CHAPTER I

Tracing cultural revolution in classical Athens

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The language of 'revolution' makes for powerful rhetoric, whether in a political realm or in the institutional politics which governs the award of academic research grants.[1] In an earlier book, *Rethinking Revolutions through Classical Greece*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2006, we have explored how the rhetoric of revolution has come to be applied to classical Greece. There is no straightforward equivalent in ancient Greek for the term 'revolution', but what happened in classical Greece has been repeatedly claimed to constitute a revolution in Western civilization. The adjective 'revolutionary' is one that can never be used as a neutral description: whenever a revolution is hailed it is hailed for ideological and political reasons. The affirmation or denial that a particular change constitutes a revolution is the affirmation or denial that what changes is something peculiarly valuable or significant. In surveying the use of the term 'revolution' with regard to classical Greece as a whole or particular features of classical Greek culture, we uncover part of the political history of classics in subsequent history.

Inevitably, the decision to devote a book, and indeed a research project, to investigating the changes in Athenian culture at the end of the fifth century itself implies that those changes were particularly significant. This book, however, is less concerned with whether or not those changes justify using the rhetoric of revolution than with analysing the changes which have made laying claim to a cultural revolution in classical Athens at least *prima facie* plausible. The book as a whole offers something of a description of the profound changes in Athenian culture at the end of the fifth century BC, and makes some preliminary attempts to understand why the changes came about and whether and how they may have been linked.

I

In this introductory chapter I first discuss what is at stake in constructing history as involving continuous change or revolutionary rupture. I then essay an overview of past scholarly attempts to describe and account for the changes at the end of the fifth century in Athens as revolutionary. I conclude with an attempt to suggest ways in which we might link together, and draw some conclusions from, the separate substantive studies which follow.

THEORY

It is basic to all forms of cultural history that cultural products do not remain unchanged over long periods of time. In the case of literary culture, the temporal aspect of change is often very much subordinated in discussion to the personal aspect: we tend to think in terms of Xenophon's historical writing being different from Thucydides' historical writing because Xenophon is an individual of very different intellectual capacity, not because he is writing a quarter of a century (or whatever) later.[2] But for the archaeologist it is axiomatic that time leaves nothing unchanged: relative dating depends upon change being continuous, and, since the classical period falls at a rather flat part of the radiocarbon calibration curve, in most circumstances relative dating is the only dating that the classical Greek archaeologist has. Although it has become increasingly fashionable to decry dating on the basis of changing forms alone, and to point out that changes of place as well as changes of time can influence form and how form changes, it remains the case that within defined geographical regions instances of contemporary stylistic incoherence are remarkably hard to find. There is no evidence of any sort to suggest that there was anyone in Attica in 450 still making or dedicating *korai*, for instance, and although some potters went on using the black-figure technique to paint certain shapes of pot long after red-figure had been generally adopted, black-figure drawing did not become frozen but continued to develop.[3]

[2] This is not always the case, of course. Were my examples to have been Herodotus and Thucydides, or Aeschylus and Sophocles, it would not be hard to find scholars who would talk of the differences in terms of differences of generation. The case against putting Herodotus into a different intellectual generation from Thucydides is well made by comparing the context which R. Thomas 2000 (esp. chs. 2, 6, and 7) constructs for Herodotus with that which Hornblower 1987 (esp. ch. 5) constructs for Thucydides. See further below, pp. 219–21.

[3] That said, there are some cases where individual features of an artefact reproduce a form that belongs to a past era, even though the artefact as a whole could not be mistaken for one produced at an earlier period; the shape of the hawksbeak mouldings at the temple of Nemesis at Rhamnous provides one curious example of this.

But if change is a historical constant, the nature of change in any particular cultural manifestation is not for that reason uninteresting, nor are all changes equal. To stay with my sculptural example, the change in the form of the freestanding male between the *kouros* commonly known as Kroisos (Athens National Museum 3851) and Aristodicus' *kouros* (Athens National Museum 3938) raises important questions about how contemporary viewers construed these statues. In attempting to explain the change, we reach for a viewing construction which will allow both statues to satisfy the viewer's demands but will lead us to understand Aristodicus to satisfy the demands of the viewer of c. 500 BC more fully.[4] But when we view the change between Aristodicus' *kouros* and the *Discobolus* sculpted by Myron of Eleutherai, whose works were certainly displayed on the Acropolis, the attraction of thinking that the two statues are doing the same thing, but that the *Discobolus* is doing it better, is somewhat limited. The *Discobolus* seems to display a whole different set of priorities.[5] An internalist history, a history of art, conducted by comparing works of art from an aesthetic point of view – that is, the history of art elicited by double slide projection – has some claim to appropriateness in the case of explaining why Kroisos became Aristodicus. But when it comes to explaining how Aristodicus became the *Discobolus*, an internalist history seems insufficient: the break is too great. How can we compare the incomparable?[6] Whether we choose to invoke the term 'revolution', to talk of paradigm shift, or whatever, the point is that whiggish history, the history of progress towards a single goal, has become implausible.[7]

