

# Vast Personal Forces: Thucydides, Populism, and the Liberty of the Ancients

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**Abstract:** Modern discussions of freedom focus on negative liberty or nondomination. In his portrait of the Athenian democracy, Thucydides thematizes the psychology of ancient freedom. By focusing on the psychology of the demos, Thucydides shows how democratic imperialism unfolds from the experience of freedom as a kind of felt power. His analysis offers us a way to think about contemporary populism. In representative democracy, the connection between power and freedom has been severed by representation and the modern state, but an experience of power nonetheless remains part of what we mean by freedom today. Modern citizens frequently feel powerless and so unfree, ensnared by impersonal forces. One lure of populism is that it satisfies the longing for freedom as a form of felt power, for a measure of control over one's life.

## Introduction

T. S. Eliot coined the expression “vast impersonal forces” to describe the machinery of modern history, which he brightly contrasted with Greek history and theory. As he wrote in 1948:

The advantage of the study of Greek history and Greek political theory, as a preliminary to the study of other history and other theory, is its *manageability*: it has to do with a small area, with men rather than masses, and with the human passions of individuals rather than with those vast impersonal forces which in our modern society are a necessary convenience of thought, and the study of which tends to obscure the study of human beings.<sup>1</sup>

Eliot's words can be supplemented by noting that Greek history and theory also have to do with the passions of individuals as these come together in citizen levies. The modern focus on “vast impersonal forces” has meant that the passions are insufficiently explored in the study of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot, *Notes toward the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 88 (emphasis in the original).

populism. This article looks to the ancient Greek historian Thucydides to examine how the individual's longings for freedom and power are satisfied by the vast personal forces of popular movements.

Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* is a vivid recreation of a long war, involving many citizens of disparate regimes engaged in high-stakes collective action.<sup>2</sup> Thucydides preeminently investigates the psychology of collective action, in particular the behavior of armies or citizen levies, including that of the Athenian demos. In the Funeral Oration, Pericles styles Athens a vast personal force, with each citizen a vital, participating element. He invites the Athenians to love their city, to love themselves, by reflecting daily on their own great power (2.43.1). The exhortation is revelatory not just of Athens as a polis but of the psychological profile of ancient democracy itself. This article scrutinizes one dimension of Thucydides's account of crowds,<sup>3</sup> his depiction of the Athenian demos's experience of its own power and freedom and the related link between self-rule and *archē*, which entailed rule over others.<sup>4</sup> Thucydides is generally interpreted as a critic of democracy,<sup>5</sup> an interpretation supported by his surprising praise of the mixed regime of 411 BC—and not the Periclean democracy—as the best at Athens of his lifetime (8.97.2). He does, however, acknowledge that democracy has solid virtues if also corresponding vices.<sup>6</sup>

Crucially, the ancient democratic experience of freedom is not alien to us today but it is obscured by our understanding of freedom as a domain of negative liberty ensured by the impersonal state,<sup>7</sup> or as a space of republican

<sup>2</sup>References to Thucydides are by book, chapter, and sentence. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup>For Thucydides's account of the crowd or mob as well as a canvassing of the semantic terms, see Virginia Hunter, "Thucydides and the Sociology of the Crowd," *Classical Journal* 84, no. 1 (1988): 17–30; Hunter, "Thucydides, Gorgias, and Mass Psychology," *Hermes* 114, no. 4 (1986): 412–29; and Suzanne Saïd, "Thucydides and the Masses," in *Thucydides between History and Literature*, ed. Antonis Tsakmakis and Melina Tamiolaki (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2103), 199–224.

<sup>4</sup>*Archē* is the Greek term for the Athenian "empire." It translates, literally, as a being first. The most recent treatment of freedom in the *History* is Mary Nichols, *Thucydides and the Pursuit of Freedom* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), but it does not explore the cognitive links between freedom, power, and honor. The most important historical work is Kurt Raaflaub, *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece*, trans. Renate Franciscano (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). This article offers a political psychological supplement to Raaflaub's historical treatment.

<sup>5</sup>See Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), chap. 2.

<sup>6</sup>S. N. Jaffe, "The Regime (*Politeia*) in Thucydides," in *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, ed. Ryan Balot, Sara Forsdyke, and Edith Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 391–408.

<sup>7</sup>For a classic statement, see Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166–217.

nondomination where the individual is protected from arbitrary interference.<sup>8</sup> Here, it is the power of the impersonal state that ensures freedom.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to modern conceptions of liberty, this article offers neo-Athenian insights about freedom. Thucydides repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the living connection between power and freedom for the Athenian demos. Understanding this link, which requires the reader to participate in the first-person experience of ancient democracy, opens up conceptual space for asking questions about populism today, in particular, the extent to which populism represents a reaction against felt powerlessness.<sup>10</sup>

The freedom of the ancient city was, of course, ensured by power, but this power was the product of citizen virtue, especially courage on the battlefield.<sup>11</sup> In Athens, there was only the power of the demos assembled, while the demos constantly experienced this power in the collective exercise of it. Athenian people-power, then, calls out for comparison with a feature of our world that is so ubiquitous we take it for granted: the powerlessness of the individual compared to the system of forces which structures his or her life, and especially the modern state. While today's populisms are bound up with angry claims about justice and opposing narratives of a world gone wrong, this article suggests that populist movements themselves may satisfy the underlying unmet needs of democratic citizens, for community, power, and freedom. Ancient freedom remains a shadow attending modern liberty which the latter cannot shake.

Following a characteristically astute suggestion of the late Jacqueline de Romilly—that “the act of ruling [for the Greeks] was really considered as the perfect expression of both internal and external freedom, and, in fact, as

<sup>8</sup>For the neo-Roman conception, see Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Pettit, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and “A Third Concept of Liberty,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117 (2002): 237–68.

