ANDREW WOLPERT

REMEMBERING DEFEAT

Civil War and Civic Memory in Ancient Athens

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INTRODUCTION

In 404 B.C.E., the Peloponnesian War finally came to an end when the Athenians, starved into submission, were forced to accept Sparta's terms of surrender. Shortly afterward, a group of thirty conspirators with Spartan backing overthrew the democracy and established a narrow oligarchy. Within the course of thirteen months, the oligarchs killed more than 5 percent of the citizen population and proceeded to terrorize the rest of the community by confiscating property and by banishing from the city all who were not members of their government. After regaining control of Athens, the democratic resistance agreed to an amnesty that protected the collaborators from prosecution for all but the most flagrant crimes. The Athenians, however, could not simply forget the past. Evident in speeches delivered in public at civic settings shortly after the reconciliation of 403, a residue of anger, fear, and distrust remained in the community. Yet Athens did not sink into a cycle of bloodshed such as occurred elsewhere in Greece. In fact the city remained remarkably stable until Macedon dissolved the democracy nearly a century later.

The reader of Thucydides cannot help but be surprised at the outcome of the Athenian civil war. We are taught by the Corcyraean revolution the difficulty of stopping violence once *stasis* erupts (Thuc. 3.69–85, 4.46–48). Athens stands in stark contrast. If Thucydides wrote much of his work after the Peloponnesian War, perhaps he expected his account of Corcyra to draw to the reader's attention the uniqueness of Athens.[1] But even if this is not the case, Corcyra is a vivid reminder to us of the stakes in the Athenian reconciliation and of the consequences were it to fail.

Civil war was widespread in the rest of Greece (Gehrke 1985). For this reason, much of fourth-century philosophy was devoted to the question of how to prevent *stasis*.[2] But the philosophers did not attempt to explain what citizens must do to restore civic harmony should a city suffer from *stasis*; they were more concerned with discovering a blueprint to prevent it from happening in the first place. Still, civil strife continued to occur, and the victims, bystanders, and collaborators were forced to carry on after brutal atrocities. With such concerns in mind, I have set out to examine how the Athenians were able to do what Corcyra and most other Greek cities could not, convinced that the answer can help us better understand the nature of Athenian democracy and show us how a community can repair the damages of a bitter civil war and heal its divisions.

Historians have advanced many explanations for the success of the reconciliation: the terms of the agreement, the political condition of the Greek world, the social and economic problems of Athens.[3] They have shown that revenge and retribution were not viable options, but the Athenians could have simply dismissed pragmatic considerations in order to obtain private satisfaction for past grievances. Causal explanations present the reconciliation as a *fait accompli,* as if there were only one possible outcome to the civil war.[4] But as Corcyra shows, pragmatic considerations do not always lead a people to chose the course of action that best serves its interests.

Whatever the reasons for reconciliation, Athens had to become a community again, and relations between the democrats and former oligarchs had to be normalized. When the Spartans demolished the Long Walls, the Athenians became vulnerable from within and without. Oligarchs in collusion with Lysander seized this opportunity to overthrow the democracy. In the period after the oligarchy of the Thirty, Athens struggled to regain its autonomy. The Athenians rebuilt the walls to protect their city from foreign threats, and they attempted to restore civic harmony. They could not simply pick up the pieces and continue where they had left off. They needed to redefine who they were, or, to echo Loraux (1986), they needed to "reinvent" Athens.

Rather than explain why the reconciliation was successful, this study examines the civic speeches and public commemorations of the early fourth century to consider how the Athenians confronted the troubling memories of defeat and civil war and how they reconciled themselves to an agreement that allowed past crimes to go unpunished. This approach helps us better appreciate changes in Athenian ideology as well as the fragility of the reconciliation. The scope of this study is roughly the first generation after the Thirty, from the peace treaty of 403 to the formation of the Second Athenian League in 378/7. A precise date to mark its end remains elusive, since the reconciliation was not a single act but a process by which the Athenians gradually (and only partially) accepted the reintegration of their city. Over time, hostilities faded and new concerns and fears dominated Athens. The Second Athenian League did much to turn attention away from the rule of the Thirty, but, as late as the 350s to the 330s, speakers referred to the civil war.[5] The oligarchs had left an indelible mark on the city.