Although not, I think, usually formulated in the terms that I have just used, the argument I have just made expresses a commonly held position. It is reflected in the arguments of those who insist on reserving 'revolution' for what they see as moments of total change, like the French Revolution, and who object to more general deployment of the term. We might call this view the naïve view. It is naïve because it assumes that there can be differences in degree (from Kroisos to Aristodicus) that are not as plausibly restated as difference in kind, and that there can be differences in kind (from Aristodicus to the *Discobolus*) which are not plausibly restated as difference of degree. Part of the point of this project has been to stand

[4] Boardman 1978: 84 on Aristodicus' *kouros*; cf. p. 72 on Kroisos.
[5] Stewart 1990: 148: 'a period of frenzied experiment . . . culminated around 460 in the acknowledged champion among all such statues, Myron's Diskobolos'; cf. Carpenter 1960: 82–5.
[6] For the importance of doing just that, see Detienne 2000.
[7] Not that that has prevented some art historians trying to do exactly that by treating naturalism as the only dimension of art.

back from that naïve assumption and see it for what it is – that is, to see its
politics. *Rethinking Revolutions through Ancient Greece* addressed itself to the
politics of how moments of history get packaged up as revolutions. It was
concerned with the stories that are not told, the stories that are excluded, by
talk of revolution or by denial of revolution. The naïve view suggests, I have
claimed, that whether we choose to invoke the *term* 'revolution' or not does
not matter: there really *is* a different *sort* of change separating the *Discobolus*
from Aristodicus' *kouros* from that which separates Aristodicus' *kouros* from
Kroisos. The political view insists that revolutions are (also) rhetorical. If
Bishop Berkeley's tree continues to be when there is no one about in the
quad, revolutions, by contrast, are there only if seen by someone (other
than God).

The rhetoric of revolution is undeniable, and is ignored by historians at
their peril – not just because there is money to be made out of research
projects and books about revolutions, but because what people believe
about past continuities and discontinuities actively affects their behaviour.
To accept that a revolution occurs between A and B is to expect to side with
A or B and to act as if the difference between them matters; to assert that
A and B are essentially the same, though different in detail, is to invite the
expectation that one can hold the same attitude to A as to B. But however
much we stress the significance of revolutionary rhetoric, the naïve view is
not without foundation. Historical change does not happen at a uniform
pace, whether we are dealing with political, social, economic, or cultural
history. Even if *which* moments are marked by discontinuity is going to be
dependent on the questions being asked by the observer, there can be no
history *at all* without the presence of some observer or other, and the reality
for observers of such moments of discontinuity is not in itself in doubt.
The importance of the political view, as I have called it, is to insist that we
take a self-reflexive approach to our inquiries.

APPLYING THEORY

A *prima facie* case for seeing the period of 430 to 380 as a period of discon-
tinuity in art, literature, language, philosophy, and politics is, evidently –
given that the project received funding from the AHRB – not hard to make.
Paul Cartledge has summarised past scholarly views of what happened at
Athens like this:

Her economy (especially the cessation of silver mining), polity (the abolition of
democracy and, when democracy was restored, the spate of political trials), culture

(the finger is pointed at the demise of great tragic drama), and society (in particular the trial of Socrates on charges of religious abnormality and pedagogical corruption) have all at some time been characterized as at least temporarily disabled or dysfunctional. (2001: 109)

The case I made in the original proposal to the AHRB went like this:

