

## Thucydides on the Fate of the Democratic Empire\*

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*This paper investigates Thucydides' instruction on the problematic concept of the democratic empire. Although the term "democratic empire," that is, the combination of democracy and empire, is often justified in the modern context, it appeared to the ancient to be very problematic because of its inherent contradiction. The paper examines how Thucydides dealt with the Athenian Empire as an exemplary case of democratic empire. More specifically it examines how Thucydides related the rise and fall of the Athenian Empire to its characteristics of democratic empire. Many scholars attributed the collapse of the Empire to the excessive desire of the demos. I do not deny this traditional reading. Yet I argue that the Athenian demos was fully aware of what it was doing: it preferred democracy to empire when it had to choose either. By reading closely Thucydides I try to show how the Athenian demos constantly maintained democracy even when its preference for democracy could endanger its empire. Based on this reading of Thucydides, I conclude that Thucydides instructs both democratic citizens and imperialist elites that they cannot maintain democratic empire in the long run: they should choose democracy or imperialism at a certain point.*

**Keywords:** *Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, Athenian Empire, Athenian Democracy, Democratic Empire, Pericles, Mytilenean Debates, Sicilian Expedition*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term "democratic empire" seems to contain two incompatible words at least in normative sense: "democracy," which connotes praiseworthy goal of domestic politics, and "empire," which connotes morally despicable attitude toward outside. However, the negative aspect of empire was often justified in the name of progress and even liberty in the modern era.<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century, moreover, imperial position embraced ideal of democracy actively and vice versa. For example, the United States in the cold war period proudly upheld the position of the democratic empire by playing the role of the hegemon of democratic states and claiming to be their protector from communist-authoritarian power.<sup>2</sup> In the post-

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<sup>1</sup> For example, liberal and progressive thinkers such as Bentham and both the Mills justify the empire as a legitimate form of governance in maintaining modern civilization. However, it is an exaggeration to say that all 19th-century liberalists were straightforward imperialists. For the different tenors of relating liberalism and imperialism, see Sullivan (1983). For a broader critique of modern liberalism's attraction of imperialism, see Mehta (1999). For connection of empire and liberty in the context of republicanism see Armitage (2002).

<sup>2</sup> During the Cold War, the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union was often compared to that between Athens and Sparta. In the post-Cold War period, the study of Athenian imperialism

Cold War world, the United States took another form of democratic empire by intervening in the domestic affairs of other sovereign states in the name of “exporting democracy” or “humanitarian intervention.” After the 9/11 catastrophe, the Bush administration applied the term “empire” outspokenly to American foreign policies, with the pretext of nation-building in “failed” states.<sup>3</sup>

The contemporary acceptance of the democratic empire is based on the assumption that the oppressive and invasive elements inherent in the term “empire” can be condoned only if the empire pursues democratic causes in either domestic or foreign policies. Yet, the more fundamental assumption is that it is possible for a state to adopt imperial policies in foreign affairs, while concurrently maintaining a liberal-democratic regime within domestic affairs. In contrast, the ancient Greeks — especially the intellectuals — never believed the way a city-state behaved toward other city-states could be separated from the way the pertinent city-state behaved toward its own citizens. For example, Plato related foreign policies not only to the ethos of the state but also to the formation of individual souls. He argued that the specific foreign policies of a city-state affect everything within its jurisdiction down to the internal lives of citizens. The opposite was also true: individual soul-formation had an irresistible influence on the major direction of foreign policies (ex. Plato’s *Republic*, Books 2-4). While Plato revealed the relationship between individual souls and national character in a philosophical way, Thucydides recorded it by writing the history of the Peloponnesian War. Specifically, as we will see later, Thucydides argued that the Athenian Empire declined due to the excessive desires of the *demos* — that is, the soul-corruption of Athenian citizens (Thuc.2.65).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Thucydides draws our attention to the “forgotten” relationship between states’ foreign policies and individual soul-formation. How exactly was the latter related to the fate of the democratic empire? From a historical perspective, how was it possible that the democratic desires of the Athenian Empire were well moderated at the beginning but later unbridled, to the ruin of the empire? Many classical readers find the answers in Thucydides’ apparent statement that the leaders following Pericles were not able to keep in check unbridled democratic desires (Connor 1984; Cornford 1969; Euben 1986; Forde 1989; Orwin 1984; Orwin 1994). This explanation, however, does not offer the exact mechanism by which the Athenian Empire was connected to its democratic *demos*. Moreover, I argue that focusing merely on the absence of Pericles does not guide us properly to Thucydides’ deeper and eternal instruction, because then the only solution to the fate of the democratic empire seems to be to wait for another virtuous leader.

Contrary to traditional readings, my reading of Thucydides is based on the assumption that the Athenian *demos* was well aware of the fate of the democratic empire. Thus, this paper will examine how the Athenians dealt with their problematic empire. The first point of the paper is that the doomed fate of the democratic empire was anticipated, even at the beginning, primarily because it conceived two apparently irreconcilable principles. For a while, the inherent contradiction of the democratic empire was concealed, justified, and even

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was rekindled. As a seminal work on Athenian Empire see de Romilly (1963). For recent works on the subject see Bruell (1974: 11-17); Forde (1986: 433-48; 1989); Lebow (2001).

<sup>3</sup> For the theoretical critics of imperial nature of the US foreign policies especially under the influence of terrorism, see Hardt and Negri (2004); Elshtain (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the article I cite Thucydides according to the traditional division of book and chapter. All quotations are from Warner’s translation.

praised by eloquent politicians, but never resolved. The rhetoric of the Athenian Empire worked at the beginning; however, as the Peloponnesian War waged on, the contradiction imploded to the effect of ruining the empire.