<sup>9</sup>For the claim that, with reference to power, liberal and neo-Roman views are the same, see Guido Parietti, *On the Concept of Power: Possibility, Necessity, Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press 2022), 152–70.

<sup>10</sup>For Harvey Yunis the political instruction of Pericles in the Funeral Oration “is the heart of the speech, the famous idealized portrait of Athens (37–41), which must be encountered first hand in order to be appreciated.” Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 80 (emphasis mine).

<sup>11</sup>Ryan Balot, *Courage in the Democratic Polis: Ideology and Critique in Classical Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25–46, offers the most sophisticated meditation on courage in the democratic polis, recovering from the amber of the Periclean speeches an “anatomy of democratic courage.” The below focuses on elements of democratic courage in the Thucydidean presentation.

a superior freedom"<sup>12</sup>—this article examines the psychology of democratic freedom and *archē* in Thucydides's pages with an eye to explaining de Romilly's contention. De Romilly makes this claim with reference to Thucydides's statement at 8.68.4 about the oligarchic revolution at Athens, where he remarks that it was difficult to deprive the Athenians of their internal freedom, given its longstanding character but also because the demos had long been accustomed to ruling over others.<sup>13</sup> As we will see, it is the experiential link between power and freedom that makes empire the perfect expression of internal as well as external freedom.

To untangle these dynamics further, we need to turn to Thucydides's thematic presentation of the Athenian character, and then to look at how the Athenians experienced their city's power, especially in the speech of the Athenian envoys at Sparta and the Periclean Funeral Oration. The Funeral Oration, through its linking of *erōs*, or erotic longing, to freedom and power, reveals key elements of a psychological portrait of ancient democracy. It is also the combination of *erōs* and power which connects the Funeral Speech of 431 BC—an idealized portrayal of the Athenian democracy as a vast personal force—to the launch of the Sicilian Expedition in 415 BC, the quintessential act of imperialism in the *History*. Taken together, these episodes reveal the interrelationship between feeling powerful, feeling free, and feeling able to satisfy one's desires. The conclusion suggests how this account of ancient freedom can help us to reconceptualize the populist energies of our moment by examining the ways crowds amplify the individual's experience of power.

### The Ways of the Athenians

To approach democracy in the *History* requires a discussion of the ways of the Athenians, for the Athenians prove representative of the democratic possibility itself.<sup>14</sup> At various places, Thucydides, his Athenians, or others discuss the Athenian character as well as the establishment, consolidation, and

<sup>12</sup>Jacqueline de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, trans. Phillip Thody (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 79–80.

<sup>13</sup>Steven Forde, "Thucydides on the Causes of Athenian Imperialism," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 2 (1986): 442, quotes de Romilly to similar effect, but does not make this quotation his theme. This article is indebted to Forde's discussion but has a narrower focus. See also Kurt Raaflaub, *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece*; and "Democracy, Power, and Imperialism in Fifth-Century Athens," in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, ed. J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach, and Josiah Ober (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 103–46. Raaflaub's chapter emphasizes ideology more than psychology.

<sup>14</sup>Athens, of course, is famous as the first democracy. For democracy outside of Athens, see Eric Robinson, *Democracy beyond Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge

growth of the empire. Thematically, it is the growth of Athenian power that leads to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. Athenian power, for its part, is bound up not only with what we today call hard power,<sup>15</sup> but also with the immaterial advantages flowing from the Athenian character, from the dispositions and capabilities of the Athenians.<sup>16</sup> As Timothy J. Galpin notes, “the acquisition of the empire may best be explained by the character of the Athenian people.”<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the *History*, the Athenians are styled bold, confident, and desirous of acquisition. Thucydides stresses, however, that they were not always daring, not before the deposition of their tyrants or the establishment of the democracy (1.17). According to Thucydides, it was the defense of their freedom against the Persians that revolutionized the Athenian character. Indeed, the reader observes a similar transformation of the Syracusan character over the course of the *History*'s sixth and seventh books, as the democratic Syracusans progressively defend their freedom against the Athenians. The Athenians and Syracusans become *homoiotropoi*, “alike in their ways,” which corroborates the claim that Thucydides's portrait of “Athenianness” is linked to democracy itself (8.96.5).

During a debate at Sparta in 431 BC, a Corinthian embassy compares and contrasts the ways (*tropoi*) of Athens and Sparta in a series of antitheses—a psychological profile of the principal cities and their characteristic citizens. This account of the Athenian character is thematically picked up by the later Periclean Funeral Oration.<sup>18</sup> For their part, the Corinthians say that

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University Press, 2011). On cities in the *History* as representative of their regimes, see Jaffe, “The Regime (*Politeia*) in Thucydides.”

<sup>15</sup>On the material constituents of Athenian power, see June W. Allison, *Power and Preparedness in Thucydides* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); on war materials, see Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); on money, see Lisa Kallet-Marx, *Money, Expense, and Naval Power in Thucydides' "History" 1–5.24* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and Lisa Kallet, *Money and the Corrosion of Power in Thucydides: The Sicilian Expedition and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup>The growth of the Athenian empire is a central Thucydidean theme, as even cursory readings of the prefatory Archaeology (1.1–23) and later Pentecontaetia (1.89–118) confirm. At 1.23.6, Thucydides ascribes the outbreak of war to Athenian power.

<sup>17</sup>Timothy J. Galpin, “The Democratic Roots of Athenian Imperialism in the Fifth Century B.C.,” *Classical Journal* 79, no. 2 (1983–1984): 108.

