

Just wars, angry wars, democratic wars: the Athenian model

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The ancient cities lived in a constant state of conflict. Athens, the *polis* we know better than any other, produced an impressive corpus of rhetorical arguments on war. Being a democracy – and the first one to theorize about itself, in the exercise of its most distinctive activity, public speaking –, it engaged in a persuasive reflection about how wars can be justified in a democracy, as democratic actions. When they intend to start a military campaign, democratic leaders need to offer good reasons, because the citizens are soldiers; because those who have to risk their lives are also those who deliberate collectively, and vote, in favor or against it. Thucydides' most memorable speeches – those of Alcibiades and Nicias before the Athenian assembly, or the interventions of many leaders or ambassadors before Pan-Hellenic audiences – discuss, precisely, the prospect of a war. Furthermore, the citizens / soldiers are the listeners of those panegyrics, ritually linked to an ongoing combat, which provide the most eloquent crystallization of patriotic rhetoric: the funeral orations. Democracy has to find a widely acceptable validation for its warfare, one that the citizenry in the city – and not only the armed forces on the battle-field – will have to endorse. It has to be a political rationalization, not a mere incitation to victory and violence¹.

Founded on the principle of freedom *of all*, a democratic city cannot, purely and simply, sport imperial expansion, aimed at the domination of others. In words (at least) a democratic war has to be waged to protect freedom, or to make liberty equally shared. Athens therefore invented that self-applauding, and now trite, argument that, when fought on behalf of

¹On the role of the people in the decision making on war and peace, see Ruzé 2003: 171–190.

democracy, a war is always just. Or, in the language of the Greeks, it is beautiful, noble, worthy of praise. Firstly, it will always be intended for self-protection (and, later, security) even when it consists of the most aggressive intervention in, or against, other cities. Secondly, it will always be conducted for the sake of somebody else: allies, and preferably weaker or offended parties. Democratic wars preserve, by definition, the principles of democracy. Thirdly, in the oratory of a prominent speech-writer, who composes his arguments after 403, every democratic war reenacts – in the virtually infinite extension of liberty *of all* – a foundational struggle, the one which is praiseworthy above all, the democratic revolution. Lysias' montage of Athenian history from the stand point, and on behalf, of democracy restored, will be our focus. But not simply as a narrative.

Because democracy operates through speech-acts, and because felicitous speech-acts are made up of moving arguments, the life of democracy requires an orchestration of the passions. In Lysias' language on war, we can see a particularly powerful emotional component. If a righteous war is defensive, it has to be vindictive. The narrative and explanation of conflicts fit the pattern of the most political of human emotions: anger, as the honorable wish to punish an undeserved offense. To present a war – and, what is less obvious, a civil war – as just means to claim that it is, indeed, an act of retaliation, justified by an assault, that was unjustified in the first place; the emotional effect of this claim is to feel anger, and to arouse it in the audience. The rhetoric of the just war is a rhetoric of anger. Democratic wars are angry wars².

² This paper is part of my ongoing reflection on political passions, especially anger and envy. I have discussed a number of complementary aspects – such as the gender implications or the ethical significance of the Aristotelian definitions and their early-modern transformations, in the following articles: Sissa 2009 and Sissa 2008.

Now, anger is the quintessentially aristocratic, Homeric and tragic passion, felt by gods, heroes and kings. Anger, Aristotle claims, is the response to an unmerited slight, by all those who merit recognition, even deference, thus cannot endure disrespect. The anger of the People, which Lysias' oratory stokes with great verve, is part of a peculiar feature of Athenian democracy: the appropriation of the values and the discourse of the archaic, pan-Hellenic, nobility. Beyond the obvious paradigm of the resistance to the Persian invasion, another foundational war can be seen at the horizon of fourth century political culture: the Trojan War, that long story of a *mênis*, the "numinous" wrath of a slighted warrior, but also the tale of a vindictive and righteous expedition

Native nobility

In the language of "democratic knowledge", – that form of theoretical awareness, pervasive in Athenian political and judicial life³ – any military intervention implies the representation of the People as one, righteous fighter. When the *dêmos* takes the field, it is for a good reason. In its narrative of the heroic exploits against external enemies, be they the Persians in 480, or the Spartans in 431, democratic rhetoric borrows the vocabulary of warlike, personal *aretê*. The People are noble, in deeds as well as from birth. In its most obvious and exemplary version, this appears in the funeral orations.

I will begin with our ancestors, since it is both just and fitting that they be given the honor of remembrance at such a time. Because they have always lived in this land, they have so far handed it down in liberty through their valor to successive generations up to now. They deserve praise⁴.

³ This notion is defined in Ober 2004.

⁴ Thucydides II, 36.

The first *topos* in this epideictic performance – an unconditional praise of the dead and their homeland – is autochthony. The Athenians represent their origin as a spontaneous generation, a mythological one, from the soil of Attica. They are natives, and the only natives (they say), in the Greek world. In 431, Pericles opens his fictional address with a tribute to these first progenitors, sprung from earth. Aspasia, to whom Socrates ascribes a fictional eulogy in the *Menexenus*, will place even more emphasis on the maternal and nurturing vocation of the Athenian countryside. In 394, during the Corinthian war, Lysias' more baroque words revisit the same eulogy:

They had not been collected like most people, from every quarter, and had not settled in a foreign land after driving out its people; they were born of the soil, and possessed in one and the same country their mother and their fatherland⁵.

This beginning is unique. The Athenians form a *genos*, a line of descent, originating from Erichthonios, a legendary child of Hephaestus, Athena and Earth. Generation after generation, they remain a privileged dynasty, linked to the gods and rooted in their own land. They stand apart from the many, *hoi polloi*, those other Hellenes or Barbarians, who are just a collection of

⁵ Lysias, *Funeral Oration* (2), 17. I am not engaging in the discussion about Lysias' authorship of the *Epitaphios*. See Dover 1968: p. 56: "We have no political or ideological grounds for denying the ascription to Lysias of any extant or lost speeches in the corpus, including [...] the *Epitaphios*"; p. 193 : "I see no reason why Lysias should not have composed the *Epitaphios*."; p. 194: "Ascription of epideictic speeches received by the booksellers was less vulnerable to error or deceit, since the involvement of anyone but the author was rarer and smaller. So far there are no technical criteria which help us decide whether the ascription to Lysias of the *Epitaphios* [...] was erroneous". Avezzu 1985: XCIV–XCVI, reaches the same conclusion.

The celebration of autochthony recurs in Demosthenes, *Epitaphios* 4–5 and Hyperides, *Epitaphios* 7 (*koinê genesis*).

disparate people, who originally migrated from elsewhere into a foreign territory⁶. Not being immigrants, the Athenians did not have to expel or submit preexistent dwellers from their homes. As citizens of an ethnically pure and legitimate city, they were all, and still are, well-born, *eugeneis* – and forever innocent. In time, their exceptional birth sets the stage for an exceptional history, made up of beautiful, defensive wars against a number of enemies: Euristheus, the Amazons, the Thebans, and the Barbarians. At each new generation, the Athenians *become* worthy men, *andres agathoi*, because as children they learn the goodness (*agatha*) of their ancestors, as young men they cultivate that heroism and, finally, they come to emulate it with their own excellence, *aretê*⁷. Thanks to their exemplary background and their training, they grow capable of accomplishing their collective prowess. And this combination of birth and personal virtue create, as we shall see, true nobility.

Aretê is first of all military valor. For Thucydides' Pericles (and for all his Athenian speakers, during the Peloponnesian war and the Sicilian expedition), as well as for Lysias, *aretê* characterizes above all the Athenians as the leaders of the Greek coalition, in their resistance against the Persians⁸. That war, with its glorious battles at Marathon, Salamis and Plataea was the defining event for the history of the city in the fifth century, and it could always be used to justify the creation of the Delian league in 478, its progressive transformation into an empire and its increasingly tyrannical, as both Cleon and Pericles put it, administration. That was the paradigmatic war: defensive, intrepid, and altruistic.

Democratic *aretê* is not just military valor. It is the exceptional quality that allows for a special kind of war: the fight for freedom, justice and democracy itself. The Persian wars were

⁶ Nicole Loraux has examined in detail the myth of autochthony in Loraux 2006 and 2000.

⁷ Lysias 2, 69.