The second point of the paper is related to reinterpreting Thucydides' "eternal instruction" in light of a reevaluation of the demos' role in the democratic empire. I do not completely deny the traditional reading, whereby the Athenian demos contributed to the downfall of its own empire; unlike the traditional reading, however, I emphasize more importantly that it did so consciously and even purposively. When the contradiction inherent in its "democratic empire" was no longer concealed and the demos faced a choice between democracy and empire, it displayed a clear preference for democracy. For example, when the demos chose Diodotus' policy rather than Cleon's in the Mytilenean debates, and when it recalled it was Alcibiades who was the most capable commander-in-chief in the Sicilian expedition, it applied a simple criterion: How democratic did they seem to be, when they spoke to the public? The demos did not care for the virtues by which the leaders may have contributed to the common good of the empire; instead, the Athenian demos paid close attention to the rhetoricians' perceived democratic loyalty. The persistent and conscious purpose of the demos was to maintain democracy, even when it was aware that its preference for democracy could severely undermine its empire. If this point is correct, the Athenian demos could be reevaluated: it may be blamed for irresponsibility, but not for irrationality.

In the following paper, I will examine critical junctures of Thucydides' *History* — namely, Archaeology, Pentecontaetia, Pericles' funeral oration, the Mytilenean debates, and the Sicilian expedition — to support the two aforementioned points. Let us begin to explain how the idea of a "democratic empire" came to light at the dawn of the Athenian Empire.

## 2. THE "SHOTGUN MARRIAGE" OF EMPIRE AND DEMOCRACY: EMERGENCE OF THE DEMOCRATIC EMPIRE IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND PENTECONTAETIA

In Archaeology and Pentecontaetia, Thucydides demonstrates the unique way by which Athens combined empire and democracy. He first explains how wars in the land of the Greeks were gradually interconnected with the concept of freedom (*eleutheria*), which in turn related to empire (*arche*) (Balot 2001; 2004; Riley 2000). To understand the process by which the Athenian democratic empire was born, it is useful to explore the Athenians' specific conceptions of freedom and empire.<sup>5</sup>

First of all, it is notable that the Greeks developed the concept of freedom in response to the threat of Persia. In the mainland Greece of the sixth century BCE, wars normally resulted from rivalries between neighboring communities over disputed borders. Such wars did not usually result in the destruction of cities or the enslavement of their populations (Raaflaub 1994: 127). The military subjection of and subsequent rule over entire communities was

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<sup>5</sup> According to Balot, the Greek understood freedom by way of three central contrasts: 1. Freedom from external tyranny, empire: The Greeks on the coast of Asia Minor experienced "slavery." They had long been subject to the authority and tributary demands of Eastern monarchs (Thuc.6.82). 2. The Greeks contrasted freedom with the ordinary Persians' "enslavement" to their king and master. 3. Freedom was contrasted with the weakness and effeminacy of the Persians, since the Greeks considered freedom a "masculine" attribute. In summary, freedom required a certain element of ruling (Balot 2001). See also Hansen (1996), Raaflaub (2004).

virtually unknown; at most, early attempts at maintaining control over other city-states, based on personal power and relationships, were undertaken by some tyrants. Thus, the problem of communal independence was not yet a political concern (Connor 1984).<sup>6</sup> It was not until the Persian Wars and their aftermaths that the Greeks saw their confrontation with external forces in terms of a struggle for freedom and against servitude.

In the course of the Persian Wars, Athenians discerned the connection between internal freedom from tyrants and external freedom from Persian domination. Herodotus had a good sense of it; just before the battle at Marathon, he reports that the Athenian Miltiades had invoked the tyrannicides of the past (the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton), in order to encourage the polemarch, who was going to fight against Persia: “it is now in your hands, Callimachus, either to enslave Athens, or to make her free and to leave behind you for all future generations a monument more glorious than even Harmodius and Aristogeiton left” (Hdt.6.109). Miltiades here links explicitly internal freedom from tyranny to external freedom from Persian domination. Now that internal freedom — supposedly achieved by Harmodius and Aristogeiton — was easily identified with democracy, the Athenians took their struggle against Persia as not only a protection of freedom from external threat but also as the protection of democracy.

The Athenians’ awareness of the connection of war and democracy was increased by observing the events of Asia Minor, where the failure of revolt from Persia resulted in servitude to both the Persians and tyrants. Persian rule in Asia Minor was exercised indirectly through tyrants who were members of the local aristocracy, and the Athenians were able to see clearly that the maintenance of their democracy required an adamant resistance to being ruled and, preferably, the capability to rule others (Balot 2004). In addition, the Athenians felt a self-imposed responsibility for the freedom of the whole of Greek society, and they eventually claimed that their selflessness and moral superiority entitled them not only to political and military leadership (*hegemon*), but to rule (*arche*) over other Greeks.

It was true that after the Persian Wars, the Athenian leadership was largely granted by other Greeks. However, it was critically distinctive to become a hegemon and an empire (*arche*),<sup>7</sup> because the latter was allowed to subjugate equals. The *Pentacontaetia* describes how Athens gradually transformed itself from an alliance (*symmachia*) into an empire (*arche*). Around 450 BCE, warfare with the Persians ceased and the league had fulfilled its original goal of liberating and protecting the Greeks from the Persian Empire. Since then, however, the process of transforming the Athenian position in the Greek world had begun. After the threat of the Persians ended in the middle of the century, the same generation of Athenians had become accustomed to their city’s hegemon and imperial role; one could observe that Athens now used force not only against those who refused to join, but against

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<sup>6</sup> For the pervasiveness of war in the Greek world, see Plato (*Laws* 626a2-5) where he says: “What most men call ‘peace’ is really only a fiction (*onoma*), and in cold fact all states are by nature (*kata physin*) fighting an undeclared war against every other state.” (cf. Xenophon also says: “War is like agriculture as being among those most necessary human activities that are carried out in the open air” (*Memorabilia* 2.1.6). I cite classical authors according to traditional convention by using Stephanus pages for Plato and Aristotle, and division of books, chapters and lines for other authors.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek term *arche* (rule, empire) represents the first extensive and long-term rule of one city-state (*polis*) over other city-states (*poleis*), despite the modern connotations of these terms (Raaflaub 1996: 274-5).