<sup>18</sup>For a comprehensive interpretation of this speech and the claim that it represents a Thucydidean introduction to the ideal typical characters of the Athenians and Spartans, see Jaffe, *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War*, 59–76. On Thucydides's uses of collectives—the Athenians, the Syracusans, etc.—see Maurice Pope, “Thucydides and Democracy,” *Historia* 37, no. 3 (1988): 277–82. Robert D. Luginbill, *Thucydides on*

the Athenians forever embrace danger, running risks in their pursuit of acquisition (1.70.4 and 1.70.8). In daring beyond their power and running risks beyond their judgment, they are full of hope (1.70.3). The Corinthians consistently emphasize Athenian hope (*elpis*; cf. 1.70.3 and 1.70.7). According to the Corinthians, if the Athenians fail in an enterprise, the lack is filled up with fresh hope (1.70.7). Here, hope appears as the engine of risky acquisition. The word “daring” (*tolma*) also attends the Athenians in Thucydides’s pages.<sup>19</sup> The Athenians, however, are not moved by groundless reliance upon the uncertain future but by the justifiably high opinion that they have of themselves, which they can prove in deed. The Athenians evince a confidence and pride in their virtue, in their power, in their capacity.

The verb “to acquire” (*ktasthai*) is also frequently used of the Athenians. Indeed, they term their empire “the things they have acquired” (cf. 1.70.4, 1.70.7, 1.70.8, and 1.73.1). Pericles will use similar formulations in his Funeral Oration and Final Speech (cf. 2.36.2, 2.41.2, and 2.62.3). Athens, then, is a hopeful, acquisitive power, with the empire the product of its many acquisitions—jewels won not simply by material might, by the Athenian fleet, but also by the skill of its sailors, its constant practice of warfare, and the hopes of its citizens. This hopefulness, then, grounded in a justified confidence, is what throws the Athenians into the future and comprises a constituent of their daring and resilience.

So how did the Athenians become hopeful or confident, the disposition driving their acquisitiveness? The key moment is when they became nautical (*nautikoi egenonto*), the product of Themistoclean innovation in the shadow of the Persian invasion (1.18.2). It was confidence born of Salamis, then, which completed a character made possible by the establishment of the democracy at Athens.<sup>20</sup> The collective victory in the defense of their freedom activated Athenian hope by placing a confirming seal upon it, for the city’s virtue had been gloriously proved in deed. Confidence in this newfound power, conjoined with a natural pride in the city’s achievement, would soon generate a newfound hopefulness about what else such power might accomplish. And here we observe the psychological seeds of the later empire, rooted in the

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*War and National Character* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999), 173–88, furnishes a useful meditation of the Syracusan *tropos*.

<sup>19</sup>On the programmatic character of daring in the *History*, see Steven Forde, “Thucydides on the Causes of Athenian Imperialism,” 436–38; and Forde, *The Ambition to Rule: Alcibiades and the Politics of Imperialism in Thucydides* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University press, 1989), 17–40.

<sup>20</sup>See Herodotus’s comment about how the establishment of the democracy at Athens remarkably unified the private and public interests of the Athenians. Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.78, 389.

Athenian experience of their power. This experience is explicitly the subject of the speech of the Athenian envoys at Sparta and the Periclean Funeral Oration, to which we now turn.

### The Speech of the Athenian Envoys at Sparta

In 432 BC, an Athenian embassy at Sparta advances the original articulation of an argument about nature and necessity that recurs throughout the *History*, usually in the mouths of Athenian spokesmen. Importantly, these are not Sophistic claims about politics, authorial impositions by a “realist” Thucydides, but instead depictions, if artistically purified ones, of what these envoys (and many Athenians) had come to believe about politics. Thucydides discloses the imperial Athenian self-conception for his readers, which requires that they vicariously inhabit the Athenian perspective. With regard to the speech, its rhetorical intention is to deter Sparta through a display of Athenian power, while the Corinthians seek to foment a wider war (1.72.1). Athenian power, specifically the Athenian *archē*, is the theme of the speech.

Concerning the accusations of the Peloponnesians, the Athenians say that they wish to demonstrate that their city holds its empire reasonably and that Athens is worthy of renown (1.73.1). Although the Athenians speak before a hostile audience, their account of their empire reveals a pride in their power. The speech propounds a conception of honor as bound up with power. Attending to the logic of the envoys’ claims generates the position that to honor properly means to gauge relative strength accurately. A parallel argument appears in the Funeral Oration. Here, power is worthy of respect because it is the ability to do things in the world. Consequently, stressing the remarkable things that the Athenians have done in the past communicates their ability to do similarly remarkable things in the future. In this way and others, the Athenians display their power to slow the Peloponnesian march toward war.

While propounding a vision of virtue or excellence as power, stripped of other considerations, the embassy offers an account of Athenian action during the Persian Wars. At Salamis, the envoys say, Athens furnished the three most useful things: the most intelligent leadership (i.e., Themistocles), the ships, and an indomitable fighting spirit (1.74.1). And here, in the Athenian self-presentation, the Athenians of the earlier generation ran every risk against the Persian invaders, saving not only themselves but all Hellas in the process (1.74.3). This zeal—or fighting spirit—was common among the Athenians and is most important for our interest in democratic psychology.

The historical answer is that Themistocles convinced the Athenians to resist the Persian yoke against all odds, partly through his interpretation of the Delphic oracle: the navy was the prophesied wooden wall and Salamis the

“isle divine,” which heralded victory.<sup>21</sup> Yet these latter-day Athenian envoys do not say this, do not suggest that their fathers were heartened by divine favor, but merely that the Athenians of old believed themselves worthy to abandon their city, to ruin their property, and to embark on their ships to fight (1.74.1).