⁸ Thucydides II, 36; Lysias 2, 33.

fought for freedom, because Darius and Xerxes threatened to enslave the whole of Greece. This was the danger to which the Athenians were the first, and the fiercest, to respond – for the sake of all the Greeks – because of their idiosyncratic aspiration to freedom. They were exceptionally eager to stand up for liberty, their dearest value, but a value they were also ready to shield, on behalf of their friends. Liberty, Lysias, claims, is of all. Liberty contains a built-in tendency to be shared, and generalized. It is the recurrent motif for all of Athenian wars.

Justice too is inherent to any war the Athenians undertake, because, in Lysias' words, "the beginning of their life was just"⁹. Their being natives, makes them naturally entitled to be where they are. But it also endows them with an innate, spontaneous sense of what a just war is: not one of occupation and conquest, but one in defense of a land that, initially and rightly, has always been theirs. They never committed the original sin of a colonial settlement; they are immune from any temptation to harm people, who simply stay within their boundaries. The political myth of autochthony serves precisely this purpose: to grant military self-righteousness. Nicole Loraux had argued that it conveys the fantasy of an origin, from which the feminine body was excluded. Erichthonius was born from the semen of Hephaestus, which fell on the ground, when Athena resisted his advances. The miraculous ancestor had thus one divine father two mothers, a virgin goddess and the earth¹⁰. But the myth projects, above all, a genealogical unity: the imaginary kinship of the "*enfants de la patrie*", or the "*fratelli d'Italia*", we hear celebrated in national anthems. That kinship creates an identity. That identity is put to

⁹ Lysias 2, 17.

¹⁰ Loraux 1994.

the test in war. *Aux armes, citoyens! Stringiamci a coorte, siam pronti alla morte!* Brotherly blood is to be shed¹¹.

Fought to protect their freedom from enslavement, Athenian wars are always an affirmation of legitimacy, never an attempt to harm and dominate others. And this is as exceptional as democracy. Justice and freedom are profoundly connected to popular rule. As Lysias phrases it:

They were the first and the only people in that time to drive out the ruling classes of their state and to establish a democracy, believing the liberty of all to be the strongest bond of agreement; by sharing with each other the hopes born of their perils they had freedom of soul in their civic life, and used law for honoring the good and punishing the evil¹².

The Athenians never expelled others from their land, we said, but were capable of throwing out their own archaic rulers, *dunasteiai*, from their own city. They were the *first* and *only* people in that time to do so. This is the very foundation of democracy. And they did it, out of a highly dignified vision of themselves, within human kind: they thought that what defined

¹¹ On the “nationalistic” significance of the myth of autochthony, see Detienne 2003, and his criticism of Nicole Loraux’ interpretations in Loraux 1994 and 2000. In the latter publication (esp.13 – 28), Loraux argues that the “benefit” of autochthony is the negotiation of democratic and aristocratic values, through the fantasy of temporal continuity, for a regime only too aware of its recent creation and vulnerability. My intent is to refocus the discussion on the *military* scope of funeral orations, thus on their intent to justify wars (past, present, and future) by reigniting warlike passions.

¹² Lysias 2, 18. Loraux 2006:196 reads this passage as part of Lysias’ fantasy about an indefinite past, the « first birth of the autochthonous » and a « time of high mythical feats » – a blurred, remote beginning intended to *obliterate* the reality of the democratic revolution. I understand it, on the contrary, as the candid mention of a violent, and highly valorized, turn in the history of the Athenians.

humanity was obedience to law and reason, as opposed to the beasts who submit to each other by violence¹³. Political forms other than democracy entail a residue of rough bestiality, a vulgar conception of power. Servility, slavish obedience to a ruling individual or a ruling class, is inferior to the recognition of the authority of the Law, the only form of discipline which is acceptable for a free, noble man. As human beings are superior to animals, the Athenians are superior to other people, precisely in their understanding of the dignity associated with the privilege of being human. Their superlative excellence culminates with the invention of democracy, because democracy is the political translation of that nobility.

Democratic *aretê* is a set of beliefs about many things: reason, justice and power, all grounded in the native rights, so to speak, of the Athenians. In its rejection of primitive forms of brutish domination and in its awareness of what it means to be human, it sets the highest possible standard both for politics and humanity. It is the extension to an entire society – or more precisely to the male, freeborn, adult component of the Athenian society – of the ethics and manners traditionally attributed to an exceptional kind of person, the one who would set those standards for himself: the man who does not submit to others' power for ever, the man who does not tolerate humiliation, for himself as well as his friends. In a paradoxical displacement, the Athenian people become *all* excellent, while *hoi polloi*, the many, can only be the others, the non-Athenians. The distinctive value of ancient democracy is equality, but equality is shared superiority, collective leadership, well-deserved hegemony.

Marathon at the Piraeus

A rhetoric of just wars, intended to protect and spread freedom, flourished after the Persian invasion, and during the war against the Spartan coalition. Thucydides laid out its

¹³ Lysias 2, 19.

arguments in the speeches of the Athenians, on the one hand, and exposed the flaws of those arguments from the standpoint of the victims of Athenian imperialism, on the other. But in public discourse the celebration of democratic just war extended to the *stasis* that culminated with the coup of the Thirty and ended with the victory of the *dêmos*, in 403. The People handled such a success with remarkable elegance, Aristotle observes¹⁴, by making the decision not to persist in their conflict for ever, but to reconcile the population and by voting a decree “not to remember the evil”, *mê mnêsikakein*¹⁵.

Lysias’ oratory occurs in the aftermath of those events, at a time that was critical for many reasons: the failure to extend the empire into Sicily and the west Mediterranean in 415; the defeat at Aegospotami in 405, thus the disastrous end of the Peloponnesian war; the repeated overturn of democracy, in 411 and 404; the evident division of a city, where the oligarchic faction could succeed in taking power. Democracy was victorious, but it had been put to the test, severely¹⁶. In this context, Lysias, whose family had been badly harmed by the Thirty, composes a number of speeches, directly related to the dilemma of reconciliation and recrimination¹⁷. The *Funeral Oration*, ascribed to him, follows a most significant rhetorical strategy: it creates a seamless narrative, in which the history of Athens unfolds as the development of democracy from a foundational struggle, into a sequel of just wars including, and even culminating with, the *stasis* of 404-403, finally to justify Athens’ well deserved hegemony in the Aegean Sea¹⁸.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*, 40, 2-3.

¹⁵ Dorjahn 1946; Loening 1987; Mossé 1997; Loraux 1997a; Wolpert 2002b.

¹⁶ On this political climate, see Lévy 1976; Strauss 1986; Mossé 1973.

¹⁷ Todd 2000; Wolpert 2002a.

¹⁸ Comparable narratives can be found in other epideictic speeches, such as the funeral oration allegedly composed by Aspasia, in Plato’s *Menexenos*, or Demosthenes’ and Hyperides’ *Epitaphioi*. I focus on Lysias, because of

In 403, the ordinary citizens who convened at the Piraeus were the true heroes, Lysias argues, rising against the tyrants and their friends. They were the worthy men, the *andres agathoi* ready to take risk (*kindunos*), acquire fame (*doxa*) and to accomplish worthy deeds, *agatha*¹⁹. They faced the culprits of terrible things: the slanderers, the greedy, the unjust few

his particular emphasis on the reconciliation of 403: the defining moment that creates his perspective. On historical accounts in oratory, see Nouhaud 1982; Frangeskou 1999.

