

Dissolving the *Demos*

The Destruction of Democracy as Destruction of the Political Community – or: How Democracy Dies in Silence

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Abstract

In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides describes the effects of the anti-democratic revolution of 411 BC on the Athenian people in detail. According to him, the well-targeted terrorism orchestrated by the oligarchic conspirators led to a complete disintegration of the political community: the Athenians lost all sense of security and trust in each other and were unable to act together. Therefore, it seems significant that Thucydides repeatedly characterises the coup of the Four Hundred as a *dissolution* (*katalysis*) of the *demos* rather than of democracy. This peculiar wording is used not only by Thucydides but also by other authors such as Lysias, Xenophon, or Aristotle; it refers to a specific concept

of democracy according to which the transformation of the democratic order did not take place on an abstract constitutional level. For the Athenians, the transformation of their political order meant the very concrete disintegration of their civic community as a politically organised body capable of acting together. Their experience of democratic voices being silenced in the face of anti-democratic discourse and action bears a striking resemblance to current democratic experiences.

Keywords: Thucydides; Xenophon; Athenian Democracy; *Demos*; Oligarchic Coups of the 5th Century BC; Political Community

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The poetic name for civil war [...] is *luē*, unbinding.
 In fact, *stasis* is a principle of dissolution
 (Loraux 2002, 95)

In 411 BC, Athens faced a serious crisis: the failure of the Sicilian expedition had led to demographic, economic, and military problems, prompting several members of the Delian League to revolt against Athens. In addition, the occupation of the garrison of Dekeleia by the Spartans and the financial support provided to Sparta by the Persians further weakened Athens' position. In this situation, leading members of the Athenian fleet stationed at the island of Samos launched a coup against democracy.

After having convinced the soldiers and oarsmen that Persia would support the Athenians if they abandoned democracy, they sent some delegates to Athens (Thuc. 8.48–49). There they called for a significant change to the current constitution – and the return of the highly controversial former *strategos* Alkibiades –, which led to outraged rejection by the Athenian *demos*. Peisandros, one of the conspirators, then used a clever strategy to silence his opponents (Thuc. 8.52.2f.): he asked each of them if they had any idea how Athens could be saved. As none of them could suggest an alternative way out of the current crisis, the people agreed to send ambassadors to the Persians to negotiate a treaty, accepting Peisandros' demand that the precondition for this would be the abolition of democracy. Simultaneously, Peisandros launched a well-orchestrated terror campaign by activating all the previously existing secret societies (*synomosiiai*: Thuc. 8.54.4) in Athens and calling on them to join forces in their efforts to take over the city.

Thucydides has described the irritation, uncertainty and fear that prevailed in Athens after these initial steps toward the overthrow of democracy had been taken in great detail. For the first time in its history, the democratic system had been called into question openly, and no one seemed to know how to react. In his account of the oligarchic coup against democracy, Thucydides mainly uses two expressions: *katalysis* (dissolution / dissolving / liquidation) of democracy (Thuc. 8.47.2.; 8.63.3) and, more often, *katalysis* of the *demos* (Thuc. 8.65.1; 8.68.1, 4; 8.86.2; see also 1.107.4; 3.81.4; 5.76.2). Both terms also appear in the works of other ancient authors who describe the coup of 411 as well

as other oligarchic attempts to overthrow democracy.¹ But what does this mean? Is *demos* just a synonym for democracy here? What concepts of *stasis*, of democracy and of its overthrow lie behind these formulations? Why is the verb *lyein* used? *Lyein* denoted the opposite of intertwining and linking together; it could refer to processes of dissolving, for example in a liquid, or of the weaving out of a texture (Loraux 2002, 94–97).² So, how could the democratic order have been dissolved? And, lastly, is it possible to derive lessons for today's democracies from these events? In order to answer these questions, I will first discuss the possible meanings of the word *demos* in the expression *katalysis of the demos* and the specific conceptions of the *demos* and its rule that underlie this formulation (1. Which *demos* was dissolved?). In a second step, I will examine how exactly the oligarchic conspirators managed to destroy the *demos* as a political community and therefore the political system of democracy, focussing on the initial phase of stasis rather than its course or end (2. The disintegration of the political community and the abolition of democracy). Thirdly, I will compare the two oligarchic coups in Athens with Thucydides' account of the *stasis* at Kerkyra, emphasising the absence of violent opposition at the outset of both coups (3. *Stasis* in Athens and Kerkyra). Finally, I will briefly look at how the Athenians restored their democracy (4. The return of the political community).

1 Which *demos* was dissolved?

Scholars on ancient history point out that *demos*, usually translated simply as *the people*, can have different connotations, depending on the context (Donlan 1999, 225–236; Hansen 2010, 502f.). Keeping this in mind, we can distinguish at least five interpretations of the *demos* that was dissolved when democracy was overthrown:

1. *Demos* is just a synonym or abbreviation for democracy.
2. *Demos* refers concretely to those who participate in politics by attending a particular assembly meeting (*ekklesia*).
3. *Demos* refers to the whole citizenry / the people in a more abstract, non-concrete sense.

¹ *Katalysis of the demos*: And. 1.98; 3.6; 4.8; Aisch. 1.173; Aristoph. Ecc. 453; Aristot. Pol. 1304a–b; Lys. 13.16, 17, 20, 51; 26.4; 26.4; Xen. Hell. 2.3.28. *Katalysis of democracy*: And. 1.95–97; Aristot. Ath. pol. 29.1; Lys. 13.12, 15; 26.9; Plat. Rep. 562b.

² In his dialogue *Politikos*, Plato uses the image of weaving to illustrate the art of statesmanship, which also consists of binding together and interweaving different natures in one state (Plat. polit. 306a). One might conclude that the analogy between the weaving of a texture and the binding together of a political community could have been encouraged by the implications of *lyein* as a term denoting the un-binding and therefore disintegration of a political community.