These latter-day Athenians ascribe to virtue what the older generation believed to be bound up with the divine. Crucially, the envoys’ assessment of Athenian “worth” is not here distinct from an assessment of Athenian virtue, which is not distinct from Athenian power. The Athenians at Salamis believed themselves capable of beating back the might of Persia and of preserving their freedom—again, partly because of an oracle—but triumph at Salamis gave the Athenians a taste of what Steven Forde has aptly called “the enormous potential of purely human power. . . a power standing on its own bereft of its traditional supports, terrestrial or otherwise.”<sup>22</sup> As befits the confidence of victors, the Athenians began to ascribe victory at Salamis to their virtue alone.

One of the characteristic intoxications of power is the belief in its sufficiency to achieve desirable outcomes. Victory at Salamis, then, represents the seed of the later empire as well as of Athenian hubris. The allegation that Athens is a tyrant city, an arresting expression first appearing in the Corinthian speech before the Peloponnesian League, is made several times throughout the *History* (1.122.3, 1.124.3). Democratic leaders, Pericles and Cleon, for example, even refer to the Athenians as tyrannical (cf. 2.63.2 and 3.37.2), which implies, through the association of the tyrant with the democracy, that power can corrupt, and, what is more, that such corruption is rooted in the psychology of the demos.<sup>23</sup>

The Athenian envoys at Sparta stress that it would have been shameful for the Athenians to become slaves to the Persians. By the light of their argument about honor following power, men who deserve freedom must be able to prove their worthiness for it in a fight against those intent on depriving them of it. To extend the logic, those “worthy” of empire must prove their superiority by the fact of their rule. Again, a parallel argument appears in the Funeral Oration. An existing state of affairs reflects the balance of virtue or power: what is—or what can be accomplished—is what is merited

<sup>21</sup>Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.140–43, 515–17.

<sup>22</sup>Forde, “Thucydides on the Causes of Athenian Imperialism,” 437.

<sup>23</sup>On the arresting trope of the imperial/tyrant city, see Christopher Tuplin, “Imperial Tyranny: Some Reflections on a Classical Greek Political Metaphor,” *History of Political Thought* 6, no. 1 (1985): 348–75; Virginia Hunter, “Athens Tyrannis: A New Approach to Thucydides,” *Classical Journal* 69 (1973–1974): 120–26; for the demos as a domestic tyrant, see Lisa Kallet, “*Demos Tyrannos*: Wealth, Power, and Economic Patronage,” in *Popular Tyranny: Sovereignty and Its Discontents in Ancient Greece*, ed. Kathryn A. Morgan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 117–53.



or deserved. Here, virtue is effectual, synonymous with power, ability, or capacity.

It is power, then, that allows one to defeat one's enemies and to bend fortune in one's favor—or such is the typical conceit of the powerful. This proud position also derogates chance, for it is power that smoothly generates outcomes. Power moreover intoxicates, inflaming desire by nourishing the hopes that feed it. To borrow language from Plato's *Republic*, Periclean Athens is a fevered city.<sup>24</sup> The Periclean presentation of the relationship between freedom and power, especially in the Funeral Oration, orbits the demos's experience of its power. And here, Thucydides invites us, his posthumous readers, to become members of the Athenian crowd and hearers of the speech.

### The Funeral Oration of Pericles

The Periclean Funeral Oration offers an idealized portrait of Athens as a vast personal force, a city so terrifically powerful because of the collected virtues of the Athenians themselves. The extent to which the speech represents a mirror of democratic Athens, a piece of rhetorical flattery, or some combination is disputed.<sup>25</sup> Yet even if the speech is flattery, it is nonetheless revelatory of those feelings of elevation, pleasure, and freedom that the ancient Athenian experienced as a member of the demos. Virtue, power, and honor are again in the foreground. In Thucydides's assessment, Pericles deftly enhanced or deflated the confidence of the demos through his persuasive speech so as to meet the exigencies of any given situation (2.65.9). In the Funeral Oration, Pericles even suggests that the Athenians should judge happiness to be freedom and freedom to be courage, presumably because courage defends and secures that freedom which comprises the greatest part of happiness (2.43.4). Crucial for our purposes, the Periclean Funeral Oration has a courage-making purpose. It is intended to inspire the Athenians to emulate the courage of those who died in defense of the city, and who "became good men" through their sacrifice (2.35.1).

The setting is a public funeral in 431 BC, in which Pericles offers a speech over the first dead of the Peloponnesian War to the full citizen levy as well as to foreigners and metics. We can infer from the text that there are only a few war dead.<sup>26</sup> Instead of praising them, however, Pericles praises the

<sup>24</sup>Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 372e–374b.

<sup>25</sup>On the Funeral Oration as a genre, see Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); and John Ziolkowski, *Thucydides and the Tradition of Funeral Speeches at Athens* (Salem, NH: Ayer, 1985). On the didactic function of epideictic rhetoric, see Ryan Balot, "Epideictic Rhetoric and the Foundations of Politics," *Polis* 30, no. 2 (2013): 274–304.

<sup>26</sup>In the narrative prior to the Funeral Oration, the only mention of Athenian casualties occurs at 2.19.2 and 2.22.2. This does not mean that there were not more,

living. He praises the democratic city, the city for which the dead sacrificed themselves. But he also stresses that the city itself is its citizens, past, present, and future. Consequently, it represents a monument to their achievements, whether good or evil (2.41.4). There is something interestingly circular about the praise. But whatever its truth, Pericles is generating a communal experience for the Athenians, and for us as vicarious members of the Athenian throng.<sup>27</sup> To use a proverbial expression nonproverbially, Pericles is working the crowd.