other city-states intent on leaving the league. Thucydides branded the subjugation of Naxos (in the mid-460s BCE) as the first “enslavement” of a formerly autonomous city-state.<sup>8</sup>

What should be noted here is that the dominance of Athens became so marked that it was recognized, and finally also designated, as being rule (*arche*) or even oppression (*turannis*) rather than hegemony (i.e., leadership). Athens appeared to be a tyrant-city (*polis turannos*) in the Greek world. “Tyranny” was originally a term used only within a city-state or community to designate the extraordinary power of an individual over his fellow citizens, who were otherwise entitled to enjoy equality before laws (*isonomia*) and equal say (*isegoria*). Just like a tyrant within a *polis*, Athens ignored the initial spirit of equality and autonomy among its allies; hence, Athens was considered a tyrant-city and its former allies its slaves (*douloi*), which prompted widespread resentment and dissatisfaction (Thuc. 1.99.1–3). Appearing to be a tyrant-city, Athens faced numerous problems pertaining to focusing on Athenian methods and policies in running an empire. For the first time in the Greek world, the necessity emerged of justifying its domination and of developing rhetoric for power and rule over others.<sup>9</sup> They needed to be reassured that it was deserved, necessary, and good.

On the surface, an empire for freedom as an ideal or a democratic empire in reality appeared to be natural products in achieving internal and external freedom at the same time. However, we should remember that inasmuch as any empire has been defined in terms of tyrannical rule — and democracy in terms of freedom from tyranny — the combination of these two opposing principles is revealingly unnatural. Perhaps non-Athenians were in a better position to perceive the inherent contradiction of a “democratic empire,” because they forfeited their freedom by being subject to this empire. Herodotus already had raised the warning that Athens’ internal health and external strength would transform the leading Greek city into a quasi-tyrannical imperial power comparable to Persia itself (Balot 2004). However, it took some time for the Athenians to be awakened to the contradiction embedded in the concept of a democratic empire; Pericles, an excellent Athenian rhetorician, contributed to the duration of Athenians’ blindness to that contradiction. In the next section, we will see how Pericles enchanted the Athenians, so that they believed that their democracy matched well with their empire, defying the prevalent accusation that the Athenian Empire was a tyrant-city.

### 3. DEMOCRATIC EMPIRE ENCHANTED: THE SPEECH OF ATHENIAN ENVOYS AT THE SPARTAN CONGRESS AND IN PERICLES’ FUNERAL ORATION

At the Spartan Congress, the Athenian envoys first justified their empire by resorting to the necessity or compulsion (*anagke*) thesis, that they were “compelled” to take the empire. The compulsion thesis was supplemented by the famous Athenian thesis that explained the

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<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Russell Meiggs describes that of Thasos as the first unambiguous sign of tyranny (Meiggs 1972: 86). About Naxos see Thuc.1.98 where Thucydides uses the term enslavement (*edoulothe*). With regard to the enslavement of Thasos, see Thuc.1.100.

<sup>9</sup> The rhetoric of the fourth century BCE panegyric speeches suggests that the Athenian demos felt a deep and constant need for legitimization of the empire. The Athenians discussed the forms, goals, and consequences of their exercises of such rule (de Romilly 1963: 60ff; Meyer 1967: 147ff). The Mytilenean debates offer a good example (Thuc.3.36–48), while Euphemus’ speech in Camarina illustrates the need to justify imperial rule abroad (Thuc.5.84).

three well-known motives of the empire: fear, honor, and profit (Thuc.1.75).<sup>10</sup> When Sparta was no longer willing to stand with the Athenians, Athens was compelled to overtake it, for fear of Persian invasions. Once the empire was taken up, the Athenian envoys insisted, they had to hold on to their rule in order to preserve their own safety and freedom, because of the hatred of their subjects and Sparta's hostility. As a result, Athens now feared not only the Persians but also its allies (Thuc.1.75). Fear was the first motivation of the Athenian Empire; however, the Athenian envoys continued with the compulsion thesis by arguing that honor and profit as well as fear were equally irresistible and extenuating compulsions on which their empire rested (Forde 1995: 147).<sup>11</sup> According to this thesis, there was no other choice for the Athenians (Thuc.1.76).<sup>12</sup> In other words, the Athenians appealed to universal human nature in justifying the acquisition of the empire (Forde 1986: 433; Bruell 1974: 16).

In addition to the appeal to universal human nature, the envoys argued that the Athenians *deserved* the empire because of their own particular merits. The Athenians had shown historical merits in fighting against the Persians, while they sacrificed themselves by abandoning the city and acting for the common good of the entire Greek populace. Although the envoys could not hide the oppressive character of the empire by referring to the doctrine of the natural right of the stronger to dominate the weaker (Thuc.1.76.2; 77.3; cf. 4.61.5; 5.89, 105),<sup>13</sup> the envoys' final claim was that the rule of the Athenian Empire was in the best interest of its subjects. It was not really deception, to say that the Athenian Empire had positive aspects that bestowed benefits upon the ruled. In fact, Athenian rule was less oppressive in comparison to Spartan or, needless to say, to Persian rule. In addition, the conditions prevailing in the Aegean Sea required governance, since the Sea was controlled by pirates and stasis raged; wars, raids, and the conquest of cities were common. Above all, the Athenian Empire allowed the freest constitution to subject cities and allies. According to the envoys, the Athenian Empire gave the guarantee of both external and internal freedom to cities under its rule. Thus, the envoys' speech attempted to refute the long-standing accusation that Athens was a tyrant-city.