4. *Demos* is a sociological term referring to a peculiar part of the citizenry: those who are not members of the economic and social elite / the poor / the lower classes.
5. *Demos* means neither only the participants in a peculiar assembly meeting nor the citizenry as a general idea, but a politically organised collective actor that can act in and through political institutions.

What does this mean in detail? First, reading *demos* as mainly a synonym for the political system of government called democracy means that a *katalysis* of the *demos* is simply a regime change brought about by the overthrow of democracy, in this case by a group of oligarchic conspirators (Cammack 2019, 57; see also Ober 1996, 118). This interpretation aligns with most English translations of Thucydides' text, which do not capture the particular connotations of the Greek wording but instead use phrases like *subverting democracy*, *putting down democracy*, *abolishing democracy*, and so on.³ Correspondingly, *demos* could be used by ancient authors to denominate a supporter of democracy (Thuc. 5.82.2, 8.73.2; Xen. Hell. 7.1.45, 6.5.7, 3.2.27; Diod. 15.70.3.). However, it is still noteworthy that *democracy* can be abbreviated in this way and that the act of ending a political order is expressed by a word that literally means the dissolution and disintegration of a previously coherent, firmly connected substance. To understand the concepts and ideas behind these formulations more deeply, we have to take a closer look at the ancient use of this term.

Second, Mogens Hansen and others have emphasised that “the most use of the term *demos* is to signify the people in assembly” (Hansen 2010, 510; see also Budelmann 2018, 192–194; Cammack 2019, 43; *contra* Ober 1996, 117). *Demos* was the official term for the political body that passed resolutions and laws by open vote in an assembly meeting (*ekklesia*) (Hansen 2010, 507). The phrase “the Council and the *Demos* have decided” was the standard formulation on all inscriptions publishing the decisions adopted by the

³ Cf. the following examples: “abolish the democracy” (Thuc. 8.65.1: Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*, transl. by Thomas Hobbes. The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury. Thucydides. Thomas Hobbes. London 1843: Bohn; Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, transl. by Richard Crawley. London 1910: J. M. Dent & E. P. Dutton; Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*, transl. by Charles Forster Smith. Cambridge / London 1923: Harvard University Press, LCL); “put down the democracy” (Thuc. 8.68.1: transl. Thomas Hobbes; transl. Richard Crawley); “overthrow the democracy” (Thuc. 8.68.1, 4: transl. Charles Forster Smith); “subvert the democracy” (Thuc. 8.86.2: transl. Richard Crawley; transl. Charles Forster Smith); “renverser la démocratie” (Thuc. 8.65.1, 68.4: Thucydide. *La guerre du Péloponnèse*, transl. Jacqueline de Romilly / Raymond Weil. Paris 1972; Les Belles Lettres); “destroyer la démocratie” (Thuc. 8.68.1: transl. Jacqueline de Romilly / Raymond Weil); “Sturz der Demokratie” (Thuc. 8.65.1: Thukydides. *Der Peloponnesische Krieg*, transl. by Michael Weissenberger. Berlin / Boston 2017: de Gruyter; Thuc. 8.68.1, 4: Thukydides. *Der Peloponnesische Krieg*, transl. by Helmuth Vretska / Werner Rinner. Stuttgart 2000: Philipp Reclam jun); “Auflösung der Demokratie” (Thuc. 8.65.1: transl. Helmuth Vretska / Werner Rinner); “Abschaffung der Demokratie” (Thuc. 8.68.1: transl. Michael Weissenberger); “Zerstörung der Demokratie” (Thuc. 8.68.4: transl. Helmuth Vretska / Werner Rinner; Michael Weissenberger).

ekklesia. So, if *demos* is understood, in a very concrete sense, as those who participate in a peculiar political institution, then it becomes quite clear what *katalysis* of the *demos* exactly means: the dissolving of the assembly. This could be done in two ways: first, by ending a peculiar meeting and sending the participants away; and second, by abolishing the assembly as a political institution altogether. Such a move would, of course, mean the end of democracy, as the assembly was the key institution of this political system. Moreover, it would also mean the end of the *demos* as the independent, yet partial “collective political agent constituted by the common people” meeting in the *ekklesia*, as Daniela Cammack puts it (Cammack 2019, 45).

Indeed, in his account of the oligarchic conspiracy of 411 BC, Thucydides describes the dissolution of the core political institutions of democracy. After they had dissolved the rightfully appointed Council of Five Hundred and sent its members back home, the conspirators took over the *bouleuterion* and made all political decisions themselves. The same happened again about seven years later during the second oligarchic coup following Athens’ unconditional surrender at the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC, when Theramenes, backed by the Spartans, forced the assembly to install a board of thirty law-writers (*syngrapheis*), which then appointed a council and the other officeholders at their own discretion (Lys. 12.76; Xen. Hell. 2.3.11). In both cases, most members of the *demos* were deprived of all political rights.⁴ The conspirators proclaimed that citizenship should be reserved exclusively for those they deemed useful for the *polis* (Thuc. 8.65.3) – in the end, those members of the economic and social elites who supported the oligarchy. But even these elites had in fact no formal part in the political process. Instead, the small group of the oligarchic conspirators and their supporters made all political decisions themselves.

Thucydides’ description shows that the formal abolition of the key democratic institutions was not the beginning, but the final point in a process of political transformation. The formal disempowerment of the *demos* was only possible because its morale was already broken. Thucydides describes in detail the disintegration of the political community, the uncertainty and the fear that paralysed the Athenians, leading to their total loss of trust in each other. During this time, as Thucydides reports, the assembly continued to meet but only decided what was favourable to the conspirators (see Section 2 below). In this context, the *katalysis* of the *demos* cannot be identical with the abolition of the

⁴ Simonton 2017, 45f. estimates that the Five Thousand men to whom the ruling oligarchs wanted to grant full citizenship in 411 BC made up between 10 and 16 percent of the male citizenry; in 404 BC, the Thirty proclaimed to bestow three thousand men with full rights as citizens, depriving even more Athenians of their full rights as citizens – although one can assume that the number of inhabitants might have fluctuated in the last years of the Peloponnesian War.

assembly, as the assembly was still functioning – though not as usual. So, in this case, the meaning of this phrase must have been broader and less concrete.