¹⁹ Lysias, *Defense against a charge of subverting democracy* (25), 28: «And you should consider that, in the [Piraeus](#) party, those who are in highest repute, who have run the greatest risk, and who have rendered you the most services, had often before exhorted your people to abide by their oaths and covenants, since they held this to be the bulwark of democracy: for they felt that it would give the party of the town immunity from the consequences of the past, and the party of the [Piraeus](#) an assurance of the most lasting permanence of the constitution». Cf. 2, 61-65: «But though I have been led to utter this lament over [Greece](#) as a whole, it behooves us to remember, in public as in private, those men who, shunning slavery, fighting for the right, and rallying to the cause of democracy, incurred the hostility of all and returned to the [Piraeus](#); compelled by no law, but induced by their nature; imitating in fresh encounters the ancient valor of their ancestors; ready to purchase with their own lives a common share in the city for the rest; choosing death with freedom rather than life with slavery; no less ashamed of their disasters than angered against the enemy; preferring to die in their own land rather than live to dwell in that of others; and having as allies their oaths and covenants, and as enemies their open foes of aforetime and their own fellow citizens. Nevertheless, having felt no fear of the multitude of their opponents, and having exposed their own persons to the peril, they set up a trophy over their enemies, and now find witnesses to their valor, close to this monument, in the tombs of the [Lacedaemonians](#), for we know that they restored in the sight of the world the diminished greatness of our city, revived in her the harmony that had been shattered by faction, and rebuilt walls in place of those that had been demolished. The men who finally returned, showing the kinship of their counsels with the deeds of those who lie here, applied themselves, not to vengeance upon their enemies, but to the preservation of the city; and being men who at once could not be overreached and would not seek their own advantage, they shared their own freedom even with those who wished to be slaves, and declined for themselves a share in that slavery. By the conspicuous greatness and nobility of their conduct they justified the claim that the former disasters of the city were due to no remissness of theirs, nor to the valor of the enemy; for if

who put innocent people to death without trial, confiscated the property of resident aliens only to raise funds, and fundamentally betrayed the city, making it smaller and weaker. Those men were both excellent and the victims of injustice²⁰.

Now, the excellence of the men at the Piraeus has a precedent: the *aretê* of the men who fought at Marathon. In both cases, the Athenians defied danger, took daunting risks and, in so doing, became worthy men²¹. In both cases, they acted in such a way as to arouse the admiring emulation – the *zêlos* – of mankind²². A hundred years later, the resistance to the Persian invasions, sets the standard of glory. This telescopic overlapping of Marathon and the Piraeus appears, in Lysias' *Funeral Oration*, literally as a reenactment, a *mimêsis*. A century ago, the orator claims, the Athenians were the only ones to challenge the king of Persia and his immense army, driven by their aversion to slavery and their passion for freedom. Yesterday, the men at the Piraeus proved the same determination to avoid servitude (*douleia*), to fight for justice and to engage in a civil war for the sake of democracy. By choosing to die as free men

they proved able, after internal dissensions and despite the presence of the [Peloponnesians](#) and their other enemies, to return to their own place, unanimity would clearly have made it an easy matter for them to make war on their foes.»

²⁰ Lysias, *Against Eratosthenes* (12), 57.

²¹ The men at the Piraeus (12, 97): «You came, despite many adversities, to the [Piraeus](#). Beset by many great perils, you proved yourselves men of true valor, and liberated one party while restoring the other to their native land». The men at Marathon (2, 25): «They proved their worth as men, neither sparing their limbs nor cherishing their lives when valor called, and had more reverence for their city's laws than fear of their perils in face of the enemy; and so in their own land they set up on behalf of [Greece](#) a trophy of victory over the barbarians, who had invaded others' territory for money».

²² The men at Marathon (2, 26): «No wonder, then, that these deeds performed long ago should be as though they were new, and that even to this day the valor of that band should be envied by all mankind». The men at the Piraeus: «Thus the struggles at the [Piraeus](#) have earned for those men the envy of all mankind» (2, 66).

rather than live as slaves in an estranged land, they “imitate (*mimêsamenoi*) in those new risks the ancient excellence of their ancestors”²³. And, in this *stasis huper dêmokratias*, they accomplish the most beautiful deeds²⁴.

The Persian wars – and the *aretê* of the Athenians in leading them successfully – offer the most memorable paradigm for the civil war, and the *aretê* of the democrats in it. A mimetic affinity connects the Piraeus to Marathon, Salamis, and other undisputable triumphs, in a temporal perspective that enhances contemporary events and glorifies *stasis* as a supremely just war, fought in the name of democracy. But such a *mimêsis* operates, however, also the other way around. The rhetoric of this funeral oration goes so far, in legitimating that recent battle through the remote heroic past, that it ends up projecting *internal* conflict, retrospectively, at the very beginning of Athenian history, and at the foundation of democracy. That was the matrix of all just wars.

Lysias recounts the history of Athens, in a narrative that goes forward – from the past to the present – but he does so looking back, from the standpoint of very recent circumstances, the events of 403. The men at the Piraeus, we have seen, are for him the true Athenians. They are the kin and the heirs to the men at Marathon and Salamis. But those battles, against the

²³ Lysias 2, 61.

²⁴ Lysias 2, 64-65. As a result of this discussion of Lysias’ rhetorical strategy, I cannot agree with Loraux 2006:202 when she claims that “l’oraison funèbre n’évoque les luttes civiles que pour mieux les nier”. On the contrary, *stasis* – once it is *huper dêmokratias* – shines vividly in the memory of the city. More generally, I cannot share all of Loraux’ arguments on *stasis* as the obliterated model of democracy (*The Divided City*). Nicole’s counterintuitive thinking, however, was inspiring for my reading of Lysias’ *Epitaphios*. *Stasis* is indeed at the horizon of democracy. But, I must add, there is no need to hide it. Democratic oratory has no qualms in extolling dissension and division, once this is framed as democratic (again: when it is a *stasis huper dêmokratias*), and made analogous to democratic wars – i.e., fought for the sake of liberty.

barbarians, were already fought on behalf not merely of a homeland, but of a particular political order: democracy. Those battles were fought for the sake of liberty in order to avoid slavery, and only because collective, equally shared, freedom is the highest value, at the core of democracy²⁵. It is thanks to their *democratic* commitment to generalized freedom, that the Athenians took the leadership of the Greek coalition. Being already “the land of the free and the home of the brave”, they could never resist a just war²⁶.

Now, this commitment was very ancient. In the most remote past, the Athenians were the first and the only people to drive out (*ekballein*) the “ruling families” (*dunasteias*) of their states and to establish a democracy, believing the liberty of all (*pantôn*) to be the strongest bond of agreement²⁷.

²⁵ Lysias 2, 44.

²⁶ For a comparative problematization of courage in Athens and in contemporary American politics, see Balot 2004.

²⁷ Lysias 2, 18. Thucydides opposes *dunasteia* (in Thessaly) and *isonomia* in Athens (IV, 78). He characterizes it as a regime near to tyranny: «Our city – claims a Theban orator – at that juncture had neither an oligarchical constitution in which all the nobles enjoyed equal rights nor a democracy, but that which is most opposed to law and good government and nearest a tyranny – the rule of a very small group (*dunasteia*)» (III, 62). Aristotle defines *dunasteia* in opposition to *politeia* and democracy (*Politics* 1272b, 1292b, 1302b). He sees it as the most elitist form of oligarchy, close to monarchy: «And if they carry matters further by becoming fewer and holding larger properties, there comes about the third advance in oligarchy, which consists in their keeping the offices in their own hands, but under a law enacting that they are to be hereditary. And when finally they attain very great pre-eminence by their wealth and their multitude of friends, a dynasty of this nature is near to monarchy, and men become supreme instead of the law; and this is the fourth kind of oligarchy, the counterpart of the last kind of democracy» (*Politics* 1293a).

In this self-praise, the Athenians began their democratic life, not thanks to a set of reforms first by Solon, then by Cleisthenes, as Aristotle would recount, but with a revolution. Although we may understand this as an allusion to the killing of Hipparchos in 514, by two highly individualized aristocratic figures, Harmodios and Aristogiton, Lysias attributes the origin of democracy to the Athenian people, in its entirety. The power of the people originates from an anonymous, collective uprising – a *stasis*. And that foundational violence was the very first expression of those people’s devotion to a value – freedom. Their wish to build their political order upon that value, showed up in that primordial exploit – and never withered. This is why democrats combat beautifully *always*, including in their conflicts within a single city: when humiliated by an unjust ruling elite, the *dêmos* fights back. The people rebel not against the best, but against the few. In a city ruled and divided by oligarchy, the people become the only *aristoi*, the only worthy men, *andres agathoi*. The self-enhancing representation of democracy, in sum, applies not only to the most obviously patriotic propaganda, but also to the glamorization of one side – the People – in what political thought (think of Thucydides, Plato or Aristotle, not to mention tragedy) usually describes as absolute horror: an internal war. That side represents the true city, the authentic, autochthonous beauty of Athens.