It is notable that the Athenian justification of the empire cited not only material necessities — such as profits and protection from foreign threats — but loftier elements, such as honor, the Athenians' merits as a ruler, and even the interests of the ruled.<sup>14</sup> They were

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<sup>10</sup> A lot of debates on the three distinctive motives of empire, especially on honor (ex. Meiggs 1972). Compare Thucydides' three motives with Hobbes' three well-known instincts in the state of nature: distrust, competition, and interest. Johnson demonstrates the nuanced difference of the two authors in spite of superficial similarity (Johnson 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Forde notes that the fear here is not objective but rather subjective, which implies that human beings are not automations lacking autonomy (cf. Ahrens Dorf 1997: 243).

<sup>12</sup> Compare the previous list of motives (fear, honor, self-interest: Thuc.1.75) with this new order here (honor, fear, and self-interest: Thuc.1.76). Later, in Pericles' last speech, only fear and honor appear as the primary concerns (Thuc.2.60–64). See De Romilly (1963: 251–54) and Finley (1987). For the aspect of economic self-interest, see Meiggs (1972: 255–72); Finley (1978); Finley (1982: 41–61); Lisa Kallet-Marx (1993).

<sup>13</sup> For the doctrine's relationship with Sophistic thought, see Guthrie (1971: 55ff); Kerferd (1981: chap.10). However, the view that the strongest member of a group or *symmarchy* is entitled to leadership was older (e.g., *Hdt.* 7.160.2, 161.3; *Iliad* 2.576–80).

<sup>14</sup> For the concept of necessity see Ostwald (1988) and for three elements of human things see Slomp (1990).

able to justify the empire not only in terms of a sheer realist thesis, but also according to non-realist elements. Moreover, the speech was given by anonymous envoys, which implies that most Athenians at that time had convinced themselves that they deserved the empire, due to both nature (*phusis*) and laws (*nomoi*). How was it possible that most Athenians dared to justify their empire with respect to both nature and laws? In other words, how was it possible that they were blind to the apparent contradiction that non-Athenians may have recognized easily? We find the answer in Pericles' funeral oration, which succeeded in enchanting most Athenians to view their empire as being contradiction-free. Pericles' funeral oration substantiated how the Athenians saw the perfect harmony between democracy and empire.

First, Pericles' oration displays the rudimentary relationship between the habits of the Athenians and the activities inherent in their political institutions. Athenians were unique in the Greek world; their uniqueness did not rest on their material wealth or monuments, but on peculiar qualities of habit and intellect. Specifically, Pericles emphasizes that the unity of deliberation and action was made possible by Athens' settled habits, democratic political institutions, and national character. Thus, Pericles asserts that the power of Athens was based on the Athenian national character, namely Athenian democracy (Thuc.2.37). According to Pericles, Athenian democracy provided each citizen with the opportunity to participate in public life, debate, and deliberation, so that it produced a unity of will among its citizens that was far stronger than the Spartan one, which originated from blind obedience to the state. Pericles contrasts the bravery of the Spartans that resulted from painful discipline with the self-conscious patriotism of Athenian citizens, who were able to live as they pleased and yet be just as ready to act bravely when they must (Thuc.2.39). In this way, Pericles employed beautiful words to praise democracy.

When he talks about their empire, however, Pericles appears to be frank and even blunt in saying that the empire was inevitably tyrannical. By noting that losing the empire would make its people unsafe (Thuc.2.64), Pericles acknowledges that the empire was inevitably tyrannical. Those who have regarded Pericles as a leader of moderation and prudence may be surprised by this outspoken statement of imperialism; however, it is notable that even the moderate Pericles could not conceal the inherently tyrannical nature of the empire. What he could do was enchant Athenians into believing that the democratic empire countered the tyrannical effect inherent in an empire, by virtue of its democratic character.

The method that Pericles chose for enchanting the Athenians was overstating the democratic virtues of the Athenians. First, Pericles depends roughly on the Aristotelian thesis, that the good of individuals is closely connected to the good of their city. Pericles praises the Athenians for their active political life; thus, Pericles urges that the good of each individual citizen depends on the city, and in turn the Athenian city depends on the existence of the empire. Yet, Pericles makes a more specific point in relating freedom of Athenian political life to the practice of empire. He says: "You should not believe that you are struggling only over the one evil of slavery instead of freedom. You are also struggling over the loss of empire and the danger of the hatred that you have incurred from your rule. From this empire it is no longer possible for you to stand away ... for you now hold the empire as a tyranny, which seems to be unjust to have taken, but is now dangerous to give up" (Thuc.2.63). Pericles here makes an explicit causal linkage between freedom and empire (Raaflaub 2004: 184-190), and succeeds in convincing Athenians that their freedom was dependent on Athens' status as an imperial city.

If Pericles succeeded in enchanting the whole Athenians — in other words, if the democratic empire appeared to Athenians to be well justified — then can we say that

Pericles' rhetoric of democratic empire was indispensable for Athenian freedom? An imperialist may well answer "yes." However, the Athenian demos may have stopped to think: "For whom should the democratic empire be maintained?" As the war went on, the Athenian demos experienced a number of crucial occasions, because of which it may have reconsidered the prevalent ideology of the democratic empire. Through these occasions, it began to awaken from Pericles' enchantment. The most conspicuous test occurred in dealing with the Mytilenean revolt, which I will examine in the next section.