The late tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles differ from their earlier work not just technically, in the way verse is handled, but in their dramatic form and their concerns: plays like *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Phoenician Women* consciously revisit the themes of earlier plays re-reading the concerns of those plays in changed circumstances. Of tragedies written after 405 we generally know little beyond the titles, but they are enough to indicate a continuing change of focus. Aristophanic comedies survive from five successive decades, and a continuous process of change in theme and form is apparent; but the plays from after 400 remain notable for the absence of political engagement (still there in *Frogs*), for the focus on concerns which are less narrowly Athenian, and for the repeated emphasis on social themes which had played little role in the earlier work. Comparisons within prose literature are more difficult because of the absence of works of the same genre from before and after 400 (itself, of course, a point of major significance). But if differences between Thucydides and Xenophon may be explicable in personal terms, the differences between Antiphon and Lysias, writing words to be spoken by others, are not so susceptible to that explanation: a whole new language is forged in Lysias' works. In philosophy we see a revolution of subject-matter, of philosophical method, and of the form in which philosophy is 'written up'. Outside literature the changes are equally massive: the iconography of Athenian red-figure pottery undergoes successive revolutions in the last quarter of the fifth century and first quarter of the fourth, first with the invasion of 'Meidian' scenes, dominated by personifications and effectively anonymous female figures, and then with polychromy and a new concern for fantastic creatures as well as mythical fantasy.

Such a case might be as readily deconstructed as it is constructed. If Aristophanic politics is different in the 390s, that does not mean that there is no politics. Robert Tordoff's work (see chapter 10) has found itself emphasising continuities as well as discontinuities. Nor is the revisiting of earlier themes by tragedians much of an argument for discontinuity in a genre built, at least in part, upon revisiting epic themes. 'For sensationalism, triviality, affectation', often alleged of fourth-century tragedy, 'we ought perhaps to read', Pat Easterling has suggested (1993: 568–9), 'elegance, sophistication, refinement, clarity, naturalism, polish, professionalism – a new kind of cosmopolitan sensibility'; in changing the evaluative language, Easterling encourages us to see differences of degree rather than differences of kind. The 'whole new language' of Lysias may seem a marked break from Thucydides, but it is sufficiently little of a break from the Old Oligarch for Simon

Hornblower to canvass a 380s date for that work more normally placed in the 420s or 410s.[8] Meidian scenes are certainly very different from those of Polygnotus in the middle of the fifth century, but Polygnotan scenes are themselves strikingly different in subject-matter and style from those of Euphronios or Douris – there seem all too many candidates for revolution in vase-painting.[9] And so we might go on – all this without invoking the problem that in many aspects of cultural history we simply do not have comparable evidence from the fifth and the fourth centuries: 'the fact that extremely successful plays like Astydamas' *Hector* or Theodectes' *Alcmaeon* failed to get through the educational filter of late antiquity and the middle ages should not cause us to brush aside a whole period of intense and dynamic dramatic activity', to quote Easterling again (1993: 568). Paul Cartledge has judged 'soundly based' the view that Athenian popular morality 'remained substantially and consensually stable between . . . 430 and 320 BC (Cartledge 2001: 110). Even in terms of political history there is a case for 'utopian' scenarios, as well as for the 'nightmare' scenarios which see the end of the fifth century as the beginning of some terminal crisis of the Greek polis (Cartledge 2001: 108–10).[10]

It is precisely the way in which the changes at the end of the fifth century are so readily open to redescription that offers justification for this project. In a period when so much changes, it is easy to assert or to deny the absolute or comparative importance of any individual change. This makes it vital to conduct a wholesale, rather than a piecemeal, investigation of the period; focusing on cultural history and on the issue of revolution seems to be needed. The minimum aim of the project, and of this book, then, is to build a wigwam argument, in which arguments which are individually less than completely compelling offer support to one another which strengthens each of them, or to show that one cannot be built: either to bolster the claims for changes in one field by showing that they can be better understood in the context of changes in other fields, or to undermine the claims that particular changes constitute a revolution by showing that there is no coherent pattern of change. That minimum aim demands that we achieve a fuller description of late fifth-century culture, in its individual elements and as a whole, than

[8] Hornblower 2000. For arguments against this position see R. Osborne 2004b, another product of the AHRB project.

[9] On the history of fifth-century vase-painting see Robertson 1994.

[10] Alternatively it might be claimed that there was change, but it occurred at a different point. Davies (1978/93) began the chapter entitled 'Social Change', 'The 380s are a turning point.' But reading on into the chapter we discover that it is relations between Greek cities that Davies thinks change in the 380s – he admits that shifts in social values (e.g. the disappearance of bawdy from old comedy and of sexually explicit scenes from Athenian vases) and in the role and status of myth occur c. 400.

has previously been offered by other scholars, and that we set those elements in some sort of context. But that is only the minimum aim. There is a more ambitious aim. This is to move beyond co-ordination or correlation to an understanding of the reasons for, as well as the nature and scale of, any change.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH PAST TREATMENTS?