The establishment of democracy, through what Lysias depicts as an uprising of the Athenians, in the plural, against the ruling class, becomes therefore the very archetype for all subsequent wars, always fought on behalf of those same values, which had inspired the original violence²⁸. The fact that democracy came into existence because the Athenians, above

²⁸ Herodotus mentions that the general Miltiades evoked the murder of Hipparchos, in his encouraging speech, before the battle of Marathon. The memory of the tyrannicide was offered to the hoplites as the example to emulate, in their combat against the Persians (6, 109). Harmodios and Aristogiton are not yet transfigured into the People, but the paradigmatic inspiration is already there. “Through a masterful piece of assimilation, both

and before everyone else, treasured the liberty *of all* (*pantôn eleutheria*) – and were always prepared to fight for it – sets the stage for a permanent, guaranteed self-righteousness. Because they were right once, they can never be wrong. Such self-confidence opens a far-reaching perspective for their foreign politics. It is in the name of that vocation that Athens can cast itself as the city called to leadership, destined to hegemony and entitled to dominate its allies. The role of Athens at the head of the Hellenic coalition, resisting the Persian invasion; the Empire built as a defensive alliance, after the war, in view of the everlasting Persian threat; the pitiless interventions in allied cities, such as Melos or Mytilene, in order to maintain their democratic government, secure the alliance or punish any attempt to recede from it; the invasion of Sicily: all these moves, which appear so crudely aggressive in Thucydides' rendition of Athenian history, fade out in Lysias' encomium. What remains of a century of wars and tyranny (*Pericles dixit*), is an idyllic period of peace punctuated by a few sacrosanct interventions, ultimately grounded on one source of legitimacy: the democratic revolution.

It is on behalf of the same – infinitely extensible and exportable – commitment to liberty that the Athenians have created and managed the empire, a beneficial alliance of dutifully democratic cities.

By means of countless toils, conspicuous struggles and glorious perils, they made Greece free, while making their native land the greatest: they commanded the sea for seventy years and saved their allies from faction, not suffering the many to be slaves of the few, but compelling all to live on an equality²⁹.

internal and external oppressors became 'tyrants' worthy of resistance by the normatively defined, tyrant-killing Athenian male" (Balot 2004:83).

²⁹ Lysias 2, 55-56.

Lysias' speaker acknowledges the pressure (*anankazein*) exerted by Athens upon its "allies", members of the Delian league, i.e, its empire, to become and remain democracies, but he justifies it as the ultimate manifestation of democratic excellence. The Athenians simply cannot bear slavery, for themselves as much as for their friends. Athens was made *megistê*, the greatest, precisely by its search for *to ison*, an unrelenting quest, generously extended as far as possible. Athens became the best, by promoting and imposing equality. From this exceptional distinction, derives its vocation to a noble supremacy on the other Greeks³⁰. "Then conquer we must, they might have sung, when our cause it is just".

Lysias' brief, allusive story resonates with Herodotus' account of the end of the rule by the Pisistratidae³¹. Once freed from the tyrants, the Athenians cease to fight as if they were working unwillingly for a master (*despotês*), because now each man starts to strive with great passion, for his own sake (*autos hekastos heautôi prothumeto katergazesthai*)³². Political freedom, more precisely free speech, *isêgoriê*, generates military excellence, through a new form of commitment to the *polis*: enthusiasm for individual liberty. Only after this sea change, Athens begins to become the "first" city-state.

³⁰ Lysias 2, 57. A systematic reconstruction of the concept of freedom in Greek politics and political thought can be found in Raaflaub 2004. Raaflaub 2004: 175-176 examines Lysias' justifications of the Athenian empire to rule, together with those given by Isocrates in the *Panegyric*.

³¹ Herodotus 5, 62. Ober 1996: 32-52 highlights the role of the Athenian people in the establishment of democracy, before and independently of Cleisthenes. He focuses on a later episode: the popular riots that followed the attempt by Isagoras to dissolve the Council, when Cleisthenes was still in exile. The forcing out of the Peisistratidae, however, appears to be the first collective action (notwithstanding the Spartan leadership), which consists of what Lysias calls the *expulsion* of the *dunasteiai*. On the need of tyranny and its ideological use, see also Ober 2003.

³² Herodotus 5, 78.

Like Herodotus, Lysias too identifies what he elliptically calls “the expulsion (*ekballein*) of the *dunasteiai*” as the first noteworthy act, in the history of the city: a deed that is decisive both politically and militarily. What follows merely reenacts that same original excellence, made of a beautiful nature and of beautiful thoughts³³. It is for the sake of liberty and because they were a democracy, that the citizens of Athens fought the Persians³⁴. It is now for the same reasons – freedom and its corollary, justice – that they engaged in a civil war on behalf of democracy, *stasiazein huper dêmokratias*³⁵. Finally, the empire is nothing but the attempt to promote the “liberty of all”, to oblige as many other Greeks as possible to share the beauty of democracy. Acted out as a first *stasis*, the *aretê* of the Athenians was originally divisive: *demo-kratic* in the first place. And it is now a defensive domination.

After listening to the ideological music of the *Funeral oration*, an Athenian citizen might be persuaded of two things: firstly, that the recent civil war was not a dreadful dissection of the body politic, but a beautiful resistance, conducted by the worthy men on behalf of the entire city, exactly as the first expulsion of the *dunasteiai* had been, in the past. A civil war was retrospectively converted into a legitimate, and legitimizing, revolution. Secondly, as a consequence of their innate nobility, whatever the Athenian people might have done to the members of the Delian league, it was always well deserved, on both sides³⁶.

³³ Lysias 2, 20.

³⁴ Herodotus already mentions the exemplarity of the internal violence. Miltiades, he claims, evoked the murder of Hipparchos, in his encouraging speech, before the battle of Marathon. See n. 28 *supra*.

³⁵ Lysias 2, 61.

³⁶ Lysias 2, 41-43: «They declared to all men, by their victory in the sea-fight (Salamis), that there is better hope for the venture shared with a few in the cause of freedom than for that in which numerous subjects of a king contend for their own servitude. They made the fullest and fairest contribution in aid of the freedom of the [Greeks](#) by providing [Themistocles](#) as commander, most competent to speak and decide and act, and ships more

The passions of democracy

We do not find in this rhetoric a systematic theory of the just war, comparable to the normative description of Cicero. We see, however, a pattern: a righteous war, the Athenians say, is waged for our safeguard and/or the security of our friends, in response to an unwarranted aggression. What justifies the defense is an unjustified attack. Such an argument fits the definition of an emotion, one that Lysias' speeches designate by name: anger, *orgê*. Rage, as we see it staged in epics, history, and the theater, is a reaction to an undeserved offense³⁷. Aristotle describes it as the painful feeling of having being unfairly slighted, accompanied by the wish to take revenge, either for ourselves, or on behalf of our dear ones³⁸. Self-protecting *and* altruistic, ire is grounded on our self-respect as well as our affection and loyalty to others, when they are close to us. Love is an extension of self-love.

The men who resisted at the Piraeus, Lysias argues, were exactly in position to get angry, *orgizesthai*. Because they were excellent and the victims of injustice, anger is the emotion they were supposed to feel and they ought to feel. Those worthy men were no less ashamed at what had happened to them than furious (*orgizomenoi*) against their enemies³⁹. Along with other

numerous than those of all their allies, and men of the greatest experience. For indeed who among the rest of the [Greeks](#) could have vied with these in decision, in number, and in valor? Hence it was just that they should receive [from Greece](#) without dispute the prize of prowess in the sea-fight, and reasonable that they should attain a prosperity in accord with the measure of their perils, having taught the barbarians of [Asia](#) that their own valor was genuine and native to their soil».

³⁷ Anger has drawn a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. See for instance: Allen 2000. Harris 2002; Braund and Most 2004; Konstan **2006: 41–76 (esp. 75–76, on connection with democracy)**.

³⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2, 2. On Aristotle's theory of anger, replaced in the larger context of his understanding of political passions, see Koziak 2000; Sokolon 2006.