This brings me to the third interpretation of *demos* as the whole citizenry or the people, which is broader and more abstract. It does not denote a specific group of people but rather the ideological and imagined construct of “the whole of the Athenian citizen body”, as Josiah Ober puts it (Ober 1996, 117; see also Donlan 1999, 228). To a certain extent, this also applies to the fourth interpretation of *demos* as the lower class of the citizens or the poor, although it has a more narrow and sociological sense. However, as Ellen M. Wood has emphasised, these two levels of meaning cannot be clearly separated. In the “Greek context the political definition of the *demos* itself had a social meaning because it was deliberately set against the exclusion of the lower classes, shoemakers and smiths, from politics. It was an assertion of democracy against nondemocratic definitions of the polis and citizenship” (Wood 1996, 127). Therefore, the meaning of *demos* as *the poor* overlaps with other terms that carry distinctly negative or pejorative overtones, such as *plethos*, *ochlos* or *polloi*. All of these terms combine social and political connotations: on the one hand, the lower classes are economically and thus socially defined as the poor, non-elite segments of the citizenry. On the other hand, these lower classes – or the common people – typically constitute the vast majority of the citizenry, as the wealthy are few in number. Consequently, in a democratic system where all citizens are politically equal, they hold a dominant position. Due to these interconnections, I will examine these two possible meanings – *demos* as the whole citizenry and *demos* as the poorer part of the citizenry – together.

At first sight, it does not seem to make sense that these two types of *demos* could be overthrown, abolished, or dissolved, as Mogens Herman Hansen has explained: “One can ‘overthrow’ (καταλύειν) the *demokratia* or the *demos* in the sense of ‘rule of the people’; but one cannot ‘overthrow’ the *demos* in the sense of ‘all the citizens’ or ‘the common people’. In the sociological sense there will still be a *demos* after the revolution, viz., a *demos* ruled by a tyrant who might even summon meetings of the *demos* in the sense of assembly” (Hansen 2010, 504). Interestingly, Hansen’s explanation is very similar to the argument put forward by the oligarchs at the beginning of the coup of 411 BC, as mentioned before. During the conspirators’ first public appearance before the Athenian assembly, Peisandros challenged anyone who spoke against his suggestion to abandon democracy to offer a better solution for saving the city:

A number of speakers opposed them on the question of the democracy [...]; when Peisandros, in the midst of much opposition and abuse, came forward, and taking each of his opponents aside asked him the following question: In the face of the fact that the Peloponnesians had as many ships as

their own confronting them at sea, more cities in alliance with them, and the king and Tissaphernes to supply them with money, of which the Athenians had none left, had he any hope of saving the state, unless someone could induce the king to come over to their side? Upon their replying that they had not, he then plainly said to them: ‘This we cannot have unless we have a more moderate form of government, and put the offices into fewer hands, and so gain the king’s confidence, and forthwith restore Alcibiades, who is the only man living that can bring this about. The safety of the state, not the form of its government, is for the moment the most pressing question, as we can always change afterwards whatever we do not like.’⁵

According to Thucydides, Peisandros thus argued that at the moment, the most pressing question was not the form of Athens’ government but its salvation (μὴ περὶ πολιτείας [...] ἢ περὶ σωτηρίας), in other words: “the survival of the polis is prior to its form of *politeia*” (Teegarden 2014, 19; see also Taylor 2010, 210). Exactly the same argument was brought forward by the Spartan general Lysander in support of the Athenian oligarch Theramenes in an assembly meeting after Athens’ defeat in the Peloponnesian War. Theramenes had argued that his plan to establish an oligarchy had the backing of Lysander and the Spartans; when the Athenians started to uproar, Lysander told them “that it must be a question, not of your constitution, but of your salvation (οὐ περὶ πολιτείας [...] ἀλλὰ περὶ σωτηρίας), if you refused to do as Theramenes demanded” (Lys. 12.74). In both cases, the promoters of oligarchy argued that at the present moment, the question of the constitution (*politeia*) was insignificant. They claimed that worrying about the abolition of democracy was mere hair-splitting in the face of the urgent need to save the *polis* (cf. Nebelin 2024, 37). By doing so, they suggested that, on the one hand, there was no alternative to establishing an oligarchy, whereas on the other hand, this step was only temporary and could be reversed once the situation had changed. Until then, the *polis* would be better-off as oligarchy: Athens would still exist, but not as a democracy; the *demos* too would still exist, but it would not rule anymore. To return to Hansen’s statement: the conspirators attempted to separate the sociological meaning of *demos* from its political implications – the common people would still be there, but now they would be ruled