#### 4. DISENCHANTMENT WITH THE DEMOCRATIC EMPIRE IN THE MYTILENEAN DEBATES

"After Pericles' death," Thucydides writes, the leadership of Athens fell into the hands of men who chose to "occupy themselves with private cabals for leadership of the commons, by which they not only paralyzed operations in the field, but also first introduced civil discord at home" (Thuc.2.65). Noting Thucydides' evaluation of Pericles, many scholars attribute the downfall of the Athenian Empire to the lack of political leadership that Pericles showed in convincing the Athenians that the private interests of the Athenian demos was perfectly harmonious with the flourishing of the empire. True, Pericles succeeded in making Athenian demos "virtuous,"<sup>15</sup> at least in terms of making them believe that the common good of the empire superseded private interests. As seen above, Pericles was able to enchant Athenian demos for a while with his eloquent words and exemplary deeds, so that it was blind to the contradiction inherent in the concept and term of "democratic empire." However, Pericles did not remove the root of the disease of the democratic empire, which finally led it to self-destruction. That disease did not immediately rise to the surface; instead, rather fortunately or unfortunately, the Athenian demos tended to become disenchanted from the Periclean spell of the democratic empire. Let me elaborate on how the Athenian demos acted differently after this disenchantment. The first test occurred in the way the Athenian demos dealt with the revolt of Mytilene.

Just after Athens was smitten by the plague, the city of Mytilene revolted from the Athenian Empire (Thuc.3.2-5). The revolt was enormously distressing to Athenians, because the city had remained autonomous and enjoyed equality with Athens. After placing the city of Mytilene under siege, the Athenians decided to kill the entire male population and sell the women and children into slavery. The Athenians dispatched their admiral, Paches, to carry out this order.

It is important to note that the Athenians "felt a kind of repentance in themselves and began to consider what a great and cruel decree it was that not the authors only but the whole city should be destroyed" (Thuc.3.36; cf. Orwin 1984: 485-94). This repentance implies that the Athenians were already waking from Pericles' spell; had they been fully enchanted by Pericles' ideology *vis-à-vis* the democratic empire, they would not have had even a second thought about Mytilene's fate. The demos would have followed whatever policy Pericles had considered most compatible with the benefit of the empire, since no one knew the exact results of foreign policies. Had the Athenian demos been under Pericles' leadership, it would not have cared about the precarious outcome, but rather about the unity of the empire. Above

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<sup>15</sup> In the *Gorgias*, however, Socrates refutes the view that the demos of Pericles' age was virtuous in any sense (Plat. 515e-516d).



all, it was unusual for the Athenians even to reconsider the first decision they had made in the assembly. Even more remarkable was that the Athenian demos offered humanitarian reasons for rethinking its initial slaughter/slavery strategy, notwithstanding the expected danger that the Athenian demos may have become disunited on the matter of foreign policy.

Again, had there been leaders like Pericles, Athens would have remained uniform and maintained its empire status longer; however, it would not have flourished forever, because it likely would have eventually declined for other reasons. No empire lasts forever, after all. The collapse of Athens was due to its internal schism, rather than external elements. Is this case more deplorable? The answer may differ according to perspectives; however, if we read closely the Mytilenean debates, one thing becomes clear: the Athenian demos was well aware that its split opinions on foreign policies undermined the common good of its empire, yet it showed an unequivocal preference for democracy over empire. In other words, it was not willing to sacrifice the cause of democracy to that of empire. Let me elaborate more on the demos' conscious decision on that preference, by looking closer at the famous Mytilenean debates.

Cleon's speech was basically designed to persuade Athenians to carry out the sentence that they had decided upon the previous day. Cleon opened his speech with the sarcastic observation that the democratic atmosphere in Athens did not allow people to face up to the reality of the empire. Cleon reiterated Pericles' earlier acknowledgement that the Athenian Empire was necessarily tyrannical to the ruled. What distinguished Cleon from Pericles was Cleon's outspoken point that democracy was responsible for the mismanagement of empire. In other words, Cleon was the first Athenian leader to admit that democracy was not compatible with empire; he complained that the Athenians had gone astray in foreign affairs, because they lived lives of "security and openness" in democratic Athens (Thuc.3.37).

More remarkably, Cleon's criticism of democracy was leveled not only against unarticulated foreign policies but also against the democratic way of life itself. In Cleon's mind, the failure of imperial foreign policies provided enough reason to condemn democracy as a whole. Cleon's primary concern was with the success of the empire. Remember that Pericles was also concerned about the successful foreign policies of the empire, but he emphasized that its success was supported only by praising the democratic way of life among the Athenian demos (Thuc.2.65). However, by putting the interest of the empire before the value of democracy, Cleon disregard the demos' preference — a preference that Pericles understood and exploited in his rhetoric of democratic empire.

In addition, while Pericles' version of Athenian imperialism celebrated the glory of Athens and her empire, Cleon's view of the Athenian Empire was characterized simply by its harshness towards its subjects and was guided by expediency and interest alone. Pericles was not ignorant to the brute realities of imperialism; nonetheless, he made efforts to beautify the Athenian Empire, as if there were something nobler than fear and profit within the empire. From this perspective, Pericles proudly declared that Athens "is an education to Greece" (Thuc.2.41). According to Cleon, however, even the obedience that Athens' allies paid was not due to a sense of friendship or goodwill, but rather because of Athens' brute force (Thuc.3.37). Even if that were true, Cleon did not understand the situation he faced, and as a result, he failed to satisfy the Athenian demos. Even worse, Cleon did not show any willingness to please the demos. Ironically, the Athenian demos wanted to hear even specious praises of democracy and its democratic way of life; it needed someone who could beautify its empire and thus make it worthy of its individual sacrifices. Although Cleon later attempted to ennoble Athenian foreign policy by appealing to punitive justice — that is to

say, that the Mytileneans should be punished because they had wronged the Athenians' trust — his amendment to the vulgarization of the Athenian Empire was “too little, too late” in convincing the Athenian demos. His reluctance to please the demos was the decisive reason why the majority of Athenian demos opposed Cleon in the end.

In contrast, Diodotus surely attempted to appease the demos. He opened his speech by expressing how he understood Athenian democracy. He was aware of speakers' reputations, so the perceived purity of his motives were more important than the substantive contents of his speeches to the demos. Trust in the motives of the political leaders would be crucial to the proper functioning of democracy, and Diodotus realized exactly that it was the Athenian demos' trust he had to gain, in order to be persuasive. Thus, he repeatedly emphasized that he had had sufficient loyalty to democratic institutions.