³⁹ Lysias 2, 62.

feelings and beliefs – such as revulsion for slavery, love of freedom, sacrifice of their lives for the sake of the common good and fearless courage in taking risks – their ire, their *orgê* is an expression of their nature, their *phusis*⁴⁰, in other words of the natural excellence of their character. And right now, a few years later, *orgê* is the passion Lysias insists in awakening and keeping alive, by recalling those events – again and again⁴¹. After 403 BCE, Lysias’ orations addressed to the Athenians – as the victorious party, now in control of the city – offer a perfect example of the rhetorical manipulation of *orgê*.

I fully understand you, gentlemen of the jury, when hearing such statements and remembering the events, you get angry (*orgizesthai*) in the same way against all those who remained in the city⁴².

⁴⁰ Lysias 2, 61.

⁴¹ Howland 2004 has seen the crucial importance of anger in Lysias’ rhetoric, especially the speech *Against Eratosthenes*. «In *Against Eratosthenes*, Lysias begins with, and repeatedly returns to, the anger that he and the members of the jury feel—or ought to feel— toward the defendants (12.2, 20, 30, 80, 90, 96). He makes clear that he had good reasons for anger and therefore for enmity: “I make these remarks not, indeed, because I lack private enmities (*echthras*) and sufferings,” he tells the jury at 12, 2, “but because there are for all of us a great many reasons to be angry (*orgizesthai*) on behalf of our private concerns or those of the people (*tôn dêmosiôn*).” Anger is also a sufficient justification for punishment—all the more so, Lysias insists, in the present circumstances (12, 20, 30–31; cf. 36). In sum, Lysias’ rhetorical strategy is to inflame the anger of the jury toward the defendants and to use this anger as a reason for treating the defendants as enemies who ought to be harmed». Howland argues that Plato, in the *Republic*, very probably engages with these arguments, intended to stir up ire and legitimize revenge. Aristotle, in turn, re-assesses and re-evaluates the reasons of anger.

⁴² Lysias 25, 1.

I consider, gentlemen, that you would not be justified in hating those who have suffered nothing under the oligarchy, when you can indulge your wrath (*orgizesthai*) against those who have done your people mischief⁴³.

You feel anger (*orgizesthe*) against everyone who entered your houses in search either of yourself or of some member of your household⁴⁴.

«One absolutely must get angry (*sphodra chrê orgizesthai*)», Lysias claims, when a man such as Pheidon, trusted to reconcile the city, ends up betraying it⁴⁵. Sometime one has to get angry, *dei orgizesthai*, Aristotle will acknowledge.

Wrongly aggrieved by a few of their own fellow citizens, as their predecessors were wrongly attacked by myriad barbarians, those *andres agathoi* have fought full of anger (*orgizomenoi*)⁴⁶. And in the same way their excellence reenacts the excellence of their ancestors, the affective experience of that excellence – their rage – refreshes the hatred of those predecessors, in an earlier occasion, when they fought against Euristheus, to protect Heracles and his children.

Acting on what they held to be just, on no ground of former enmity against Euristheus, with no gain in view but good repute, they made this perilous venture on behalf of those children, pitying the wronged and hating the oppressors, *tous d'hubrizontas misountes*⁴⁷.

⁴³ Lysias 25, 18.

⁴⁴ Lysias 12, 30.

⁴⁵ Lysias 12, 58.

⁴⁶ Lysias 2, 62.

⁴⁷ Lysias 2, 14.

The language is vibrant, dramatic, stirring. Emotions are named: but even beyond the explicit mention of anger and hatred, it is the pattern of all Athenian wars that fits the logic of *orgê*, as a legitimate defense, in response to undeserved wrongdoing. A righteous war, let me insist, is made of the right emotions: not fear or greed, but aspiration to fame, pity for unmerited pain, and hatred for unfair arrogance, *hubris*. The rationalization of conflict requires the appeal to strong feelings. The reasons of a just war are, actually, passions.

Now, to understand better how Athens found the most powerful legitimating model of its own wars in one of these passions, *orgê*, we have to recapture the pathetic apparatus, the affective climate, of democracy. Aristotle will be our cultural guide⁴⁸.

At first sight, social inequality seems to be felt as envy, the tense, lingering hostility of the poor towards those who have more⁴⁹. But is envy the engine of social struggle or patriotic excitement? Not always. Those who are inclined to equality make a revolution, Aristotle claims, when they believe that they have less than those who have too much⁵⁰. They fight either for the sake of material advantage or for the sake of social recognition, only *not in order to acquire those goods for themselves, but because they see that others have more of them, either justly or unjustly*⁵¹. In front of the *pleonexia* of others you cannot be indifferent and you react. But your reaction, Aristotle insists, is not – or, at least, not yet – competitive: you do not want to get as much, or more, for yourself. You merely feel that it is offensive.

⁴⁸ As we shall see, Aristotle provides us with a constant insight into Athenian political culture. We can count also on his specific knowledge of democratic rhetoric, especially epideictic speeches such as the funeral orations, including those we are discussing here (by Pericles and Ps-Lysias). See Trevett 1996.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2, 9. On *phthonos*, see Thalmann 2004; Konstan and Rutter 2004; Konstan 2006: 111-128.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Politics* 5, 1301b25-26.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Politics* 5, 1301b38-1302a2.

Phthonos is base and worthy of base people (*phaulon kai phaulôn*)⁵². In order to fight beautifully, you need an active / aggressive emotion: anger. You need to lose your temper, in a sudden eruption of violence. The kind of emotional interactions that trigger the acting out of “metabolic” beliefs and desires are: offences, fear, excessive superiority, contempt and disproportioned increase of power. And in a different manner: corruption, slights, meanness and inequality⁵³. Apart from fear, all the passions that Aristotle identifies as particular causes of political change are related to anger. Analyzed in the *Rhetoric* as a reaction to either offence, or spite or contempt, anger seems to be, in the *Politics*, the revolutionary emotion par excellence – that of the noble tyrannicide.

Orgê however cannot be reduced to mere gut feelings. From Homer to Aristotle and the Stoics, what could be taken for an explosion of sheer irrationality is, actually, a sequence of

⁵² Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2, 11, 1. *Phthonos* remain a despicable emotion, incompatible with “*beauty*”. This is why the most intelligent and stable form of democracy is founded – thanks to the election of magistrates not at random, but on the base of merit and to their public examination – on a clever, calculated avoidance of popular resentment. A state is governed beautifully (*kalôs*), Aristotle claims, when political responsibilities will be held by the best, whereas the people will give their consent and will not envy the upper classes. On the one hand, such an order satisfies the wealthiest and the most distinguished, because they are not ruled by people inferior to them. On the other hand, it pleases the mass: the magistrates will feel obliged to rule with justice, because another group, the people, will hold them accountable. The expectations of the elite and the will to power of the masses are both fulfilled. The leaders are excellent, yet the people have the last word as to that excellence. It is they who apportion praise and blame.

A system of checks and balance is what makes democracy stable, Aristotle claims. At its core he sees the prevention of *phthonos*, the neutralization of that potential for anger and thus revolution, which threatens a state where the elite is ostentatiously wealthy and offensively pompous, thus launching a constant provocation to the craving for equality, shared among the people.

⁵³ Aristotle, *Politics* 5, 1302a2-4.

thoughts: «I have received an undeserved slight, now I wish to retaliate». It is both pain for a more or less hurtful offence and desire to punish the offender. Notwithstanding its physical disorder, believed to be caused by the over-heating of blood around the heart, rage involves a cognitive process, which combines the assessment of a social interaction and the intent to react appropriately. It is a narrative passion, ready made to tell the story of an act of violence transformed, *ipso facto*, into legitimate defense.

Aristotle's theory of anger is relevant for our understanding of the Athenian ideology of warfare, not simply because Aristotle is an exceptionally perceptive interpreter of his culture, but also, and above all, because he delineates this *pathêma*, in its phenomenological nuances, social details and narrative structure. Anger may appear to be messy and loud, but it is a multilayered experience, made of sensations (the pain of being insulted, the pleasure of anticipating revenge), of social awareness (how I expect to be treated), of memory (the rewards I am entitled to receive, from people I benefited), and finally of a storyline. I feel unduly slighted; therefore I wish to take revenge: this offers not only a causal explanation, but also the pattern of a plot. It presents the template, ready-made, for a historical reconstruction and a justification of conflicts, or for self-absolving autobiographies.