Scholars who have previously written about aspects of end-of-fifth-century cultural history have offered a variety of types of explanation. Much that has been written seeks to locate what changes in the minds of the Athenians. For Cornford, in *Before and After Socrates* of 1932, understanding the sophistic revolution was all a matter of the Greeks growing up: in Greek society after the Persian wars 'we can observe an analogous effort of the individual to detach himself from the social group' (pp. 40–1); 'In the philosophy of individual self-assertion parents will recognise something analogous to the spirit of adolescent reaction against the authority of the home' (p. 43). For Dodds, in *The Greeks and the Irrational* of 1951, trying to explain not the occurrence of but the reaction to the sophists, the key was 'wartime hysteria'. He talks of 'the regressiveness of popular religion in the Age of Enlightenment', and goes on:

The first signs of this regression appeared during the Peloponnesian War, and were doubtless in part due to the war. Under the stresses that it generated, people began to slip back from the too difficult achievement of the Periclean Age; cracks appeared in the fabric, and disagreeably primitive things poked up here and there through the cracks. When that happened there was no longer any effective check on their growth. As the intellectuals withdrew further into a world of their own, the popular mind was left increasingly defenceless, though it must be said that for several generations the comic poets continued to do their best. The loosening of the ties of civic religion began to set men free to choose their own gods, instead of simply worshipping as their fathers had done; and, left without guidance, a growing number relapsed with a sigh of relief into the pleasures and comforts of the primitive. (pp. 192–3)

Dodds then proceeds to identify as examples of regression the 'increased demand for magical healing' (p. 193) leading to the rise of Asclepius, and 'the fashion for foreign cults, mostly of a highly emotional, "orgiastic" kind, which developed with surprising suddenness during the Peloponnesian War' (p. 193). Psychological effects of the war also figure strongly in J. J. Pollitt's account of changes in art in the late fifth century in his *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* of 1972:

When compared with the Parthenon . . . the art of the late fifth century often seems . . . devoid of serious content. It shows a fascination with technique and exalts ornamental elaboration above subject matter. At the same time it seems clear that the florid style was consciously selected and developed by the artists of the period to express a particular state of mind. (p. 123)

Now the flying drapery style is obviously Gorgian in spirit, and appears to emanate from the same pressures as contemporary rhetoric. On the surface it is all elegance, but underneath it may reflect a despairing desire to retreat from the difficult intellectual and political realities of the age and to take refuge in gesture. Escapist wish-fulfillment is perhaps just as common a reaction to troubled times as overt agonizing.[11] (p. 125)

Cornford, Dodds, and Pollitt may all turn to psychological explanations, but two very different models are at work here. Psychological explanations of the Cornford type effectively redescribe the observed phenomena so that what appears to be a radical break can be understood in terms of an evolutionary coherence. Whereas Plato in *Republic* explores the workings of the city in order the better to understand the workings of the mind of the individual, Cornford uses analogies from the individual to understand the society of the city.[12] The Athenians are simply growing up, there is nothing untoward in what happens; just as every human being grows up, it is implied, so did classical Athens – it could not be otherwise.

Psychological explanations of the Dodds and Pollitt type, on the other hand, affirm that there is something to be worried about, for they look to explain radical change in culture with reference to traumatic experiences elsewhere in society. Fifth-century Athens is the healthy society, fourth-century Athens is the traumatised society. There is a notable circularity in this argument: it is only because of the episodes which Dodds takes as evidence that the trauma of war and plague caused regression that we know that the experience of war and the plague were traumatic in the first place.

There can be little doubt that the plague was in some sense traumatic, but the extent to which it cast a long shadow over the Athenian mind is more open to question: Thucydides' surprising, indeed impossible, claim about Athenian demographic recovery after the plague (6.26.2; cf. 6.12.1 (speech of Nikias)) might be taken to be some evidence that Athenians shrugged it off more lightly than Dodds would have us believe.[13] In the case of the war

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[11] For a wholesale defence of Pollitt's approach see now Meyer and Lendon 2005.
[12] On Plato's analogy see Williams 1973.
[13] Compare Marshall 1990 for possible Thucydidean distortion of the seriousness of the plague, and Mikalson 1984 and Parker 1996: 200 (cf. pp. 150, 180) on the limited impact of the plague in Athenian religious actions.