⁵ Thuc. 8.53.2f.: “ἀντιλεγόντων δὲ πολλῶν καὶ ἄλλων περὶ τῆς δημοκρατίας [...] ὁ Πείσανδρος παρελθὼν πρὸς πολλὴν ἀντιλογία καὶ σχετλιασμὸν ἠρώτα ἕνα ἕκαστον παράγων τῶν ἀντιλεγόντων, εἰ τίνα ἐλπίδα ἔχει σωτηρίας τῇ πόλει, Πελοποννησίων ναῦς τε οὐκ ἐλάσσους σφῶν ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ ἀντιπρώρους ἔχόντων καὶ πόλεις ξυμμαχίδας πλείους, βασιλέως τε αὐτοῖς καὶ Τισσαφέρνους χρήματα παρεχόντων, σφίσι τε οὐκέτι ὄντων, εἰ μὴ τις πείσει βασιλέα μεταστῆναι παρὰ σφᾶς. ὁπότε δὲ μὴ φαῖεν ἐρωτώμενοι, ἐνταῦθα δὴ σαφῶς ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς ὅτι “τοῦτο τοῖνυν οὐκ ἔστιν ἡμῖν γενέσθαι, εἰ μὴ πολιτεύσομεν τε σωφρονέστερον καὶ ἐς ὀλίγους μᾶλλον τὰς ἀρχὰς ποιήσομεν, ἵνα πιστεύῃ ἡμῖν βασιλεύς, καὶ μὴ περὶ πολιτείας τὸ πλεόν βουλευέσομεν ἐν τῷ παρόντι ἢ περὶ σωτηρίας (ὑστερον γὰρ ἐξεσται ἡμῖν καὶ μεταθέσθαι, ἢν μὴ τι ἀρέσκη), Ἀλκιβιάδην τε κατὰξομεν, ὅς μόνος τῶν νῦν οἶός τε τοῦτο κατεργάσασθαι.”

instead of ruling themselves. And while it was possible to abolish democracy, it was, of course, not possible to abolish the common people. But did the Athenians think so too? What was the *demos* without *kratein*, i.e. without democracy?

The fifth possible meaning of the term *demos* refers neither to the common people or the citizens nor to the assembly as a political institution, but to a politically organised collective actor that can act in and through political institutions. This interpretation is not inconsistent with the other four: Daniela Cammack has pointed out that the different meanings of *demos* can be traced back to a joint basic idea. According to her, *demos* was broadly understood as a peculiar group within the *polis* and the assembly, “consisting not of the entire community but of the ordinary people who constituted the majority of the population, in contradiction to both the political elite [...] and the entire citizenry (*polis*)” (Cammack 2019, 45). *Demos* was thus a political catchword: “it was an oppositional term, defined by contrast with the political elite” (ibid.). Consequently, Cammack stresses the revolutionary origins and implications of democracy: it did not merely mean “self-rule [...], but the rule of the mass of ordinary voters over the political elite”; in other words: the “rule by the poor” (ibid., 45f.; see also Donlan 1999, 225–227; Loraux 2002, 27; Cammack 2022). However, the poor, non-elite *demos* could and did act as a singular collective and independent political agent only if and to the extent that it was “not a pre-constitutional or disorderly multitude”, a *plethos* or *ochlos*, but “formally constituted” and institutionalised, and the place for this was the assembly (*ekklesia*) (Cammack 2019, 46). Outside this political space, the many (*hoi polloi*) might not be able to translate their sheer numbers into the practical exercise of political power (*kratein*).

In Cammack’s interpretation, the term *katalysis* of the *demos* thus refers to the unbinding or dissolving of the core democratic institution that enabled the ordinary citizens to act as a collective agent: “What is imagined is the dissolution of the ties that bind the *dēmos* together, such as the practice of meeting together” (Cammack 2019, 57). This would also mean the end of democracy, as Cammack explains: “When the *dēmos* is divided, that is, dissolved back into the multitudinous *λαοί*, *dēmokratia* is impossible – hence overthrown” (ibid.). So, the dissolution of the *demos*, the assembly, and of democracy were directly interlinked. But this process was even more comprehensive: a closer look at Thucydides’ account of the oligarchic coup of 411 shows that it affected not only the political sphere but all social spheres. According to Thucydides, the disintegration of the community started in the assembly and spread into the pre-political public space.

2 The disintegration of the political community and the abolition of democracy

How exactly did the oligarchs manage to “deprive the Athenian *demos* of its freedom, almost a hundred years after the deposition of the tyrants, when it had been not only not subject to any during the whole of that period but accustomed during more than half of it to rule over subjects of its own”, as Thucydides puts it (Thuc. 8.68.4)?⁶ First of all, the foreign and domestic policy disaster following the fatal defeat of the Athenian fleet in Syracuse in 413 BC had shaken confidence in democracy (Caire 2016, 11f.; Heffner 2001, 1–6; Mann 2007, 268f.). In this crisis, the Athenians had demonstrated their mental strength and willingness to optimise and discipline themselves, for example by immediately building a new fleet, reducing public spending, and even appointing a new board of ten senior advisors (*probouleutes*) to supervise the *polis*’ finances (Thuc. 8.1.3–4, 15,1; Aristot. Ath. pol. 29.2).

Throughout his work, Thucydides repeatedly characterises the Athenian *demos* as hyperactive, flexible, risk-loving, and open for innovations.⁷ These dispositions were not naturally given but resulted from the self-confidence and self-efficacy the *demos* had gained through its active participation in the political processes of direct democracy (Nebelin 2024, 36f.). They had provided the members of the *demos* with institutionalised experiences of agency and the strong conviction that everything – including political systems and forms of government – was disposable if the *demos* wanted it. However, their disposition to pass far-reaching decisions and make sacrifices for the common good led the Athenians to vote for their own disempowerment, when the conspirators suggested that a temporary change of government would improve Athens’ chances in the Peloponnesian War. At first glance, this could be considered a deliberate act of self-restraint and “self-discipline”, as Christian Mann (2007, 266) has put it, but such an interpretation would ignore the massive shocks that the *demos*’ self-confidence was experiencing at the same time. Even talking about the abolition of democracy had been taboo before, as had been the use of physical violence and murder as a political method. Therefore, Mann emphasises the importance of political terror throughout the coup of 411 BC (ibid., 280f.).

By combining political murder with political agitation, the oligarchs implemented a very effective bipartite strategy (Teegeraden 2014, 19f.; Nebelin 2024, 40f.). After the initial assembly meeting, when democracy was not yet abandoned, but the idea of abol-

⁶ τὸν Ἀθηναίων δῆμον ἐπ’ ἔτει ἑκατοστῷ μάλιστα ἐπειδὴ οἱ τύραννοι κατελύθησαν ἐλευθερίας παῦσαι, καὶ οὐ μόνον μὴ ὑπῆκοον ὄντα, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὑπὲρ ἡμισυ τοῦ χρόνου τούτου αὐτὸν ἄλλων ἄρχειν εἰωθότα.