Now, if we think that this intricate definition is culturally plausible, we can detect it at work in public rhetoric, even beyond the actual use of the words *orgê*, or *orgizesthai*. We can see the structure of the emotion, its scenarios, and its scripts - even when its name is not spelled out - in all those arguments that make of a war the justified response to an unjustifiable insult.

When the people come to feel humiliated, beyond what is deemed tolerable, by the arrogance, the outrageous behaviors, or simply the overpowering domination of their rulers, then they revolt: as Lysias put it, they expel their *dunasteiai*, they engage in a civil war for the sake of democracy. But, as we have seen in Lysias' idiom, the same emotional dynamic is also

what unifies the city, in its conflicts with others – Greeks or Persians or Euristheus or the Amazons – who are perceived as threatening to its freedom, thus its collective honor. An empowered *dêmos* aware of its liberty equally shared, is more prepared to fight against external enemies. Democracy, Herodotus claims, makes cities stronger and more patriotic. A dignified response to an insufferable provocation, inside and outside the city: this is the unfolding of anger, from the pain to feel slighted to the pleasurable eagerness to retaliate.

This is why the entire sequence of the Athenian wars, as Lysias' speaker recounts it, is the repetition of the same reaction to iniquitous, unfair, uncalled-for attacks. But, thanks to Aristotle's microscope, we can see even better the continuity of Athenian just warfare. In all their struggles, the basic threat was the same: enslavement, the loss of freedom, because of what Aristotle calls "excess of power". The democratic revolution stands as the perfect, foundational, example of the desire to react to a humiliating domination: the one that the Persians would have imported from the outside, the one that the Thirty would have restored from the inside. History would be different, Lysias is saying, if we had not been saved by the *orgê* of the People. Our hegemony on the Aegean Sea, the empire, is the logical consequence of their courage – and rage – in fighting the Persians, for the sake of all the Greeks.

Andreia politikê: Diomedes, Hector, and Ajax

Why would the language of *dêmokratia*, the power of the people, choose *orgê* as its signature emotion? The question is in order because, as Aristotle put it, ire is for gods, kings and heroes. But for the people, *hoi polloi*? Are not we to expect an anti-elitist set of values, a popular culture, a demotic apparatus of feelings, for the mass?

The endorsement of a passion which is noble is consistent with a more general appropriation, intrinsic to Athenian democracy, of aristocratic values. In the performance of public oratory, the stirring of that passion activates the nobility of a character, thus

contributes, in practice, to the vitality of democracy⁵⁴. It is in this context that we have to understand the Athenian arguments on the just – because angry – war.

As the assessment of a slight can only be made in proportion to one's expectations of deference, the disposition to get angry depends upon how one sees oneself within the social scale. The higher the status a man – and we are, indeed, talking about men, here – believes himself to hold, the lower his threshold of patience. Beyond Aristotle, this is a cultural and political lesson to be learned, first of all, in Athens itself, directly from the Homeric poems, those colossal representations of the archaic, Pan-Hellenic aristocracy, which remained the core of Athenian education. The democratic city perpetuates a grand festival founded by Peisistratos' son, Hipparchos, in the VI century B.C., and ever since celebrated every fourth year: the *Great Panathenaia*. Now this solemn ceremony, all to the glory of the Athenian citizens, still visible for us on the freeze of the Parthenon, included, among parades and athletic contests, the public recitation of the *Iliad*, the tale of the quintessentially heroic war, and the *Odyssey*, its struggling aftermath. Democracy, in sum, fully endorses the epic example, in the most phantasmagoric, self-congratulatory and over-stated of its rituals⁵⁵. That same universe, filled with irascible heroes, is also what the theater keeps alive⁵⁶. Tragic plots are constructed around different forms of slight – offence, betrayal, ingratitude, contempt and denial of recognition – which trigger suffering, violence and murder in response. Anger is, indeed, one of the structural passions of tragedy⁵⁷. Achilles, Ajax or Oedipus (and, here, Medea,

⁵⁴ Roberts 1986.

⁵⁵ Ps.-Plato, *Hipparchos*, 228 b.

⁵⁶ On the significance of the Panathenaia in the creation of a Homeric culture in Athens, and for the shaping of the Homeric text itself, see Nagy 2002. For a contextual understanding of the two major Homeric moments, the *Great Dionysia* and the *Great Panathenaia*, see Goldhill 1991: 167–176.

⁵⁷ I have developed this argument in Sissa 2006.

Clytemnestra, Hecuba or Phaedra are at home) stand as the most memorable testimonials of the epic past.

Playwrights, we could add, bring on stage those monuments (or caricatures) of volatility, only to show their downfall, as a warning about *sôphrosunê*, in the context of a new ethics that ought to be grounded on moderation, flexibility and consensus. In the rhetoric of political speeches, however, we can see the emergence of a collective actor, the Athenian People – the *Andres Athênaioi*, the *Andres agathoi* – whose excellent “character” must include, necessarily, the fatal irascibility of the “heroic temper”⁵⁸ – not a tragic flaw, yet a social destiny. Modeled on the heroic individual, the heroic city will act and feel like him⁵⁹. Let us now highlight the major points of contact.

Firstly, the Homeric representation of aristocracy shows that *excellence* is made of two things: genealogical prestige, the distinction of the family, on the one hand, and the ability of the individual, to live up to the achievements of his ancestors, on the other. The fame of your predecessors is less a legacy, passively inherited and to be taken for granted, than a challenge to your own glory, to be actively deserved. The figure of Achilles stands as the model of this challenge: his father had the highest expectations for him, and he agonizes about his own son’s prowess. In the afterlife, this is his only concern: is Neoptolemos up to snuff? Ajax who, in

⁵⁸ The classic discussion on the incompatibility of the irascibility of Homeric characters and the new context of the *polis*, in particular a democratic *polis*, remain that by Knox 1983.

⁵⁹ Mills 1997: 33; 58-79, examines how the heroic deeds that tragedy attributes to great individuals such as Theseus or Demophon – the Amazonomachy, the war for the burial of the Argives, or the defense of the Heraclidae – are progressively displaced to the Athenians as a whole, in the “exaggerated” rhetoric of the encomia. Theseus becomes interchangeable with the Athenian people, and disappears from the picture. This transfiguration of singularity into the popular plural occurs also between the tyrants-slayers (Harmodios and Aristogiton) and Lysias’ Athenians, see note 28.

Sophocles' play, impersonates the most towering exemplar of the epic character, magnifies this same construction of nobility. After his devastatingly ridiculous gesture (to kill cattle instead of the Atridae and Ulysses), Ajax' thought goes to his father, a man who distinguished himself beautifully and brought home, from the same Trojan land, a great renown. "What kind of eyes shall I show to my father Telamon, when I appear in front of him?" he asks in anguish⁶⁰. He must find something to show to his father, something that will prove to him that he, his offspring, is not of a gutless (*asplanchnos*) nature⁶¹. He will commit suicide.

Following the same pattern, the noble origin of the Athenians in the mythical past translates into the nobility of their characters, as it shines in the present. When the hero becomes the body politic of an exceptional city, the harmony of illustrious pedigree and glorious performance is granted by imitation, emulation, and education. The city, Lysias claims, assures that the consistent example of the previous generations inspires the prowess of the youth. The good birth (*eugeneia*) of the Athenians, both Demosthenes and Hyperides argue in their *Epitaphioi*, leads to their great deeds, but together with education (*paideia*) and habituation to high principles⁶². In both worlds, the brilliance of an individual' background puts him to the test. Or, as Aristotle put it, to be well-born, *eugenês*, is a different thing than to be noble, *gennaios*: one has to live up to the excellence of the ancestors, which is not to be taken for granted⁶³. *Eugeneia* is one of the goods due to fortune, which accompanies *aretê*, excellence; and this is true for individuals as well as for cities. Echoing the funeral orations, the *Rhetoric* claims that:

⁶⁰ Sophocles, *Ajax* 430–466.

⁶¹ Ibid. 470–73. Ajax also thinks of his own child, Eurysaces, «Ah, son, may you prove luckier than your father, but in all else like him (*homoios*)! Then you would not prove base (*kakos*).» (545–550).

⁶² Demosthenes, *Epitaphios* 27; Hyperides, *Epitaphios* 8.

⁶³ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2, 15.