Yet, in following part of his speech, it becomes clear that Diodotus seemingly undermines the previous argumentation for his democratic loyalty, by stating that “he that gives the soundest advice is forced by lying to get himself believed” (Thuc.3.43). How did he dare to say that he may have told a lie to the demos, even while in front of them? If we look more closely at the specific context of Diodotus' speech, we can understand that this seemingly undemocratic statement was made because of Diodotus' rational calculation.<sup>16</sup> The apparent situation was that the Athenian demos had reassembled to reconsider its first decision of the previous day on the Mytilenean revolt, mainly because the decision seemed “savage” (Thuc.3.37-40). Perhaps the opinions of the demos had been divided, but only marginally. Following Cleon's speech, Diodotus spoke to represent those who opposed the “savage” decision; it was anticipated that he would argue that they needed a more lenient policy in dealing with the Mytileneans. So when Diodotus implies that he may lie to the demos, it was as if he were whispering to his existing supporters, “Don't be offended, even if my speech appears to be savage. That's just a lie for the purpose of convincing the previously pro-Cleon audience.”

Diodotus seems to be even-handed and fabricate his speech as if he were interested only in the expediency of the empire. Thus, he argues that the important thing is not what the Mytileneans deserve in terms of punishment — which was Cleon's focus — but rather what is in the interest of Athens. Furthermore, he rebuffs Cleon's point that justice and self-interest could be combined; he holds that these “can never possibly be found together in the same thing” (Thuc.3.47). Cleon's argument appears to be based at least partially on justice, whereas Diodotus excluded justice altogether from the treatment of the Mytilenean revolt. This part of Diodotus' speech may have disappointed the previous pro-Diodotus people, because it seemed to represent a more ruthless version of realism than Cleon's. Nonetheless, one may be reminded of Diodotus' excuse, that sometimes it is necessary to tell a lie for the sake of persuasion. Therefore, Diodotus' speech was different from what it appeared to be on the surface — taking the argument of expediency a step further by apparently rejecting all claims of justice, in order to gain the trust of the Athenian demos. In any case, Diodotus managed to put forward the argument for the preservation of the Mytilenean population, and appeal to the Athenians' sense of justice by saying that since the majority of Mytileneans had not committed a crime, it would be unjust for the Athenians to execute them (Thuc.3.47).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Relying on this statement Johnson argues that Diodotus does not believe in the realism that he argues for (Johnson 1993:138).

<sup>17</sup> Specifically, Diodotus argues that it is not in the Athenians' interest to kill all of them, oligarchs and democrats alike. Orwin, Bolotin and Bruell appreciate this view of Diodotus (Orwin 1994: 112-3;

Finally, Diodotus won the support of the assembly. Yet, one can hardly say that it was because his substantial arguments were superior to those of Cleon. Cleon's key claim was based on the theory of deterrence — that deterrence was a primary means of running an empire — whereas Diodotus' claim was with regards to appeasement, and that indiscriminate punishment would result in other desperate revolts. As international relations theorists may agree, both the theories are valid, at least in theory: the theories are warranted only by their practical application. Similarly, both Diodotus' and Cleon's claims were equally acceptable without knowing exactly the results of practical application of the theories. Thus, what affected significantly the decision of the Athenian demos were not the specific contents of the speeches, but its preexisting preference for democracy. Diodotus shows full trust of democratic institutions and never dismisses the demos' opinions. The seemingly awkward revelation of the possibility of deceiving the demos was a deliberate and calculated confession that he knew democratic power ruled in every sphere within the *polis*. The Athenian demos must have appreciated Diodotus' democratic bent; even if the demos was divided in its opinions, and sometimes made use of elites to refute its opponents, it would never tolerate elites' criticism of democracy as such. Diodotus observed the democratic principle of the Athenian Empire, whereas Cleon inadvertently overstepped those boundaries by criticizing the democratic way of life in front of the demos.

Therefore, Athenians' preference for Diodotus' policy proved that they consciously preferred democratic principles over imperial ones, were they forced to choose one. In the next section, we will see more clearly that the Athenian demos was determined to choose democracy rather than empire, whenever the two principles collided.

## 5. IMPLOSION OF THE DEMOCRATIC EMPIRE IN THE SICILIAN EXPEDITION

I argued in the previous sections that the fate of the democratic empire had already been anticipated, beginning with the earlier Athenian Empire, through the height of the Periclean empire, to splitting the empire during the treatment of the Mytilenean revolt. However, it is often argued that the Sicilian expedition was the decisive “moment of truth” that led to the abrupt decline of the Athenian Empire. I agree with the existing view that the Sicilian expedition was the watershed moment in the downfall of the Athenian Empire; however, I object, inasmuch as the problem was not in the decision *vis-à-vis* the expedition itself, but in the way the expedition was managed. The Sicilian expedition failed primarily because the demos recalled the most capable general Alcibiades and instead appointed the too-inactive Nicias (Ahrendsdorf 1997: 256). I argue that the Athenian demos made the decision consciously because it made the maintenance of democracy a priority, even before making guaranteed gains through imperial expedition. Thus, the failure of the Sicilian expedition was an exemplary case of the Athenians consciously choosing democracy over imperialism. Let us now review, from the beginning, how the disenchanted Athenian demos dealt with the Sicilian expedition.

In the spring of the 17th year of the war, an assembly was held in which it was decided to send 60 ships to Sicily, under the absolute command of Alcibiades, Nicias, and Lamachus (Thuc.6.8). The Athenians were to aid the people of Eggesta against the Selinuntians, to reestablish the Leontines if they had time, and to order the affairs of Sicily in accordance

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Bolotin 1987: 27-32; Bruell 1974: 16-17; cf. Connor 1984: 84-91).

with Athenian interests. Five days later, the Athenians again assembled to consider how to ready the fleet quickly and to discuss further those things the generals would need for the expedition. Nicias came forward, willing to speak against the Sicilian expedition, which he believed was an attempt, under minute and superficial pretenses, to conquer all of Sicily (Thuc.6.8).