There are only a few extant speeches for early fourth-century Athens, but those of Andocides, Isocrates, and Lysias that have survived provide significant and meaningful statements about the civil war and reconciliation. Even when the actions of Thirty did not pertain to a particular dispute, litigants still found it useful to mention them. So too the speaker of the funeral oration had to incorporate defeat into his history of Athens. Using new methods and theories on Athenian law, I consider such references to defeat and civil war within the social and cultural context of the reconciliation. And by drawing from recent works on collective and social memory from fields outside of classics as well as from historical studies on civil war and reconciliation for other periods and regions, including Argentina, France, and Israel, this study places the aftermath of the Athenian civil war in a wider context to show what is distinctive about the Athenian experience.

Most ancient texts—such as the history of Thucydides, the dialogues of Plato, the epideictic speeches of Isocrates, and the philosophical treatises of Aristotle—were intended for an elite audience and articulate an elite ideology. This is not to say that such authors failed to express attitudes that average citizens also endorsed; rather, it is difficult to determine when their thoughts would have appealed both to an elite audience and to a broad range of the Athenian citizenry. Speeches, on the other hand— whether delivered in the Assembly, Council, and law courts or at the public funerals of soldiers—were addressed to audiences fairly representative of the citizenry.[6] They therefore had to express values and beliefs widely shared among the Athenians.[7] The stakes in deliberative and forensic oratory were too high for a speaker to risk professing values that the audience did not endorse. Failure before the Assembly could mean the loss of political power, and failure in the courts could result in financial loss, exile, or even death. Although the speaker of the funeral oration did not face such risks, he was chosen by the city (Thuc. 2.34.6), so he was likely to give a speech that had popular appeal. His reputation depended upon delivering a eulogy pertaining as much to Athens, its might, and the democracy as it did to the dead. The funeral oration thus reveals how the Athenians preferred to view themselves and their city (Loraux 1986: 17–76).

Although the public speaker had to use arguments that appealed to his audience, he did not have to rely exclusively on popular values. The extant orations may even show signs of influence from historians and philosophers.[8] Nevertheless, a speaker who articulates intellectual ideas does so because he believes that they will persuade his audience. Hence I choose the term *civic discourse* to refer to speeches delivered in a civic setting to a mass audience, whether at an official public ceremony or in one of the political institutions of the city. Civic discourse, after all, cannot be reduced to the lowest common denominator, and this perhaps explains much of the difficulty in interpreting the orators. Since both the masses and the elite participated in the political affairs of the city, speakers used a complex network of beliefs and attitudes to appeal to a diverse and even heterogeneous audience. Speakers, for example, sometimes professed elite values, used aristocratic language, and claimed special privileges because of their status.[9] To favor a litigant because of his wealth certainly conflicts with democratic principles. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the democracy simply accepted aristocratic principles and failed to develop a language of its own. As democracy developed, the Athenians transformed elite ideals and redirected aristocratic ambition in ways that served the interests of the community, such as in the performance of liturgies.[10]

Yet representational studies such as this have their limits. In his review of recent work on the Athenian economy, Morris (1994a: 360) observes, "Where Hellenists have faced squarely the agendas behind our sources, we seem to be trapped in a bloodless, intellectualized realm of competing discourses, where . . . our data always come to us already implicated in elite acts of representation." With this in mind, we realize that we cannot learn from the speeches what actually happened. They do not reveal whether the litigants acted for the reasons they stated or, for that matter, whether they even did what they said they did.[11] We cannot, for example, use the speeches to answer the most fundamental question concerning the civil war, that is, the composition of the factions. How many citizens joined the men of Piraeus? What were their occupations? Did they receive substantial support from the elite or were they composed mainly of the poor? The speeches do not give us any substantial clues. But for the present study, these limitations are not problematic, since we are concerned precisely with the maintenance of the "bloodless discourses." As long as confrontation remained for the most part confined to an intellectualized realm, the reconciliation prevailed. Were the Athenians to break free from civic discourse, then civil war would resume.