After prefatory remarks, Pericles foregrounds honor and power. He praises the ancestors, while suggesting that the present generation is worthy of the greatest honor because the city stands at the peak of power. The ancestors are to be honored for having handed Athens and Attica down free, a consequence of their virtue (2.36.1). The generation of the fathers deserves more honor for establishing the empire (2.36.2). And, although he does not quite say it, Pericles suggests the present generation deserves the greatest praise, for it has made the city most self-sufficient in war and peace (2.36.3). The Periclean presentation here is highly democratic: virtue is common across generations, while the present generation represents a tremendous crescendo, corresponding to the city's imperial peak (cf. 1.1 and 1.18.3). The intention here is to enhance the demos's perception of its *kratos*—*dēmokratia* in the literal sense—to fire every citizen's sense of Athenian power.<sup>28</sup>

There is also a noticeable correspondence between the Funeral Oration and the speech of the Athenian envoys at Sparta. Pericles describes an ascent to the present, the moment of maximum power, where honor follows power.<sup>29</sup> The maintenance and handing down of a free city—freedom from external rule—is praiseworthy. Worthy of more is empire, that is, rule over others. Worth more than these is that enhancement of power which makes the city self-sufficient (2.36.1–3). One implication is that the greater growth of Athenian power would bring with it more glory—a sentiment in tension with the

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merely that casualties are not emphasized, probably intentionally—for the dying of the plague follows hard upon this Periclean speech.

<sup>27</sup>In Plato's *Menexenus*, Socrates offers a humorous comment revelatory of the effect of the Funeral Oration upon its Athenian hearers. "They even praise us, the living, such that I for my part, Menexenus, feel altogether elevated by their praises. Each time, as I listen and am charmed, I am altered, believing that I've become at that moment greater, more dignified, more beautiful." *Plato's "Menexenus" and Pericles' Funeral Oration: Empire and the Ends of Politics*, trans. Susan Collins and Devin Stauffer (Newburyport, MA: Hackett, 1999), 234b–c.

<sup>28</sup>See Josiah Ober, "The Original Meaning of 'Democracy': Capacity to Do Things, Not Majority Rule," *Constellations* 15, no. 1 (2008): 3–9.

<sup>29</sup>A rejection of this view may be implied by Thucydides's reference to Marathon just before the Funeral Oration at 2.34.5, which hints that some praise is greater than others and some past honors worth more than present ones, precisely because the danger was greater or the cause nobler. (See also Pericles at 1.144.3.)

conservatism of the Periclean strategy. Moreover, if power emanates from the common virtues of democratic citizens—and not from those of exceptional individuals—then praising Athenian power is identical with praising the democratic virtues that generated it. And this is precisely what Pericles does in the speech.<sup>30</sup>

For Aristotle, the city itself is the self-sufficient partnership, embracing every dependent one.<sup>31</sup> By the light of the Funeral Oration, it is not every city but only the imperial city that is truly self-sufficient, precisely because it is allegedly free of the dangers posed by other cities. Power alone allows Athens to slip the leash of the constraints binding weaker cities.<sup>32</sup> According to this logic, the most powerful city is freest by dint of this fact, while the best regime is an empire, the bigger the better.<sup>33</sup> The most powerful empire, then, the Athenian empire, ipso facto manifests the most virtue, for power is aggregate citizen virtue. In its imperial prime, Athens is free because of its power, the same power that allows it to rule over others. Athens is a vast personal force, and its freedom and power are coextensive.<sup>34</sup>

As befits a war-time speech, the Funeral Oration's emphasis is on courage, risk taking, and the readiness to embrace danger (cf. 2.39.1, 2.39.4, 2.40.3, 2.41.4, 2.43.4). Several lines from the speech of Diodotus in the Mytilenean debate of book 3, which develops a sophisticated psychology of risk taking, would seem to explain the courage-making purpose of Periclean rhetoric.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup>And yet if deeds are more important than speeches (and Thucydides's speech more important than that of his characters), the narrative itself has furnished the reader one Athenian exemplar from each of the generations praised: Theseus of the ancestors, who unified Attica (2.15.2); Themistocles of the fathers, who beat back the might of Persia (1.138.3); and Pericles of the present generation, who safeguarded and grew the city's power (2.65.5). Whereas the Thucydidean presentation highlights individual virtue, the Periclean one stresses common virtues.

<sup>31</sup>Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1252a1–6.

<sup>32</sup>In contrast to the Funeral Oration, Pericles suggests in his final speech that necessity binds the Athenians to their empire, which it would be dangerous to abandon (2.63.2).

<sup>33</sup>Clifford Orwin argues that the Funeral Oration portrays Athens and its empire as a freely chosen project, unextenuated by necessity. This is in contrast with the speech of the Athenian envoys at Sparta—to say nothing of Pericles's final speech—which claims that the establishment of the empire is the result of necessity, of fear, honor, and interest (cf. 1.75.3 and 1.76.2). Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 15–29.

<sup>34</sup>Raaflaub terms this absolute freedom and links it to Athenian power but explores the connection ideologically (*Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece*, 181–93).

<sup>35</sup>Given the speech's sophistication, especially its claims about psychology, commentators have plausibly suggested Diodotus may speak for Thucydides. See, for example, David Bolotin, "Thucydides," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 22; Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides*, 162; de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian*

In a different rhetorical context, Diodotus maintains that the specter of death will not deter the subject cities of the empire from revolt. The risk of death is also at stake on the battlefield, while the Funeral Oration itself commemorates those who fell defending the city. No human being, Diodotus says, enters into danger thinking he will fail, which means that he will pay the ultimate price and die (cf. 3.45.1 and 1.141.5).<sup>36</sup>

Crucially, Diodotus also diagnoses *erōs*, erotic longing, as a motivating force in causing human beings to err. *Erōs* appears in the Funeral Oration but also in Thucydides's account of the launch of the Sicilian Expedition.<sup>37</sup> These references link the episodes thematically to one another, and both to the speech of Diodotus. Pericles and Diodotus are the only characters in the *History* who make strong claims about *erōs* in politics, while Thucydides himself uses the term to describe Athenian longing to rule Sicily. *Erōs*, says Diodotus, begets hope. Erotic longing generates the hope that the desired object is obtainable, which lures human beings into danger. *Erōs* engineers the plan, Diodotus says, with hope furnishing comforting assurances that the way to the satisfaction of desire will be smooth (3.45.4–5).