Certainly, Nicias realized that the Athenians could not be restrained, at this point, from “wanting more” (*pleonexia*). Thus, he attempted to show the Athenians that it was the wrong time to attempt a conquest and that Sicily would not be easy to conquer. In his speech, he warned the Athenians that by undertaking the Sicilian expedition, they would leave many enemies behind them and make many more enemies, and that the treaty they had with the Spartans (Thuc.5.23-24) was a firm one (Thuc.6.10). In addition, he said that the Athenians still had problems with their present empire, including a revolt from Chalcidea in Thrace and doubtful obedience from others. With regard to Sicily, it would be difficult for the Athenians to retain obedience, because it was far from Athens; if Athens failed the conquest, it would lose forever the means of attempting another conquest. Nicias warned the Athenians about launching a new expedition or conquest before concluding their war with the Spartans. The policy that Nicias advocated was a very cautious one: He did not want to risk anything at this point in the war, or at least not any new ventures. In a certain sense, Nicias tried to take Pericles’ tack, not simply in terms of following Pericles’ advice to avoid two front lines of battle, but in trying to enchant the Athenian demos by assimilating private interests with the common good of the empire. He failed, however, because the Athenian demos by that time was different from what had been under Pericles’ leadership. They were now disenchanted, especially by the experience of the Mytilenean debate.

Compared to the pious and cautious Nicias, Alcibiades embodied the excessive desires of the Athenians. Alcibiades had been perpetually demanding more for both himself and his city. Scornfully rejecting Nicias’ “do nothing” policy, Alcibiades claimed in his speech that if Athens failed to undertake fresh conquests in Sicily, it would “wear itself out and its skill in everything would decay” (Thuc.6.18). The principle on which Alcibiades based his call to invade Sicily was qualitatively different from that upon which the Athenian Empire was justified previously. This new undertaking had not been explained in its own terms, but as an answer to the demands of a purely external necessity, i.e. the excessive desires of the Athenians.

The traditional reading of the Sicilian expedition is that it was an exemplar of misconduct within a democratic institution, where the irrational motivation of the Athenian demos matched the excessive desires of Alcibiades. Thucydides earlier admonished such desires, saying that the ultimate cause of Athens’ defeat was the breakdown of its democratic institution, the “private cabals for leadership of the commons” caused by the growth of factionalism, “which not only paralyzed operations in the field, but also first introduced civil discord at home” (Thuc.2.65). He also points out in the same section that Athenians did not “succumb till they fell victims of their own intestine disorders” (Thuc.2.65). By underscoring these passages, the dominant reading of the Sicilian expedition concludes that these disorders caused Athenians to abandon Pericles’ policy of prudent restraint and to mismanage the Sicilian campaign by recalling Alcibiades and putting Nicias in charge of it; these matters, it is popularly believed, led to Athens’ eventual defeat (Doyle 1991: 181; Garst 1989: 18; Bagby 1994: 139-40; cf. Palmer 1982: 38-41).

In contrast with the dominant reading, my interpretation is that the failure of the Sicilian expedition was not due to the excessive desires of the demos but to the demos’ fear of

tyranny. Let me elaborate more on this point.

It should be noted that the Athenians came very close to achieving victory in Sicily, and yet were defeated only after Alcibiades was expelled from Athens and managed to convince the Spartans to come to the aid of Syracuse (Thuc.6.15. cf. Thuc.8.63-98; cf. Ahrendorf 1997: 256-7). In addition, it was pious Nicias that brought total disaster to the Athenians. Nicias decided to delay their withdrawal from Sicily because of omen from the gods, an eclipse of the moon.<sup>18</sup> This decision allowed the enemies to destroy the entire Athenian army (Thuc.7.50). Thus, one can conclude that the concurrence of the Athenian demos' desire and Alcibiades' ambition may have worked toward success — at least, avoided total disaster — in the Sicilian expedition, had the demos not removed Alcibiades from his position.

This conclusion can be supported by Thucydides' comments, which were inserted between Nicias' first speech and the following Alcibiades' speech. In this place, one would rightly expect a criticism of both Alcibiades' and Athens' ambitions. Instead, Thucydides here implies that the cause of Alcibiades' recall — and therefore Athens' downfall — was not ambition, passion, or expense, but the suspicion aroused in the demos *vis-à-vis* his unconventional lifestyle. Thucydides does not take advantage of a perfect opportunity to give an oral lesson on the errors of Alcibiades' ambition and the excessive desires of the Athenian demos; instead, he implies that Alcibiades' ambition and the expansion of the empire were both sustainable (Riley 2000: 143). Notably, it was not the abandonment of virtue, but, at least in this case, the retention of democratic virtue that accused Alcibiades. It was again the demos' taste for democracy that removed Alcibiades from the position of commander and consequently brought about the downfall of the empire. The demos' fear of tyranny was understandable, as they had observed opportunities for influence, power, and enrichment that had been given to elite leaders. Such fear was further enhanced by the ever more ruthlessly demonstrated ambition and thirst for power demonstrated by some younger members of the elite, like Alcibiades (Connor 1984: 164-65; 179-80; 177).

If we look at the story of how the Athenian demos recalled Alcibiades, Thucydides' implication becomes clearer. Thucydides describes how, during preparations for sailing, the Hermae were defaced — a sacrilege, in the minds of the Athenian demos (Thuc.6.27-9). Somehow, Alcibiades was blamed for this offense. He asked for a trial immediately to purge himself of suspicion; he declared that if he were found to be guilty, he would be put to death. However, his enemies were too afraid of the trial, given that the army was still under Alcibiades' influence. They decided — and Alcibiades agreed — to permit him to sail with the army; they would deal with the charges later. After that, the inextricable fear again occupied the demos and prompted it to remove Alcibiades from the command at the first possible moment. That was an irrational decision, with respect to the success of the Sicilian expedition; however, one must consider whether it was still irrational with respect to the interests of the demos.