Noble birth in the case of a population or a polis means that the people are natives (*autochthones*) or very ancients, and that the first ancestors were distinguished as leaders, and that many of their descendants were brilliant in those things that provoke emulation.

It takes wealth, but also virtue, and all that is held in great honor to make a noble city⁶⁴.

Secondly, in the Homeric tradition, the hero could be defined as a man who will never consent to be someone else's slave, who has an uncompromising sense of his dignity and expects recognition, respect and deference from others, superiors, peers or inferiors. For the same token and because, precisely, of his high expectations, he appears to be extremely sensitive to offence, and terribly hot-tempered. The most vivid vision we have – and the Athenians had – of the “best of the Achaeans”, the *aristos* of all heroes, is the image of a young man, first drawing his sword in an impulse to kill the man who has insulted him, and then shedding bitter tears, on the beach. That insult was unfair, and he cannot bear it. In response, he will not go to war, thus crippling his own army.

Like this kind of man, only an empowered *Dêmos*, highly aware of his excellence, – and thus sharing the feelings of an aristocrat – is proud enough to register an unendurable slight, and raise to defend his honor. But such a collective pride, impossible to swallow, can only be found, by definition, in those cities where the *dêmos* already holds the *kratos*. Only ruling people, people who have rejected enslavement, can call themselves noble. The ability to convert popular envy into shared rage is a crucial part of the aristocratic self-representation of democracy. As Aristotle suggests, in the logic of anger, only an intrepid tyrannicide, or a *Dêmos*, which is conscious of his dignity and cannot bear more harassment or further insolence, stands up and fights back. Political wrath implies collective self-respect, ideas about the limits of social inequality and the aspiration to more equality: in other words, expectations

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1, 5, 5.

and, so to speak, “status consciousness”. If *ressentiment* appears to be the mean, despicable passion of the masses in peace, wrath stands as the acting out of that potential hostility, in a change of mood, which, paradoxically, deserves the highest praise. In anger, Lysias claims, the mass becomes an army, with all the valor, nobility, excellence that it takes to be one. In the narrative of how, in a given circumstance, the people ended up “getting angry” – either against the barbarians or against the Thirty – democracy finds its most vocal self-enhancement. Furious, the people are always fighting *back*, and (up to a point) rightly so. The men at the Piraeus mimic those at Marathon.

Finally, for the Homeric hero, *aretê* consisted of a set of qualities clustered around the readiness to fight a beautiful war and die a beautiful death. The hero is himself on the battlefield – and not on any battlefield, but on one where courage is an imperative, honor is the goal, and loyalty to friends is a duty. To harm enemies and to help friends are inseparable obligations⁶⁵. Achilles, we said, is above all a wounded and revengeful youth, who cannot endure an unmerited outrage. Anger is self-protecting. But the same emotion is self-sacrificing too. Achilles is also the supremely generous warrior, who will overcome his bitterness and resume fighting, not because of the profuse gifts he is offered, but because his dearest companion has been killed. On behalf of Patroclus, and for no other reason, he will swallow his pride and join the battle. A fresh rage, against the killers of his closest companion, replaces the stale one, against his own army.

Beyond the “numinous” wrath, the *mênis*, of Achilles⁶⁶, famously the first word of western literature, the *Iliad* is the story of an angry expedition. The Trojan campaign, initiated in order to recover a woman cowardly abducted from the conjugal bed of one of the Greek princes, and

⁶⁵ See [Blundell](#) 1991.

⁶⁶ Watkins 1977; Slatkin 1992.

fought by a coalition of his peers, committed to take revenge on his behalf, represents the exemplary war in aristocratic terms. It is waged as a justified retaliation and in a spirit of solidarity, for the sake of someone who has been undeservedly wronged in the first place.

In Athens, the values of democratic heroism – the proud rejection of any form of humiliation, submission, or slavery; the willingness to take up the challenge of danger and death; and, above all, the constant concern for actual or potential allies, and sometimes even the enemies themselves – reenact the values of Homeric ethics, in the plural agency of the People. The well deserved leadership of Athens among all the Greeks is the consequence of her unwavering assistance to so many of them. In the words of Lysias, let us remember, the history of Athens repeats itself consistently, in a sequence of wars, modeled on the very first struggle for liberation and democracy, a conflict that anticipates all the others, fought outside, and is finally remade inside, at the Piraeus. The Athenians waged those wars for the benefit of others, including the enemy⁶⁷; «for the weaker on the side of the right»⁶⁸; with no gain, but in view of fame, «pitying the wronged and hating the offensive party»⁶⁹. Through their own excellence, they obtained a common freedom also for the others (*koinên tèn eleutherian kai tois allois*)⁷⁰. This is intrinsically the merit of the *dêmos*, as shown at the Piraeus, where the People – the truly best men, against the ugly few – were «ready to purchase with their own lives a common share in the city also for the rest (*koinên tèn polin kai tois allois*)»⁷¹. It is only just that the rest of Greece should give them the prize of hegemony. The Homeric example of just reprisal and self-less,

⁶⁷ Lysias 2, 9.

⁶⁸ Lysias 2, 12.

⁶⁹ Lysias 2, 14.

⁷⁰ Lysias 2, 44.

⁷¹ Lysias 2, 62.

disinterested, pan-Hellenic solidarity finds in Athens its most mimetic audience, and its fittest match.

Again, it is Aristotle who offers a theory of self-governance (that “city of the citizens”, *politeia*, of which democracy is a corrupted version), based on the warlike excellence of a group. For Aristotle, kingships come to an end when there is a sufficient number of noble men, who do not endure the rule of a monarch, thus take power in their hands⁷². Tyrannicides are, indeed, aristocrats. Polities, where many virtuous citizens govern themselves in turn, rely upon a critical mass of hoplites. These political actors are all excellent, in one respect: bravery in combat.

When the multitude governs the state with a view to the common advantage, it is called by the name common to all the forms of constitution, ‘constitutional government’. And this comes about reasonably, since although it is possible for one man or a few to excel in virtue, when the number is larger it becomes difficult for them to possess perfect excellence in respect of every form of virtue, but they can best excel in military valor, for this is found with numbers; and therefore with this form of constitution the class that fights for the state in war is the most powerful, and it is those who possess arms who are admitted to the government⁷³.

Whereas the other virtues (such as justice, moderation, or prudence) are uncommon, and complete excellence is impossibly rare, the qualities of courage, spiritedness, and solidarity can be found in a large population. This is because, Aristotle claims, we all – meaning, the

⁷² Aristotle, *Politics* 3, 1286b.

⁷³ Aristotle, *Politics* 3, 1279a-b.

Greeks – are endowed with the right dose of *thumos*, in our temperate souls. *Thumos*, Aristotle argues, is the source of our affection for other people as well as our capacity to register humiliation, and to stand up and shake off servitude⁷⁴. *Thumos* is the engine of bravery, loyalty, and anger. It is the psychological and social equipment – the aspect of the character – that distinguishes the Greeks from the people from the East, who put up with monarchy, apathetically, as well as from the people from the North, who are too high-spirited to govern themselves or others⁷⁵. Hellenic irascibility strikes the right balance, and creates a political identity.

Now, Aristotle does not approve of *dēmokratia* thus cannot celebrate its violent beginning: as just mentioned, the power of the people remains, for him, an inferior variation of polity, and evolves from tyranny⁷⁶. His ideal state is precisely a “city of the citizens”, a *politeia*, in which only wealthy land-owners would first serve in the military and then engage in politics, whereas the commons who spend their trivial lives in trade, farming and any other manual work should be excluded from citizenship. Democratic rhetoric, conversely, does apply that logic to the People in its entirety, because all the free-born male Athenians are citizens and soldiers, either in the cavalry, the infantry or the navy. To be the first ones to expel the *dunasteiai* of the origins requires all the martial *aretê* that makes the Greeks allergic to enslavement, and natural leaders. The Athenians are the best of the Greeks, and the most Hellenic among them.

⁷⁴ Aristotle, *Politics* 7, 1327b.

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* 7, 1327b-1328a. On Hellenic identity, a most debated issue in recent scholarship, see Cartledge 2002².

⁷⁶ Aristotle, *Politics* 3, 1286b.