Diodotus's arguments are about human nature and not democracy per se. Nonetheless, his claims would seem to explain the psychological dynamics at play in the Funeral Oration. Pericles's emphasis on the power of Athens and the virtues of its citizens bolsters Athenian confidence. Indeed, his presumptive goal is to hearten his Athenians on the eve of a great war. Now, confidence, assuming it is not boasting, involves an assessment of power or capacity. The confident man believes he will succeed because his power (or capacity or virtue) is sufficient to the task. Confidence nourishes hope by inoculating human beings against the specter of failure. By focusing so unremittingly on Athenian power, Pericles stokes Athenian desire, while power and desire together fortify confidence, persuading the Athenians that their desires can be satisfied.

Pericles is establishing a virtuous, courage-making cycle by manipulating the reciprocal relationship between power and desire. The Athenians are courageous because they long for good things existing above and beyond the ranks of the men stoutly resisting them. Confidence, then, drives the Athenians through the ranks of their enemies toward the objects of their hopes. They are simultaneously drawn onward by the objects of desire and propelled forward by faith in their own power. And with the demos's fears

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*Imperialism*, 160; H. P. Stahl, *Man's Place in History* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2002), 119; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 231.

<sup>36</sup>Hermocrates makes a parallel point at 4.59.2.

<sup>37</sup>S. Sara Monoson, "Citizen as Erastes: Erotic Imagery and the Idea of Reciprocity in the Periclean Funeral Oration," *Political Theory* 22, no. 2 (1994): 253–76, argues that the use of the metaphor suggests that the relationship between city and individual is strongly reciprocal.

assuaged by the warming spectacle of Athenian power, the people's desires for profit and glory blossom and grow, while these longings further reinforce their hopes that the objects of their desires can be achieved. And here we, the *History's* readers, are shown how and why the intoxicating experience of democratic power can radiate outward in democratic imperialism, but also how and why the democratic city risks becoming a *turannis polis*.<sup>38</sup>

In perhaps the most famous line of the oration, Pericles exhorts his Athenians to become lovers of their city by daily gazing upon its great power (2.43.1).<sup>39</sup> But the power Pericles exhorts them to love is a power testifying to the ways of Athenians themselves. He thus invites the Athenians to love themselves by loving the city that they have built and rebuilt together. Here, self-love and patriotism converge seamlessly—a harmony revelatory of the glue of democratic patriotism. At the same time, contemplation of the city's power—Pericles presumably intends the spectacle of the Acropolis—extends every Athenian's view of the city's reach and of his own individual reach.<sup>40</sup> Periclean rhetoric then primes the Athenians for imperial expansion, for the irrepressible pursuit of the objects of desire. Yet expansion and daring are forbidden by his war strategy itself (cf. 1.144.1 with 2.65.7). This is the destructive tension at the heart of the Periclean policy, which Alcibiades later explodes with his exhortations to unlimited empire (cf. 6.15.2, 6.18.3–4, 6.18.7). For Alcibiades proves the child of Periclean rhetoric but not of his guardian's sober war strategy.

If the Funeral Oration is the *History's* greatest speech, then the Sicilian Expedition is its greatest deed (cf. 7.87.5). The Funeral Oration better commemorates the vast Athenian dead of the Sicilian Expedition than the small number of fallen cavalrymen it actually memorializes, since that massive armada is the offspring of the psychological dynamics Pericles stokes in the Funeral Oration and in his final speech. The fame promised by the Funeral Oration demands great tasks and vast expenditures of power and not the prudent maintenance of the existing empire. Despite their separation by

<sup>38</sup>See note 23 above.

<sup>39</sup>The Greek is famously ambiguous as to whether Pericles is encouraging the Athenians to love the city or its power. On Periclean claims about Athenian power, compare 2.41.4 with 2.62.2 and 2.64.3. As Yunis astutely notes, "Thucydides has succeeded in creating an uncanny mixture of political instruction and mass persuasion"; also, "Pericles' funeral oration represents formal epideictic rhetoric used for mass education in a marked political setting" (*Taming Democracy*, 81 and 82). My own emphasis is on the speech's courage-making purpose as it relates to this "marked political setting."

<sup>40</sup>The Acropolis furnishes visual reassurance in the face of fear. There is also a parallel between the spectacle of the Acropolis as a sign of Athenian power and the spectacular sight of the Athenian armada ready to sail for Sicily, which Thucydides describes as assuaging the people's fear (6.31.1). And yet, in the prefatory Archaeology, Thucydides stresses that one cannot—indeed should not—assess the power of a city by visual signs alone (cf. 1.10.2).

many years and pages, Thucydides programmatically connects the *erōs* of the Funeral Oration to the Athenian *erōs* for Sicily.<sup>41</sup>