⁷ This image of the Athenians is condensed in the portrait that Thucydides places in the mouths of the Corinthians in Thuc. 1.70.2–9.

ishing it was openly indicated (see Section 1 above), the secret oligarchic clubs started a campaign of terror. In this climate, a small number of well-targeted murders of those who still dissented were enough to make the majority of the people submit (Thuc. 8.66.2). No one dared to search for the murderers; the *demos*, as Thucydides puts it, “remained motionless, being so thoroughly cowed that men thought themselves lucky to escape violence, even when they held their tongues” (Thuc. 8.66.2).⁸ Everyone was afraid to talk to their neighbours; they overestimated the number of conspirators and were disturbed by the participation of fellow citizens whom they had never suspected of harbouring oligarchic sympathies before:

An exaggerated belief in the numbers of the conspirators also demoralised the people, rendered helpless by the magnitude of the city, and by their want of intelligence with each other, and being without means of finding out what those numbers really were. For the same reason it was impossible for anyone to open his grief to a neighbour and to concert measures to defend himself, as he would have had to speak either to one whom he did not know, or whom he knew but did not trust. Indeed all the democrats approached each other with suspicion, each thinking his neighbour concerned in what was going on, the conspirators having in their ranks persons whom no one could ever have believed capable of joining an oligarchy; and these it was who made the many so suspicious, and so helped to procure impunity for the few, by confirming the commons in their mistrust of one another.⁹

Many modern interpreters have highlighted the accurateness and plausibility of Thucydides’ psychosociological analysis of the paralysing effects of political terror (Mann 2007, 280f.; Teegarden 2014, 18; Simonton 2017, 112–115).¹⁰ His sharp analysis of the demotivating effects of political terror is also confirmed by Lysias’ speech *For Polystratos* (Lys. 20.8f.): “whoever did aspire to oppose them [i.e., the oligarchic conspirators] in your [i.e., the *demos*]’ interest was invariably deterred by fright or by the slaughter of their victims.” According to Matthew Simonton, the “techniques of violence” adopted

⁸ ἡσυχίαν εἶχεν ὁ δῆμος καὶ κατὰπληξιν τοιαύτην ὥστε κέρδος ὁ μὴ πάσχωσι τι βίαιον, εἰ καὶ σιγῇ, ἐνόμιζεν.

⁹ Thuc. 8.66.3–5: καὶ τὸ ξυνεστηκὸς πολὺ πλέον ἡγούμενοι εἶναι ἢ ὅσον ἐτύγγανεν ὃν ἡσσώντο ταῖς γνώμαις, καὶ ἐξευρεῖν αὐτὸ ἀδύνατοι ὄντες διὰ τὸ μέγεθος τῆς πόλεως καὶ διὰ τὴν ἀλλήλων ἀγνωσίαν οὐκ εἶχον [αὐτοὶ ἐξευρεῖν]. κατὰ δὲ ταῦτο τοῦτο καὶ προσολοφύρασθαι τινι ἀγανακτήσαντα, ὥστε ἀμύνασθαι ἐπιβουλευσάντα, ἀδύνατον ἦν: ἡ γὰρ ἀγνώτα ἂν ἦν ὥστε εἰ γινώριμον ἄπιστον. ἀλλήλοις γὰρ ἅπαντες ὑπόπτως προσῆσαν οἱ τοῦ δήμου, ὡς μετέχοντά τινά τῶν γιγνομένων. ἐνήσαν γὰρ καὶ οὐς οὐκ ἂν ποτέ τις ᾤετο εἰς ὀλιγαρχίαν τραπέσθαι: καὶ τὸ ἄπιστον οὗτοι μέγιστον πρὸς τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐποίησαν καὶ πλείστα εἰς τὴν τῶν ὀλίγων ἀσφάλειαν ὠφέλησαν, βέβαιον τὴν ἀπιστίαν τῷ δήμῳ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν καταστήσαντες.

¹⁰ The partial downplaying of the importance of terror during the coup of the Four Hundred by Taylor 2010, 209–217, and, to a lesser extent, Hefner 2011, 114 does not seem convincing.

by the conspirators resulted from their “precarious position”, “a status inherent in their very name”: being per definition a minority group, the few (*oligoi*) neutralised the many by intimidating them through violent underground activities that deliberately obscured the exact number of participants (Simonton 2017, 113; see also Teegarden 2014, 14, 21, 24). The outcome of this intimidation was silence: “Fear, and the sight of the numbers of the conspirators, closed the mouths” of the people (Thuc. 8.66.2).¹¹

By fostering mutual mistrust in one another among the members of the *demos* (Thuc. 8.66.5), the conspirators had fragmented the community into isolated individuals and effectively suppressed any form of genuine, open and fearless communication. As more and more citizens joined the oligarchs or just remained indifferent, the democratic ideology of a civic community based on mutual trust was drastically challenged. Thus, the breakdown in communication affected both the political and the private sphere, leading to a dissolution of social bonds and relationships of trust that underpinned democratic practices. Once again, this demonstrates that the social and political spheres were not separate but deeply interconnected. The dissolution of political institutions not only destabilised the political identity of individual citizens, but also disrupted their social identity as neighbours, friends, and relatives. When individual members of the *demos*, the common people, were terrorised and intimidated, the *demos* as a political agent lost its ability to act collectively. In the end, the dissolution of political institutions destabilised society, and vice versa.

Athens had become a terrorised, demoralised, silenced city. The general loss of confidence in the political system also affected its functioning. It became evident that neither democracy as a political system nor the *demos* as a political actor could prevent the violent actions of the conspirators. Moreover, the deliberative process in the assembly appeared incapable of resolving the current crisis, as Peisandros had demonstrated with his – already mentioned (Section 1) – interrogation of opponents in front of the assembly. This tactic effectively prevented a democratic debate that followed the established rules, showcasing not only the helplessness of his critics, but also the failure of traditional democratic deliberation procedures (cf. Nebelin 2024, 38).

