a changed vision of Athenian rule (cf. Cogan, 1981, p. 89). This question will be addressed in greater detail in the concluding part of this essay.

12. On Pericles’ “humanism” see Grene (1950, p. 90), Grundy (1948, vol. 2, pp. 7–8), and Bury (1909, p. 146). On the impiety of this humanism see Cochrane (1965, pp. 23, 55), Edmunds (1975, pp. 26, 39, 45–46, 76, 82), and Connor (1984, p. 72n).

13. Individualism is sometimes supposed to be the exclusive preserve of modern politics. On individualism as characteristic of Periclean Athens, see Cochrane (1965, p. 23), Grundy (1948, vol. 1, p. 171, vol. 2, p. xv), Gomme (1962, pp. 139–55), and Finley (1963, pp. 49, 301; 1967, p. 149). For somewhat different views see Adcock (1963, p. 50), and Grene (1950, p. 31).

14. I have attempted in my paraphrase to retain an ambiguity of the original: it is not clear whether Pericles exhorts his listeners to become lovers of the city or of its power.

15. One of the few studies to take this theme seriously is Cornford’s (1907), but he takes it in a “mythic” sense, which I believe is unjustified. See Bury (1909, p. 124), Wallace (1964, p. 256), Dodds (1951, p. 186), and Huart (1968, p. 391).

16. The seven appearances are at 2.43, 3.45, 6.24, 6.54 (twice), 6.57, and 6.59, not counting one reference by Nicias to *duseros*, bad or unhealthy erotic passion, at 6.13. All of these references will be discussed in the course of this essay.

17. See Euripides *Phoenissae* 359, and Finley (1967, p. 21), who refers to Euripides *Erechtheus* Frag. 360.54.

18. Some perceptive observations in this vein regarding Pericles’ appeal to erotic passion may be found in Thibaudet (1922, p. 25), who speaks of an unusual political “crystallization” of erotic passion at Athens; Cochrane (1965, p. 55), who speaks of *eros* here as a substitute for ordinary patriotism based upon piety; and Immerwahr (1973, pp. 27–28), who connects it to the “pathological” course Athenian policy later took.

19. There has been a great deal of scholarly commentary on this digression, much of it assuming the passage does not have great significance for the History as a whole. See the summary in Gomme et al. (1945–1970, vol. 4, pp. 317–29), which concludes with the suggestion that the digression derives from the historian’s obsession with setting the record straight. Bury (1909, pp. 89–90) believes its aim is simply to correct popular misconceptions, apparently of no great significance. Finley (1967, p. 168) and Romilly (1963, p. 217) suggest that the digression has a deeper purpose, which they do not however attempt to identify. For other treatments that take the passage seriously, see Rawlings (1981, pp. 100–113), Palmer (1982a, pp. 105–109), and Connor (1984, pp. 178ff).

20. Among other things, the Athenians erected a statue of them in the agora, not once but twice. See

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Lang (1955).

21. The desire of the old men in the city seems to revolve more exclusively around the question of simple safety.

22. The phrase "irrational daring" is used by Thucydides on one other occasion: to describe the act of Harmodius and Aristogeiton (6.59.1).

23. The general point that the amorality of the Athenian empire caused Athens itself to degenerate is one that has been argued before. See Grene (1950, p. 32), Strauss (1977, pp. 192–209), and Ehrenberg (1947, p. 53).

24. The literature on this subject cannot even be canvassed in a note. Romilly (1963, pp. 59, 65) sees no development, but the presence of two opposed and coexisting strains; White (1984, ch. 1) describes a complicated process of degeneration that embraced the whole Greek world. See also Jaeger (1939, pp. 401–402), Finley (1963, p. 89), and note 11, above.

25. It is agreed by perhaps most of the commentators who address the issue that, within the context of the debate over Mytilene, Diodotus's speech reflects Thucydides' own views. See Shorey (1893, pp. 67–70), Romilly (1963, pp. 329f), Cornford (1907, pp. 121, 135), Grene (1950, pp. 59, 66), Ehrenberg (1947, p. 51), Bury (1909, p. 137), Finley (1963, p. 83), and De Ste. Croix (1972, p. 21). There is disagreement as to whether Diodotus is uniquely close to Thucydides in his views. This, at least with regard to the points raised in the text, is my interpretation. See Strauss (1977, p. 231), and Bruell (1974, pp. 16–17).

26. This is not to say that justice is as completely absent from Diodotus's argument as he claims. For one thing, it now becomes "unjust" to blame the Mytilenaeans indignantly, as Cleon does, though not to punish at least some of them for reasons of expediency. See also Orwin (1984).

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