For the very same reasons the Attic orators are such useful sources for the study of values and beliefs expressed in civic discourse, they offer us the opportunity to explore how the Athenians collectively remembered their past. Halbwachs (1992: 52–53, 168–69) argues that every memory, even that of an individual, is a form of social memory, since people live in social groupings and inevitably orient their memories around their relationships with others. He further suggests that, since memories of the past are reconstructed in the present, representations of the past invariably reveal the needs and concerns of the present. It is this suggestion concerning the politicization of the past which has drawn so much attention in recent years to his theories on collective memory.[12] Yet two problems limit the usefulness of such studies. First, collective memory reveals only how a particular individual or group of individuals represents the past at a particular moment. It is therefore difficult to assess long-term trends through such studies of collective memory. But this limitation is actually a strength of this approach. It prevents us from constructing static models of society and allows us to recognize change and disruption in society. And as we shall see, conflicting, contradictory, and competing images of the past often exist simultaneously.

The second problem is more serious. How can one determine the extent to which a particular representation of the past is shared by other individuals? To what extent can memory be collective? For this reason, many modern studies of collective memory focus on commemorative monuments.[13] By examining the discussions of legislators to commemorate an event, the decisions of architects about how to construct the monument, and the experiences of the people who visit it, we can explore the politics of representing the past and investigate the extent to which a particular representation of the past unites or divides people. For Athens, this problem is less serious, given the extensive participation of ordinary citizens in the political affairs of the community. Just as the stakes were too high for public speakers to risk professing values and beliefs that were not commonly shared among their fellow citizens, in the same way they tended to depict the past as their audience preferred to imagine it. The corpus of Attic orators is therefore an ideal source for the study of collective memory.

As speakers selectively invoked the past, appealing to Athenian anger and fear, the reconciliation was transformed from a symbol of compromise into a symbol of victory. The democratic exiles were remembered as loyal citizens who had fought for the good of the city, and the complicity of the demos was passed over in silence. The aid that the Thirty received from a significant portion of the population and the failure of many to assist in the resistance were either denied or downplayed. It was as if the Thirty were solely responsible for the civil war. One could even say that the Athenians accomplished a kind of erasure of the past: amnesty. In the end, 403 was a watershed year for Athens not because institutional arrangements were drastically reconfigured but because the Athenians made a concerted effort to distance themselves from the period of civil war and to rid the community of the ill effects of the oligarchy. So in the same historical period, new procedures for enacting laws were implemented, which are hailed as the democracy's greatest achievement, and Socrates was executed, which is considered one of its worst mistakes. Rather than view these decisions as contradictory, we should instead recognize that both were attempts to insure that Athens would remain stable.

Part One sets forth the historical setting of the restored democracy. Chapter 1 focuses on the narrative accounts of the civil war: Xenophon's *Hellenica,* Aristotle's *Athenaion Politeia,* Diodorus Siculus, and Plutarch's *Alcibiades* and *Lysander.*[14] They amply attest to the campaign of violence that the Thirty carried out, and they show that the civil war had so fractured the community that reconciliation was difficult to sustain. Chapter 2 outlines the laws and decrees enacted after the restoration of the democracy. Although historians conclude that the moderates prevailed, Athenians had different views about how they could best prevent civil war, who should be allowed to be full members of the community, and what direction the democracy should take. Chapter 3 examines the court cases of the restored democracy, including the trials of Eratosthenes (one of the leaders of the oligarchy) and of Socrates. Athenian law, in general, and the terms of the reconciliation, in particular, were so elastic that Athenians could easily use the courts to gain satisfaction for crimes committed during the civil war. Rules, laws, and procedures were not enough to prevent recrimination, unless the juries that heard the cases and the litigants who pursued their grievances were also committed to the principles of reconciliation. In other words, the agreement had to extend beyond the plane of law and become incorporated within the ideology of the community.