The same playbook was applied at the beginning of the second oligarchic coup in 404 BC. In his court speech *Against Eratosthenes*, Lysias recounts that during the initial assembly meeting where the abolition of democracy was openly proposed, the audience at first protested loudly against this suggestion – as mentioned earlier. But Theramenes, backed by the Spartan general Lysander, bluntly dismissed their objections, stating that he disregarded their opinions as “he knew of many Athenians who were promoting the

¹¹ ἀντέλεγέ τε οὐδαίς ἔτι τῶν ἄλλων, δεδιώς καὶ ὁρῶν πολὺ τὸ ζυνεστηκός.

same kind of scheme as himself, and that his advice had the approval of Lysander and the Lacedaemonians” (Lys. 12.74). What Theramenes was saying here was that the overthrow of the *demos* had already begun. He denied the assembled *demos* any relevance; what mattered to him was not the openly articulated opinion of the decisive political body, but the support of some anonymous Athenians and of the Spartan troops present at the meeting. In view of the military power of the Spartan soldiers, the assembly no longer had any say. According to Lysias’ report, this was literally the case: all the good men (ἄνδρες ἀγαθοὶ) “either remained there and kept quiet, or took themselves off, conscious at least of this, – that they had voted nothing harmful to the city”; only some few “raised their hands in favour of the commands that had been given” (Lys. 12.75). Lysias’ choice of words underlines that the assembly did not vote on a proposal but was forced to accept a command.

In 404 as well as in 411 BC, the established practices and procedures of political deliberation were deliberately subverted (cf. Nebelin 2024, 40). The oligarchs left no room for formal objection, forcing the *demos* either to stay and agree or to withdraw quietly. The Athenians thus found themselves in a kind of political twilight zone: no constitutional changes had been made yet, and the most important democratic political institutions – the assembly and the Council of Five Hundred – still met, but “they discussed nothing that was not approved of by the conspirators”, Thucydides says (Thuc. 8.66.1).¹² From a political science perspective, Athens at this time can be described as a defective democracy, where the usual political institutions were neither abolished nor functioned in the usual way. After the few who had dared to oppose the conspirator’s proposals publicly in the assembly had been secretly murdered under unclear circumstances, the mechanics of politics and the functions of voting had changed significantly. As Matthew Simonton puts it, “votes no longer signalled honest policy preferences; instead, they afforded the oligarchs a screening mechanism with which to identify and punish dissidents” (Simonton 2017, 126).

By this time, the stage was set for the next phase: the formal abolition of democracy through the self-disempowerment of the assembly and the dissolution of the Council of Five Hundred, a procedure that can be described as the “official’ overthrow of the Athenian democracy” (Teegarden 2014, 20). First, an assembly meeting was announced outside the city, on the Kolonos hill (Thuc. 8.67–70; Aristot. Ath. pol. 29, 1–5; 32, 1f.; see also Heftner 2001, 153–176; Mann 2007, 270–276, 279 f.; Caire 2016, 103–111). There, the oligarchs put forth only one single proposal: the abandonment of the *graphe paranomon* which allowed to suspend a law or decree that contradicted the existing laws.

¹² δῆμος μέντοι ὁμῶς ἔτι καὶ βουλή ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ κυάμου ξυνελέγετο: ἐβούλευον δὲ οὐδὲν ὅτι μὴ τοῖς ξυνεστῶσι δοκοίη, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ λέγοντες ἐκ τούτων ἦσαν καὶ τὰ ῥηθησόμενα πρότερον αὐτοῖς προῦσκεπτο.

This modification offered the opportunity to have the obedient assembly authorise the establishment of a co-optive Council of Four Hundred. Subsequently, the democratic Council of Five Hundred, still in office at the time, was dismissed by a group of armed oligarchs and hastily replaced by the new, oligarchic council. Obviously, the oligarchs intended to take the *demos* by surprise and present it with a *fait accompli* as long as it was paralysed with shock. The whole procedure exemplifies a well-known, almost stereotypical scenario of a seemingly democratic overthrow of democracy: on the one hand, the *demos*' decision was democratically legitimised, as the citizens themselves had voted for their own disempowerment; on the other hand, subtle yet significant interventions had already undermined the freedom of democratic debate.

3 *Stasis* in Athens and Kerkyra

The coups of 411 and 404 BC cannot be described as a peaceful, orderly transformation of the democratic constitution into a narrow oligarchy. However, it is also unclear whether it can be described as a *stasis* in the 'classical' sense of the word. Modern scholarship has pointed out that the term *stasis* was extremely wide-ranging, depending on the context; it referred to conflicts within political entities that could be ascribed to a class struggle between the rich and the poor, to power struggles within the political and economic elites, to the inference of foreign powers, or to a combination of any of these causes (Gehrke 1985, 309–353; Börm 2019, 13–22). In general, however, *stasis* was seen as a confrontation of two factions or *stasis* groups of which one or both alternately gain the upper hand (Gehrke 1985, 245–249; Börm 2019, 14). The two oligarchic coups, especially the second one, led to such struggles: in 404 BC, the expelled democrats and their followers fought their way back into the city and defeated the Thirty and their supporters (Walter 2023, 308). In this case, the citizenry – and other parts of Athens' population, including metics and slaves – was split in two factions who engaged in an armed conflict and attempted to gain control of the *polis*. Moreover, the first oligarchic coup in 411 BC was also on the verge of turning into a military conflict between the oligarchs, mainly concentrated in Athens, and the members of the fleet stationed at Samos, who rejected the oligarchy and were already planning to attack the city. So, both coups included elements of a classical *stasis*: a violent confrontation between two opposing *stasis* groups, each struggling for a different political order – democracy on one side and oligarchy on the other. In this respect, they share notable parallels with Thucydides' seminal account of the *stasis* at Kerkyra in 427 BC.