### Launching the Sicilian Expedition

The Athenian motivation for sailing for Sicily is referenced in four places. In each, the language of desire appears.<sup>42</sup> In the first, Thucydides deploys the term he uses in book 1 to describe the truest ground for the Peloponnesian War. The truest reason for the Sicilian Expedition, he says, is the Athenian longing to rule all Sicily (*ephiemenoi . . . tēs pasēs arxai*, 6.6.1).<sup>43</sup> In the second reference, which echoes the first, the Athenian general Nicias remarks that the Athenians long for Sicily (*ephiesthai*, 6.8.4). In the third, the Syracusan Hermocrates notes that despite the Athenian pretext—aid to Segesta—the Athenians really desire Sicily (*Sikelias epithumia*, 6.33.2). Lastly, the campaign itself, Thucydides writes in his own voice, is the product of *erōs*, which befell the Athenians, who conceived a love for the good things of Sicily (*kai erōs enepese tois pasin omoiōs eklepsai*, 6.24.3).<sup>44</sup> Thucydides makes clear that various groups within Athens desired different things in Sicily—the old, those in the prime of life, and the people. Nonetheless, all fell in love with the expedition and were heartened by the spectacle of the city's power, which, everyone believed, would assure the way to the satisfaction of their disparate desires (cf. 6.24.3 and 6.31.1). Just as the defense of freedom can powerfully unify democratic citizens against a common enemy, so too can the promise of imperial conquest harmonize the private goods of citizens.

<sup>41</sup>See Pericles's remark at 1.144.3 about the greatest glory arising from the greatest dangers. The references to *erōs* further corroborate this claim. On the level of the narrative itself the Funeral Oration brings all of the inhabitants of Athens together, citizen and foreigner alike, just as the launch of the later armada brings everyone down to the Piraeus (cf. 2.34 with 6.30).

<sup>42</sup>Zacharias Rogkoti, "Thucydides and Herodotus: Aspects of their Intertextual Relationship," in *Brill's Companion to Thucydides*, ed. A. Rengakos and A. Tsakmakis (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 57–86, explores the similarities between the Persian invasion of Greece as presented by Herodotus and the Athenian invasion of Sicily, partly by focusing on the repetition of the terms for Athenian desire. W. R. Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 158–209, helpfully focuses on the mythical and tragic evocations. See also Kallet, *Money and the Corrosion of Power*, 85–120.

<sup>43</sup>On the Sicilian expedition as a new beginning, see Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 300; H. R. Rawlings III, *The Structure of Thucydides' "History"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) offers the most ambitious claims about parallels between books 1 and 6.

<sup>44</sup>When the Athenians form their original alliance with Corcyra, the location of the city along the coasting route to Italy and Sicily is mentioned by Thucydides as a motive for the alliance (1.44.3). Nicias also notes that the young Athenians are sick in their erotic desire (*duserōtas*) for the expedition (6.13.1)

The Sicilian Expedition of Thucydides's sixth and seventh books reveals the fruit of Pericles's beautification of Athenian power. The terrific release of human energy made possible by the Athenian democracy is the product of the regime's ability to unify its citizens but also to stoke hope and power reciprocally, unlocking the acquisitive desires of citizens, which then radiate outward in democratic imperialism. This intoxicating experience of power is moreover coextensive with the feeling of freedom, with the ability to act without constrain or to overcome obstacles in the pursuit of desire.

### Freedom and Empire

For Thucydides, democracy is largely defined by its psychological profile. In Greek literature, the word *hubris* has obvious pejorative connotations. While some have interpreted the *History* as the tragedy of Athens, less attention has been paid to the collective psychology of Athenian confidence or to Thucydides's portrayal of the *demos*'s experiences of its freedom and power. And while confidence can become *hubris*, the same tendency that nourishes immorality and overreaching is also the living source of democratic adaptive learning and military success. The argument developed here, then, shares something of Ober's assertion of a "democratic advantage," albeit one which stresses its double-edged character.<sup>45</sup>

In treating the oligarchic revolution at Athens of 411 BC, in the eighth book of the *History*, Thucydides writes that "it was a difficult thing for the Athenian *demos* after almost one hundred years since the removal of the tyrants to lose its freedom, not only having not been subjects in this period but also having become accustomed for half of it to ruling others" (8.68.4). As de Romilly suggests with reference to this passage, ruling over others is the perfect form of freedom because it represents the highest manifestation of the democracy's ability to achieve the objects of desire and to ward off evil.<sup>46</sup> Power alone confers freedom, with empire a monument to its greatest expression. It was the recurrent feeling of their own collective power, which involved the palpable experience of a range of possibilities open to citizens, that made the Athenians feel free.<sup>47</sup>

### Vast Personal Forces

In representative democracies, the living relationship between power and freedom has been lost, severed by the expedient of representation and the

<sup>45</sup>Josiah Ober, "Thucydides on Athens' Democratic Advantage in the Archidamian War," in *War, Democracy and Culture in Classical Athens*, ed. David M. Pritchard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 65–87.

<sup>46</sup>De Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, 79–80.

<sup>47</sup>For an innovative, new study exploring power as the representation of possibility, see Parietti, *On the Concept of Power*.

apparatus of the impersonal state. Even if their rights are protected, modern citizens frequently feel powerless, lonely, depressed, and unable to control their lives. And here we arrive at the question of how contemporary mass politics may offer citizens a pleasurable taste of the ancient citizen's more regular experience of collective power. In joining a crowd or movement today, citizens experience an amplification of their small power to act, for what is a crowd if not a personal force? This experience gives the individual a feeling of the freedom either to resist or overcome the forces constraining his life.

When we belong to something greater than ourselves, which enfolds us and channels our interests, our concerns, our excitement, and even our anger, we are transported out of ourselves, thrown out of the ambit of our private lives, out of our troubles and concerns, and into the wider world, which appears in altered light. More seems possible, especially if we work together, precisely because of the feeling of collective possibility. For many, this experience generates a charge of energy and a surge of hopefulness. For some, it is a drug. Here, we might reflect on the carnivalesque attitude of the January 6, 2021, rioters, or on the spectacle of Canada's 2022 Freedom Convoy. And yet it must be conceded that it is frightening—in no way energizing—to be swept up in a gathering which thinks and feels differently than we do. This is profoundly alienating. It is the reverse experience of the one described. We feel small and powerless in the face of the looming force of the hostile crowd.