Thucydides again presents good criteria by which we can assess the demos' rationality. When addressing the recall of Alcibiades, Thucydides inserts a strange yet famous digression, wherein he tells the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton and their involvement in the Athenian tyrannicide. One would expect here that Thucydides would use the story to accuse Alcibiades of tyranny and criticize Athens' erotic, imperial designs (Seager 1967; Stewart 1965). However, he does not. Instead, Thucydides mentions that the demos misunderstood

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<sup>18</sup> For the close relationship between Athenian imperialism and piety issue, see Strauss (1964: 229); Orwin (1994: ch.4); Grene (1965: 83-92).

the most famous event in its own history, the Athenian tyrannicide. It was not at all the tyrant, Hippias, but his brother, Hipparchus, who was killed (cf. Thuc.1.20). Thucydides implies here that the Athenian demos' misplaced piety resulted in Alcibiades' undue recall (Palmer 1982: 103-24). If there were problems with the Athenian demos, it would not have been so much its excessive ambitions as its preference for democracy — an adamant attachment to piety, in this case.

Thus, it seems that the fate of a democratic empire was doomed not because of its excessive ambition, but because of its misplaced attention to the virtue of democracy. This ambivalent and ambiguous tendency of democracy was obvious, even in the early stages of the Athenian Empire. However, we must note that the Athenian demos was never equivocal in maintaining the priority of democracy through the rise and fall of the empire. In the Sicilian expedition, the Athenian demos paid unexpected attention to piety in dealing with Alcibiades, for no other reason than they doubted Alcibiades' loyalty to democracy.<sup>19</sup> Even if the demos knew that Alcibiades was the most capable general for the Sicilian expedition, its preference for democratic principles canceled out any expediency claim of empire. In short, the failure of the Sicilian expedition was due to the demos' adamant adherence to democracy. The demos was fully aware of what it was doing.

#### 6. CONCLUSION: FATE OF DEMOCRATIC EMPIRE AND THUCYDIDES' INSTRUCTION

This paper does not deny the existing view that the Athenian Empire perished because of the existence of the demos. True, the Athenian demos was responsible for the demise of the Athenian Empire. However, it was not simply because it could not restrain excessive desires; rather, it was because it maintained democratic dispositions that characterized it as having multifarious, sometimes ambivalent, and unpredictable desires. Remember that Plato in *The Republic* describes the demos as having two discernible characteristics: It is easily inclined to desire excessively but, at the same time, it jumps from one desire to another. One day, it would seek money; on another, they pursued even philosophy (Plat. Republic Book 8, esp.561c-d). Likewise, the Athenian demos in the rise and fall of the Athenian Empire showed multifarious desires. It desired to be free, to be prosperous, and even to be honored by others. However, the desires of the Athenian demos were never so excessive as to invite tyranny within. In other words, the Athenian demos remained persistently democratic, while resisting any sacrifice of democratic values.<sup>20</sup> Evidently the Athenian demos did not reconcile democratic principles with the expediency of empire.

This paper argues that the Athenian Empire perished because the Athenian demos adhered to its democratic character persistently. Again, democracy was responsible for the downfall of the empire and, to this extent, the fate of the democratic empire was anticipated. Was democracy culpable, because of its decisive contribution to the downfall of empire? Was the Athenian demos thus irrational in sacrificing the empire to democratic principles?

<sup>19</sup> As Connor points out, it is ironical that "Athens comes very much to resemble Melos, forced to rely on hope, chance, and speculation about the gods" (Connor 1984: 155).

<sup>20</sup> By "democratic" I mean literal democracy, rule of demos in the ancient context instead of normative goal of politics in the modern context. For the literal meaning of democracy in the ancient context see Ober (1989).

The Athenian demos accepted the idea of a democratic empire when it chose the most important democratic value, i.e., freedom (*eleutheria*), and it was willing to be enchanted by Pericles' ideology of the democratic empire, when its democratic values were praised in the name of democratic virtue. However, it was disenchanted no sooner than it saw superficial and minor conflicts between "democracy" and "empire." Finally, they disregarded the principle of empire when they saw even the slight possibility that the latter could undermine democratic principles, as shown in the case of Alcibiades' recall. With their defeat in the Peloponnesian War, the Athenian Empire disappeared; however, Athenian democracy lasted long afterward. Was the Athenian demos still irrational, then? One could say that the Athenian demos was running its empire irrationally. One could hardly say, however, that it was running its democracy irrationally.

Having said that, what are Thucydides' instructions *vis-à-vis* the democratic empire? We are left with what seem to be ambivalent messages for different audiences. To democrats, he left the instruction that they may have to give up their empire at some point, because a "democratic empire" is self-contradictory at its core. For instance, if American people intend an empire to survive, they must be ready to sacrifice democratic principles — but if that be the case, they could not claim to be any more democratic than the Athenian demos. At best, they may live under the rule of one man while being enchanted by the rhetoric of a democratic empire, as was the case with Pericles' empire. On the other hand, Thucydides leaves another instruction to democratic imperialists like top elites of American foreign policies. He implies that they should pay special attention to democratic virtues, as Pericles did. Democratic virtues are, at best, precarious, yet the elites should beautify their empire, making all efforts possible to justify their empire with rhetoric. This does not suggest that the top elites create propaganda to facilitate imperial foreign policies but rather that they provide democratic people with legitimate rhetoric that aligns imperial foreign policies with democratic lives. As soon as they neglect rhetorical justification of an empire and turn to bare realism, Thucydides would warn, the downfall of that empire draws near.

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