The core of this description is Thucydides' analysis of the devastating effects of internal strife in general. According to him, the *stasis* at Kerkyra led to a complete breakdown in morality, sparking widespread violence, revenge, and a redefinition or distortion of ethical norms and semantics (Thuc. 3.82–83; see Zumbrunnen 2008, 30). That *stasis* blurred the boundaries between *oikos* and *polis*, private and public sphere, has already been emphasised by Solon in his so-called *Eunomia-Elegy* (Solon fr. 4 West). The same applies to Thucydides' description of the *stasis* at Kerkyra, which proceeded “from the decay of sub-political restraints to that of political ones” (Orwin 1988, 836). This resulted in the destruction of the “infrastructure of civil trust” (ibid., 837), caused and accompanied at the same time by “the collapse of the three fundamental Greek institutions: kinship, human law, and divine law” (ibid., 836; see Thuc. 3.82.6f.). Thucydides is particularly interested in the role of rhetoric and the semantic changes that result from the instrumentalisation of language for political ends: “Words had to change their ordinary meaning”, he tells us (Thuc. 3.82.4), “The advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent a man to be suspected. To succeed in a plot was to have a shrewd head, to divine a plot a still shrewder; but to try to provide against having to do either was to break up your party and to be afraid of your adversaries” (Thuc. 3.82.5). In the end, Thucydides attributes the complete collapse of essential social and political institutions, norms of behaviour, and communication to the greed (*pleonexia*), ambition (*philotimia*) and lust for competitiveness (*philonikia*) of the political leaders who claimed to act for the common good but were, in fact, driven solely by their pursuit of personal power (Thuc. 3.82.8).

This description adequately characterises the power struggles *within* the oligarchic conspiratorial groups of 411 and 404 BC, both of which were marked by conflicts for supremacy between the so-called moderates and radicals. Notably, at the beginning of both coups, no *democratic* faction or leaders actively participated in these struggles. Unlike in Kerkyra, Athens lacked a democratic faction that stood up against the oligarchs; rather the escalation occurred entirely within the oligarchic faction itself. Only at the end of the two oligarchic regimes, when the oligarchs were overthrown, we hear of democratic leaders: Alcibiades in 411 and Thrasyboulos in 404 BC. In our sources, both are portrayed in a relatively favourable light – at least within this context – as responsible military leaders who prioritised the common good and the welfare of the *polis*, preventing the *demos* from taking violent revenge and fuelling the civil war (Thuc. 8.86.4–7; Xen. Hell. 2.4.40–42). Instead of escalating the civil strife, they sought to de-escalate it.

John Zumbrunnen has recently argued that the manner in which both oligarchic coups unfolded and were overcome by the Athenians can be read as an alternative version to Thucydides' account of the escalation of violence, the reversal of moral values, and the “change in the application of words” (Zumbrunnen 2008, 30) during a *stasis*. Rather than

actively opposing the oligarchs, the *demos* withdrew and remained passive; instead of solidifying and agglomerating into a *stasis* group, it dissolved. Thus, Zumbrennen highlights that it was precisely the quietness and moderation (*sophrosyne*) of the Athenian *demos* that prevented a violent escalation into full-scale civil war (Zumbrennen 2008, 40).

However, the absence of violent escalation between two *stasis* groups in the oligarchic coups at Athens has another, less positive dimension. At the beginning of the coup, when the oligarchic conspirators seized control of the democratic *ekklesia* and *boule* through surprise and terror, the *demos*' reaction can best be described as one of shock. Overwhelmed by the oligarch's violations of the norms of proper political discourse and conduct, frightened and frustrated by the sheer number of oligarchic sympathisers and opportunists, the democrats fell silent. Initially, the oligarch's strategy proved successful: intimidation led to resignation and isolation rather than group formation and collective resistance, whether verbal or physical. Athens' democracy died in silence.

4 The return of the political community

Nevertheless, Athenian democracy ultimately proved its strength and resistance. When the oligarchic regimes rapidly lost power after their establishment, the *demos*' willingness to stay calm and seek compromise facilitated a relatively peaceful restoration of democracy. During this transition, public discourse regained its essential qualities of freedom, openness, and critical engagement. As Thucydides recounts, members of the oligarchy "strongly criticised the administration, their leaders being some of the principal generals and men in office under the oligarchy" (Thuc. 8.89.1).¹³ Similarly, Xenophon notes that under the rule of the Thirty Tyrants, "when, on account of the great numbers continually – and unjustly – put to death, it was evident that many were banding together and wondering what the state was coming to" (Xen. Hell. 2.3.17).¹⁴ By uniting and speaking out freely, the Athenians reclaimed their voices, their political agency, and thereby reasserted their democratic identity (Nebelin 2024, 46).¹⁵ In the end, even the oligarchs likely engaged in open discussions within their boards and committees (Simonton 2017, 84f.; Cammack 2021, 155f.) – even they relied on the internalised forms of democratic

¹³ ἀχθομένους καὶ πρότερον τοὺς πολλοὺς τῶν μετεχόντων τῆς ὀλιγαρχίας καὶ ἡδέως ἂν ἀπαλλαγέντας πῃ ἀσφαλῶς τοῦ πράγματος πολλῶ δὴ μᾶλλον ἐπέρρωσαν. [2] καὶ ξυνίσταντό τε ἤδη καὶ τὰ πράγματα διεμέμφοντο, ἔχοντες ἡγεμόνας τῶν πάντων [στρατηγῶν] τῶν ἐν τῇ ὀλιγαρχίᾳ καὶ ἐν ἀρχαῖς ὄντων.