The intimate relationship between democratic freedom, power, and collective action is famously thematized by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville depicts the dangers of "individualism" in language similar to that of T. S. Eliot. Indeed, Eliot's expression, "vast impersonal forces," has been used with reference to Tocquevillean individualism.<sup>48</sup> Here, the powerless individual withdraws from public or common life into the ambit of his private existence.<sup>49</sup> In abandoning politics and associational life, he loses the ennobling (and empowering) experience of acting with his fellows for common aims. For Tocqueville, modern citizens pool their small power through associations, which are a surrogate for the active political life of the ancient citizen, which is why he praises the bustling associations of the New England township.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup>See, for example, the introduction by Mansfield and Winthrop to their translation of *Democracy in America*, where they write, "Americans suffer, consequently, from 'individualism,' a lamentable condition—which Tocqueville was the first to depict—in which democratic men and women are thrown on their own resources and consequently come to feel themselves *overpowered by impersonal, external forces*." And later in the same introduction, "the self-isolation induced by the belief that an individual by himself can do nothing within a mass of people *ruled by vast social forces*." Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. H. C. Mansfield and D. Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), xviii and xxxviii (emphasis mine).

<sup>49</sup>See de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482–84.

<sup>50</sup>On associations, see *ibid.*, 489–92; on the New England township, see 63–65.



On his view, the flourishing of associative life, of democratic freedom, which often takes place in the private sphere, is profoundly threatened by administrative centralization, by soft despotism, and, we can add, by the corporations unleashed by the industrialization of the late nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup> For Tocqueville, individualism represents the most likely response to the feelings of powerlessness we experience in the face of the impersonal forces threatening our freedom. Tocqueville diagnoses individualism as leading to quiescence, soft despotism, and the tyranny of the majority.<sup>52</sup> One wonders, however, if individualism might not also nourish violent reactions against this felt powerlessness, and if today's populist appeal might not be bound up with the reactive, angry desire for power and control.

With regard to these "feelings," certain qualifications are necessary. First, we can better distinguish between the communitarian argument and the freedom-power argument. One might maintain, for example, that human beings naturally long for power and freedom. In this case, money, say—the currency of modern desire—might well satisfy this longing without any admixture of communitarianism. The populist crowd would then represent one means—for the nonwealthy, say—of achieving a pleasurable taste of power and freedom. But if the communitarian impulse is primary, then the embrace of the crowd satisfies a stifled communitarian hunger, which is unmet by liberal democracy. Here, we might argue that liberal democracy requires the supplement of religion, civil associations, intermediary institutions, and so forth to bulwark the regime. This framing raises the question of the necessary background conditions required to alleviate these feelings, assuming they are persistent and not satisfied by liberalism itself. One way of tackling this hard question is to problematize the "stuff" of communitarianism itself, to inquire what role community (and collective behavior) plays in the arc of human life and what needs it really satisfies, whether for power, freedom, meaning, or belonging.

For Aristotle, human beings are political animals who find their flourishing in explorations of justice and advantage as members of a polis, a city, a personal force (1253a2). If Aristotle is right, then direct democracy remains a shadow haunting the footsteps of representative democracy, and not only because the doctrine of popular sovereignty lurks behind the technical expedient of representation.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, one question the Thucydidean account of

<sup>51</sup>On the importance of combined action in Tocqueville's republicanism with reference to our neo-Athenian theme, see Alexander Jech, "What Has Athens to Do with Rome? Tocqueville and the New Republicanism," *American Political Thought* 6, no. 4 (2017): 550–73.

<sup>52</sup>Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 661–65.

<sup>53</sup>For this formulation, see Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47 (1999): 3; Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 101, also claims that populism "is the permanent shadow of representative politics."

ancient democracy invites us to ask is whether contemporary populism is nourished by the resurgence of the political impulse in the Aristotelian sense, the revenge of a stifled and untutored communitarianism—a communitarianism bound up with power and freedom.<sup>54</sup>

Today's left- and right-wing populists articulate opposing narratives about what has gone awry in contemporary life. For those on the right, the state is often the problem, with government and its regulations inhibiting freedom. For the traditional left, it is the marketplace which circumscribes freedom or leads to profoundly problematic inequalities in its exercise. For the cultural or identarian left, intersecting structures of domination oppress human beings—whether capitalism, white supremacy, the patriarchy, or heteronormativity. My aim is not to adjudicate these claims about justice, but instead to point out the ubiquity of structural arguments about impersonal forces curtailing freedom and agency. This points toward an underlying commonality: a pervasive feeling of powerlessness, which appears to be the living root of the many disparate diagnoses as to why modern peoples feel so unfree.

The longing for freedom and control explains something about populism. What are being described here are felt needs. Perhaps they cannot be satisfied on the plane of fact. And yet politics is largely about felt needs, and so we ignore them at our peril. We are constantly told we are free or live in free societies, but we do not really feel like it. Here, the more manageable accounts of Greek history and theory may be of use to us, precisely because the human passions are so systematically explored by classical authors.<sup>55</sup> It is worth raising the question whether the contemporary resurgence of populist energies today taps into a groundswell of powerlessness in the face of Eliot's "vast impersonal forces" and to the attendant hunger for the experience of power, for the lost feeling of freedom itself.

<sup>54</sup>No one has argued more powerfully (or consistently) that ancient democracy can provide a model for modern democracy than Josiah Ober. For a recent attempt to look at the virtues of democracy as distinct from those of liberalism, see *Demopolis: Democracy before Liberalism in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>55</sup>For an exploration of the similarities and differences between Greek conceptions of the passions and our own with an emphasis on the cognitive, see David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).