For this reason, the focus shifts in Part Two to representations of the defeat and civil war in civic discourse. Chapter 4 explores the cultural significance of the amnesty. Just as the courts could not prevent the agreement from becoming a source of conflict, the memory of the civil war could either promote reconciliation or provoke hostilities. But as the Athenians selectively remembered the past, they constructed images of the amnesty which glossed over conflict. In Chapter 5, I discuss how individual speakers manipulated representations of the factions of the civil war either to depict themselves as loyal democrats and legitimize their own political positions or to contest the positions of others. Although the past was a source of controversy, few were beyond reproach.

Since speakers could more easily cast aspersions on their enemies than prove them, it was difficult to divide the community again into two warring factions. And as litigants praised the men of Piraeus, whether to win the juries' sympathy or to deny their opponents' claims to this title, they made the democratic exiles appear more unique, thereby rendering it more difficult for any single citizen to claim this praise for himself. In a sense, the Athenians democratized the men of Piraeus. The Athenian people as a whole, not a small faction or a select group of individuals, was responsible for the restoration the democracy. Accusations of complicity and cowardice simultaneously fueled and released the tensions between the various members of the restored democracy.

Chapter 6 considers how representations of the oligarchic rule allowed the Athenians to alleviate anxiety about the lasting consequences of the period of civil unrest. By heaping reproach on the oligarchs and blaming them for Athenian misfortunes, they bracketed the civil war from Athenian past and future, thereby reassuring themselves that Athens would not again experience either defeat by a foreign army or an oligarchic uprising from within the city. The more Athenians depicted the oligarchs as utter villains, the easier it was for them to encroach on aristocratic ideals and claim them for the demos. Using the Thirty as proof that oligarchy was not a viable alternative, the Athenians forcefully asserted democratic values in civic discourse. They convinced themselves that as long as Athens remained democratic they could restore its greatness. Thus, civil war gave the democracy a new legitimacy.

This study helps ancient historians and classicists better appreciate the significance of the events of the early fourth century for the development of the Athenian democracy. It puts an end to two misconceptions: (1) following the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians retreated from the so-called radical democracy of the fifth century, and (2) the success of the restored democracy was an inevitable outcome of the civil war. In addition, it offers a new approach to the study of Athenian law and society. Recent studies have collectively examined speeches from the corpus of Attic orators (420–320) to answer general questions about Athenian values and beliefs or the workings of the democracy, and they assume long periods of continuity.[15] Although the synchronic approach permits otherwise impossible investigations, such as Ober's work on relations between the masses and the elite or Loraux's study of the funeral oration, it also creates a static picture of society.[16] By exploring how the Athenians responded to a particular historical event, I show how Athens changed. Rather than conclude that the democracy was generally stable, I argue that dissension and division—even when resolved, suppressed, or mitigated—were never very far from the surface. The Athens of Lysias was a very different city from that of either Pericles or Demosthenes. Using Lysias's speeches to draw general conclusions about rhetorical *topoi* and their function in the courts is misleading, since the speeches were delivered to address problems and concerns unique to early-fourth-century Athens and are not easily extrapolated to other periods.

Finally, this study draws on literature that concerns more recent civil wars, in part because comparisons to the present are inevitable, even when suppressed. With such comparisons brought to the forefront, we are forced to confront assumptions that would otherwise remain implicit, and we are prevented from discounting explanations that seem unbelievable or unlikely.[17] Comparison is useful also because the Athenian reaction to the Thirty—no matter how unique or exceptional—can help us better appreciate and contextualize how others come to terms with the disturbing and unsettling events of their past.

PART ONE

THE HISTORICAL SETTING