itself, there is certainly scope for questioning its impact, whether physical
or psychological. Victor Hanson (1981) convincingly demolished the case
for the physical effects of invasion or the occupation of Dekeleia being dev-
astating. And Barry Strauss has pointed out, in a paper (1997) concerned
with how we periodise history and what the effects of that periodisation are,
that no one at the time was aware of living through one discrete Pelopon-
nesian War starting in 431 and going on to 404. Pausanias, writing more
than half a millennium later, could observe that the Peloponnesian War
'shook Greece from her foundations like an earthquake, and afterwards
Philip son of Amyntas found it already rotted and unhealthy and ruined
it altogether' (3.7.11), but this passage seems primarily to be a reaction to
reading Thucydides (he has just commented that it was Sthenelaidas who
brought on the war against Archidamus' resistance).

Past attempts at rooting cultural change more deeply into political, social,
and economic change only reveal the more clearly what has been problem-
atic about these explanations. J. H. Finley devoted the last chapter of his
Four Stages of Greek Thought (1966) to 'The Rational Mind'. He begins that
chapter by observing that 'in the fourth century it is as if the early mist
had risen to uncover no longer a world of gods but a bright mid-morning'
(p. 80), and goes on: 'To the men of the fourth century the forms of rational
order represented an achieved triumph' (p. 81). Turning to the question of
cause he states:

Clearly no single cause suffices to explain so wide a change. The twenty-seven
years of the Peloponnesian War . . . constitute what Aristotle might have judged
the efficient cause. The war brought losses of men and money, loss of empire . . .
loss of confidence in the promise of leaders, awareness that the state could fall apart
into conflicting interests and at best hardly contained them, and – subtlest | loss –
surfeit of the former dream of conquest. (pp. 81–2)

To this catalogue he then adds, 'But at least two other main forces abet-
ted the change: the thorough-going victory of what was earlier termed a
conceptual way of thought over the old mythological way, and the rise of
something like an urban middle class' (p. 83), before, in concluding the
chapter, reverting to a simpler choice: 'The revolution by which concep-
tual thinking replaced the old reliance on myth necessarily shook the brief
balance of the great age. As a cause of change, the intellectual revolution
far outweighs even the strain of the twenty-seven year war' (p. 107).

Finley's list of causes – financial, demographic, political, psychological –
pour out in no sort of order (and with no substantiation), and their final
ranking is based on no argument. It is easy, but also facile, to suggest

multiple contributory factors; what is needed is some way of joining them
up, of making them contribute to a single picture, not returning always
to treat them as rival pictures. Rather than taking one or more aspects
of cultural history, observing change, and tying that change into whatever
aspect of the larger historical picture comes to mind, we need an assessment
of the ways in which that larger historical picture is changing. And the
larger historical picture which we paint needs to be capable of explaining
the 'before' as well as the 'after'. Pat Easterling has pointed out, in the paper
about fourth-century tragedy from which I have already quoted, that

if the social structure created by the democracy in the fifth century was particularly
favourable to the development of tragedy, as Vernant and others have taught us to
believe, then we have to explain why in the restored democracy after the Pelopon-
nesian War these conditions no longer obtained (if it is true that they didn't), and
why one should no longer expect to find tragedy questioning, criticising, challeng-
ing or redefining the structure of the *polis* as well as 'inventing' and celebrating
Athens. (1993: 561)

Similarly, if we cannot explain why the *absence* of what we think developed
for the first time during the period we are discussing was important for
Athenian society, politics, and culture before any putative revolution, then
we need to think twice about making its *presence* a salient feature of our
thick description of Athens after that revolution.

AND SO TO THIS BOOK

Oswyn Murray's classic 'Cities of Reason' paper (1990) opens with Bertrand
Russell's observation, with regard to experiments with monkeys and
bananas, that 'animals studied by Americans rush about frantically, with an
incredible display of hustle and pep, and at last achieve the desired result
by chance. Animals observed by Germans sit still and think, and at last
evolve the solution out of their inner consciousness.' I am happy to say
that, among the scholars contributing to this book, both the American
and the German are represented (literally, let alone figuratively). We bring
together diverse training and dispositions, diverse expectations about how
the world works. One of our key tasks is to keep in view the very question
of what we are considering to count as evidence.

In a book where the question addressed is about the presence or absence
of continuities and coherence, there is one sense in which it does not mat-
ter where one starts. But commitment to coherence is not the same as
commitment to every item in a chain having the same causal importance,