Aristotle offers a piece of normative theory: the only excellence that comes in the plural is military; only polities are made of citizens/soldiers governing themselves in turn; polities are the only virtuous forms of government. But from this idiosyncratic syllogism, we can make a cultural inference. Even if Athenian democracy was wrong in its unlimited aspiration to equality, there was a core of goodness in its warlike ethos. Aristotle could see that. His discussion of *andreia*, valor and manliness, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is conducted through definitions, distinctions and examples. All the examples derive from Homer. It is from Diomedes and Hector, he argues, that we can understand the meaning of *politikê andreia*, the courage of the citizens soldiers; it is from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that we can comprehend the connection of *thumos* and manliness⁷⁷. In the middle of the Fourth century, after so many wars and military innovations, the moral and cultural references remain Achilles, Diomedes, and, interestingly, Hector.

Once more, Aristotle captures the pivotal point of a cultural continuity. Homeric ethos is what shines in the rhetorical vision of the People. Because they are, first of all, and all of them, warriors, because they have in common the same moral and political experience, war – they share the same virtue. But there is more. The founder of Athenian democracy, Cleisthenes, created ten new “tribes” into which he redistributed the population of the city and of Attica. Each tribe was placed under the protection of an eponymous, ancestral hero. Only one of those heroes was not a native: it was Ajax, the second best of the Achaeans, and another champion of anger. Demosthenes’ *Epitaphios* bestows praise onto Ajax as a vital Homeric figure, inspirational for the members of the tribe which descends from him⁷⁸. Like Isocrates’

⁷⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 3, 6-9. See in particular: 1116a16-35; 1116b22-32.

⁷⁸ Demosthenes, *Epitaphios* 31. Consistently, the same speech also insists upon all the Homeric precedents of Athenian prowess (9-11).

Panegyricus and Hyperides' *Epitaphios*, that speech evokes the Trojan War, a paradigm that the Persian wars not only emulated but over-shadowed – because of the Athenian virtue shining unmatched, in the latter⁷⁹.

The very idea of a citizenry always ready to take up arms (even in a democratic revolution), presupposes – and brings to the forefront of political discourse – the qualities, the emotions and the agency of the finest fighters from the most remote, mythical and heroic ancient times. In contrast with a more recent history, that of the hated *dunasteiai*, that of an elite of rich, arrogant oligarchs, the Homeric poems could provide a “modern” city with a precious past. Athens chose to re-perform the poems in the Panathenaia, to enjoy their infinite variations in the tragic plots, to adopt their heroes and gods, and to teach them to her children. Notwithstanding its being a democracy? Quite the opposite: because, from the demi-gods of the *Iliad*, a *dêmos* made up of warriors had everything to learn. At the core of the Athens' “Homerizon”, lies the Trojan War.

Ancient democracy saw itself emerging not from a bourgeois revolution, but from the political self-empowerment of an army, forever mindful of another one, most antique and glorious. This is the image it projected in its public speaking. Let us see now how this rhetoric could operate. The language of *aretê* could offset the repertoire of derogatory and contemptuous characterizations of the many, still current in the prose of the Old Oligarch or other antidemocratic voices. In a transparent fashion (because Homer was so much part of the popular culture) that language praised a multitude that, at the very least, knew how to be heroic. That was its only indisputable virtue. That sense of martial value, however, needed to be kept alive. Because anger is the emotional performance of nobility, the rhetorical appeal to *orgê* served this purpose.

⁷⁹ Hyperides, *Epitaphios* 35; Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 83.

Lysias never stops doing exactly this, even when it means transgressing the prohibition “to recall the evil” of the civil war. We are in situations of pragmatic speaking: what matters are the states of mind and the changes of mood which will lead the listeners to make decisions. An orator must orchestrate or *kataskeuazein*, as Aristotle would say, the emotions of his audience. Narratives are arguments. By making the case for a defensive war or a defensive *stasis*, a speaker is already working the room: he arouses the disposition to getting angry, which lurks in his audience. Arguments are reenactments. By recalling the anger of the worthy men who fought for democracy, a speaker reignites it – right there. And in so doing he acts upon those who stand in front of him: he makes them into *andres* equally *agathoi*, through the experience of the same passion. The reminder not merely of the events of 403, but of the anger of the good Athenians, does something: to infuriate the people is to gentrify them. Because wrath is the *pathos* of Achilles, Ajax or the hoplites at Marathon, to make ordinary Athenians feel *that pathos* is to bestow praise on them. This is why, can we reasonably infer, it was worthwhile, for an orator, to refresh their memory⁸⁰.

«We don't need a Homer...»

Now, the fact that ancient democracy failed to invent a language for itself, but merely adopted the values, the words and the myths associated with the aristocracy from the past has become a commonly acknowledged, yet diversely interpreted, piece of evidence. Nicole Loraux claimed that such a failure constitutes the “embalming”, in the Fourth century, of what

⁸⁰ A question that would deserve a discussion is the duration of anger. Aristotle repeats that one must know when to stop (*Nicomachean Ethics* 4, 5, 1–14). This is probably the reason why he commended the Athenians for not persisting in their *mnêsikakein*. His diffidence vis-à-vis popular rule is consistent with his limited appreciation of popular anger – beautiful as long as it does not turn to envy. Speaking as a supporter of democracy, on the contrary, Lysias had a vested interest in unburying that past.

authentic *dēmokratia* should have remained⁸¹; Josiah Ober has objected that, on the contrary, the adoption of that vocabulary demonstrates the self-importance of the People, who became able to see themselves as exceptionally successful and united⁸². What I am trying to bring into a sharper focus is the emotional aspect of the language of excellence.

The use of this language was performative, as Josiah Ober has argued. Those speech acts, I will add, reactivate the paradigm of heroic anger, as the pattern - narrative as well as causal - of all the wars, ever fought on behalf of democracy. As a sequence of undeserved humiliation and *ipso facto* justified retaliation, anger affords the most idealized account - and recounting - of any form of conflict in which the Athenians had to engage. Presented as such, any war calls automatically for praise, that most venerable genre of discourse, which - from Homer to Pindar, to the epideictic rhetoric of the funeral orations but also to the clever arguments of forensic or political speeches - is granted to everything beautiful and great. But anger is contagious. Through examples and inclusive statements on “the Athenians” ever, the past inflames the present. And this is indeed a very good reason why the power of the People would want to cast itself as a remake of the power of the best: the People need and want praise - for themselves, right now. An effective orator delivers just that. Not only by paying compliments, but also in practice: by rekindling emotions that are flattering, enhancing, ennobling; by making the people feel good - *andres agathoi*.

Far from being embalmed, withered, or distorted by the idiom of excellence, *dēmokratia* found its most gratifying genealogy in the rule of the best. Because the *aristoi* in question (those taken as models) were less the idle *rentiers* that we might associate with the French or English Ancient regime, than the over-spirited, self-sacrificing, and inimitable Homeric

⁸¹ Loraux 2006: 206; cf. 202.

⁸² Ober 1989.

fighters who could teach something to the People: how to face danger, strive for high reputation, and burst into righteous rages. And all this: in a selfish *and* selfless manner, for themselves and for the sake of their friends.

To the question: «*Why* does democracy choose *orgê* as its signature emotion?», I would like to answer now from the stand point of Aristotle's cultural logic. Because, I will reply, if it is the case (as democratic rhetoric claims) that democracy is the outcome of a revolution, and not of a reform or the corruption of a previous *politeia* (as anti-democratic philosophers would say) it has to be heroic, in a socially and psychologically plausible manner. It has to be born as the active and passionate reaction to an insufferably humiliating regime; it has to engage in virtuous wars in defense of democracy itself. But who is the kind of person who can register the insufferable humiliation of despotism? The man who has enough pride for that thought and that feeling. And that man, Aristotle alerts us, is not the resentful, exploited, intimidated servant who revolts out of *phthonos*. It has to be a self-respecting, empowered, – and therefore irascible – free-man. He will be the Achilles, and not the Thersites, of the situation – only, as Lysias shows, in the plural of a valiant, pugnacious citizenry.

The Trojan War hangs as a subliminal tapestry, in the rhetoric of the funeral oration. As Pericles rightly claims, “we do not need a Homer” to celebrate the deeds of the Athenians. Homer is there in the language itself, together with the memory of the most idiosyncratic foundational event in the history of that unique city, the democratic revolution.

“Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,

And this be our motto: "In God is our trust":

And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave

O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

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