¹⁴ ἐπεὶ δέ, ἀποθνησκόντων πολλῶν καὶ ἀδίκως, πολλοὶ δῆλοι ἦσαν συνιστάμενοι τε καὶ θαυμάζοντες τί ἔσοιτο ἡ πολιτεία.

¹⁵ For further examples for the *demos* gathering and discussing freely as a step towards the overcoming of an oligarchic regime and the return to democracy, see Thuc. 5.82.2; Xen. Hell. 6.5.7; 7.1.45; see also Simonton 2017, 158–160, with additional evidence.

deliberation and decision-making. Thus, even from an oligarchic point of view, decision-making in Athens was only conceivable in a democratic manner (cf. Nebelin 2018).

This does not mean that the restoration of democracy was entirely peaceful. A significant early indication of the Four Hundred's weakening grip on power was the public assassination of one of their members (Thuc. 8.92.2), followed by an uprising of the hoplite soldiers in the harbour of Piraeus (Thuc. 8.92.4–10; see also Teegarden 2014, 26–28), and a mutiny of the fleet stationed at Samos (Thuc. 8.74–76). Similarly, the Thirty were overthrown by an army composed of numerous exiles who had been driven out of the city by the regime (Xen. Hell. 2.4.1–19). Nevertheless, the eventual return to deliberation was relatively peaceful because the Athenians revived their long-standing practice of listening to diverse viewpoints and being persuaded by arguments that prioritised the well-being of the *polis*. For instance, when envoys from the Four Hundred arrived at Samos, the soldiers of the fleet “at first would not hear them, and cried out to put to death the subverters of the democracy, but at last, after some difficulty, calmed down and gave them a hearing” (Thuc. 8.86.2).¹⁶ Other examples of this return to reasoned debate include an assembly meeting to restore unity, in which the Four Hundred were formally deposed (Thuc. 8.97.1), and the famous amnesty that ended the civil war between the supporters of the Thirty and the democrats (Aristot. Ath. pol. 38.4–40.3.; Xen. Hell. 2.4.38–43).

These episodes demonstrate, on the one hand, the significance of democratic procedures, particularly the internalised habit of engaging in open, orderly debates where divergent viewpoints are articulated and considered. Moreover, they also underscore the interconnectedness of institutional frameworks and political culture. Both levels were closely linked, but not identical. The *demos*, as a collective political actor, existed only in practice: in and through its exercise of rule, which, in turn, could only be realised through democratic practices. As Uwe Walter has recently emphasised, being an Athenian citizen was not merely an abstract legal status but meant belonging to a group that acted together (Walter 2023, 309f.). Without its capacity to rule, the *demos* ceased to be a political subject and became merely the object of rule by the few. It seems that the Athenians had not fully grasped these interconnections until their democracy was overthrown. Contrary to Peisandros' and Theramenes' claims before the *ekklesia*, the fall of democracy was not a matter of abstract constitutional change; instead, it meant the concrete disintegration of the civic community as a politically organised body capable of acting together (Nebelin 2024, 42). This political transformation directly affected the Athenians' self-perception and identity as citizens. In losing their democracy, they also, in a way, lost themselves.

¹⁶ οἱ δὲ στρατιῶται τὸ μὲν πρῶτον οὐκ ἠθέλον ἀκούειν, ἀλλ' ἀποκτείνειν ἐβόων τοὺς τὸν δῆμον καταλύοντας, ἔπειτα μέντοι μόλις ἡσυχάσαντες ἤκουσαν.

However, although the conspirators were able to temporarily destabilise the political culture, in the long term their attack made the Athenians realise what was at stake when their democracy was threatened – not merely the constitution, but also their entire democratic way of life. In the aftermath of the two oligarchic coups, the Athenians managed to overcome the crisis of their democracy by returning to their well-established political practices. They deliberately reinforced the rule of the *demos* by enacting new laws and regulations designed to safeguard the constitution and prevent future attempts to undermine democracy.

In the end, it has to be asked whether it is possible to draw any lessons from the events surrounding the oligarchic coups in Athens for the present day. Are there parallels between events that took place two thousand five hundred years ago and the crisis of democracy facing too many countries around the world today? Despite the significant differences between ancient Athens' direct democracy and modern representative forms of democracy, there are notable similarities.

To begin with, the combination of violence and terror, along with the deliberate discrediting of democratic institutions and procedures by the oligarchs, feels strikingly familiar. The oligarchic strategy of setting the political agenda, dominating discourse, and silencing opponents through violent intimidation mirrors the tactics used by right-wing populists and extremists to undermine democracy today. Particularly concerning is the abolition of the *graphe paranomon*. While democrats tend to operate within the bounds of democratic processes and procedures, hoping their opponents will also adhere to them and may be disenchanted (*'entzaubert'*) in political practice, the enemies of democracy are focused on dismantling these very processes. A few well-orchestrated actions can suffice to push the democratic system to a critical tipping point.

The oligarchic strategy to disintegrate the political community through rhetorical tricks, intimidation and terror bears a striking resemblance to the culture wars and meta-political strategies employed by new-right groups and actors in Europe and the United States. Most notably, the Athenian *demos*' political paralysis, caused by the unsettling realisation that the enemies of democracy were far more numerous than expected, resonates deeply with the experiences of contemporary advocates of democracy and human rights. Instead of speaking out loud and forming effective collectives of resistance, the defenders of democracy remain silent. In ancient Athens as today, the pervasive feeling of isolation fosters the atomisation of former supporters of democracy and hinders collective action. Once again, democracy dies in silence.

This conclusion is far from encouraging. Much like Athens in the period leading up to the oligarchic coups, many democracies today seem to be navigating a political twilight zone where central institutions are dysfunctional, rights and procedures are undermined,

and (too) large segments of the citizenry remain either indifferent or hostile toward liberal democracy. Too often, the enemies of democracy are louder than its supporters. However, in the end, the survival and strengthening of democracy depend on the collective will of the citizens.

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