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978-0-521-86212-7 - Rethinking Revolutions Through Ancient Greece

Edited by Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**Robin Osborne*

The Greeks had no revolutions. Their analyses of the past are full of invention and innovation, of identifying who was the first to do this or that, and of change, and their political history is full of the more or less violent overthrow of régimes, but no Greek expression translates straightforwardly into our ‘revolution’. Nor were there any revolutions in English prior to the fifteenth century, or any political revolutions until the seventeenth century: the earliest occurrence of ‘revolution’ in the sense of ‘great change’ recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates to c. 1450, the earliest in the sense of ‘complete overthrow of established government’ to 1600. Since the seventeenth century, however, speakers both of English and of other European languages have readily reached for revolution: the restoration of 1688 was declared a revolution even as it occurred.¹

Classics, and indeed the whole construction of ‘Western Civilisation’ depends upon the Greek revolution. Whether or not the term revolution has been used, that ancient Greeks developed fundamentally different ways of thought and action – new political forms, new literary genres, new modes of visual representation, new types of logical analysis – has been the foundational claim of Western humanism. We in the West are what we are because the Greeks were different. Classics has built and justified itself as a discipline on the basis of that claim, and it continues to do so.

Many of our love affairs with Classics started, I suspect, with the attraction of such claims to revolution. Mine started, more or less, with this:

The reader is asked, for the moment, to accept this as a reasonable statement of fact, that in a part of the world that had for centuries been civilized, and quite highly civilized, there gradually emerged a people, not very numerous, not very powerful, not very well organized, who had a totally new conception of what human life was for, and showed for the first time what the human mind was for.

¹ Brunner, Conze and Koselleck (1984) 653–788 s.v. ‘Revolution’.

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So H. D. F. Kitto, in the very first sentence of *The Greeks*.² He echoes Stanley Casson's *Ancient Greece* written thirty years earlier: 'Greece represents humanity's first essay on the grand scale. Never before had mankind set out to solve all the most urgent problems that beset it, and set out in so courageous a spirit . . .'³ It is because they were totally new and thought things never thought before that the Greeks deserve peculiar attention and Classics its place in the academy. Alvin Gouldner was unusual only in being forthright: 'Only a juvenile romanticism parading as scientific objectivity could imagine that, since all societies are unique and worthy of study, ancient Greece has no special meaning and significance for Western man.'⁴

When scholars come to back up vague talk of a 'totally new conception of what human life was for', they come up with a whole fistful of claims. '[T]he whole idea of the beautiful was their discovery.'⁵ 'Epic poetry, history and drama; philosophy in all its branches, from metaphysics to economics; mathematics and many of the natural sciences – all these begin with the Greeks.'⁶ The Greek writing system 'represented indeed a quantitative jump.'⁷ 'It may sound paradoxical to say that the Greeks invented art, but from this point of view, it is a mere sober statement of fact.'⁸ 'There are moments in the history of mankind when new forms of thought or action appear so abruptly that they seem like explosions. Such was the appearance of science, that is of rational, scientific knowledge in Ionia at the end of the seventh century BC.'⁹ 'A revolution occurred in Greek philosophy in the second half of the fifth century.'¹⁰

Such claims can be multiplied, endlessly. There can scarcely be any aspect of Greek culture which has not been claimed as a 'new development in human history'; scarcely any aspect of Greek culture, indeed, which has not been *made into* a crucial development for Western Civilisation by the act of making that claim. As Maurice Bowra puts it, 'So potent has been the appeal of Greece, so passionate the devotion which it arouses, that there is almost no sphere of spiritual or intellectual activity which has not been touched by its living flame.'¹¹

Revolutions are always open to re-evaluation. It is said that when Chairman Mao was asked if he thought that the French Revolution had been a success, he replied that it was too soon to tell. Kitto's claim that economics can be traced back to the Greeks can be juxtaposed to Finley's denial – and

² Kitto (1951) 7. ³ Casson (1939) 13. ⁴ Gouldner (1965) 4.⁵ Bowra (1957) 126. ⁶ Kitto (1951) 9. ⁷ Havelock (1982) 316.⁸ Gombrich (1959) 120. ⁹ Bonnard (1959) 54. ¹⁰ Finley (1963) 128.¹¹ Bowra (1957) 1. Some of the cultural conflicts about Greekness and Greek are explored in Goldhill 2002a.

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to Meikle's reassertion – and a similar set of opposing views about how original or radical the Greek achievement was could be found for almost every other claim.¹² Political revolutions turn out to reconstruct the systems of oppression they aimed to overthrow, or to be steps in another history. (As the Russian joke has it, 'Before communism, one class oppressed another, after communism, the other way round.') Cultural revolutions are easy to announce – few artists wish to be thought exactly like their predecessors – hard to fulfil.

The very decision as to whether change in the past – political, cultural, social – should be construed as a revolutionary rupture or a gradual process of accretion and development is one subject to intense debate and is, in part, itself a political decision. Those who believe that radical change is necessary in contemporary society look to demonstrate that such change has been managed in the past. Those who deny the necessity for contemporary revolution deny either that revolution is possible or that it can be successful. Once it is accepted that a revolution has occurred, the revolution may be hard to stop. This is particularly clear in the case of political revolutions: Napoleon proclaimed the revolution finished in 1799 but came to acknowledge that after him it would begin again.¹³ Radicals from the early nineteenth century on talked of continuous revolution, and the necessity of permanent revolution came to be a rallying cry of Marx: 'Ihr Schlachtruf muß sein: Die Revolution in Permanenz.'¹⁴

Even those for whom it is a temptation to postulate past revolutions, however, find it hard to demonstrate them, certainly not to the satisfaction of sceptics. Within the world of academic history the 'solution' to this is to emphasise both the arrival of the new and the persistence of the old: witness the popularity of 'Continuity and change' as a book title.¹⁵ But this is a pusillanimous solution that misses the point that revolutions are rhetorically constructed. To assert, or deny, or redefine a revolution is to take a stance not simply about what did or did not happen in the past but about how the present can be constructed. Whether the focus is on a broad, all-embracing notion such as the Enlightenment, or a specific event such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, for historians the question of revolutionary change is a defining issue.

Avoiding the word revolution may delay the re-evaluation, but it does not change the substance of the issue. Particular terms get charged by particular

¹² Finley (1973) ch. 1 (1970/1974), Meikle (1995) esp. 1–5.

¹³ Brunner, Conze and Koselleck (1984) 761.

¹⁴ Brunner, Conze and Koselleck (1984) 763.

¹⁵ Browsing the Oxford electronic library catalogue on 17 September 2003 yielded seventy-one different titles employing 'Continuity and change', in addition to the journal of that name.

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historical events, and the shadow of the French and Russian Revolutions still hangs over the 'r' word, deterring some and attracting others depending on the shock they desire to produce. 'Totally new conceptions' do not have the political edge of 'revolutionary ideas' because such talk does not point to the consequences but only to the contrast with what was there before. But 'totally new conceptions' would be of no interest had they no effect, and 'totally new' and 'never before' are open to precisely the same questioning as is 'revolution'. Choice of words says something about how writers wish to present themselves, but choice of words makes little difference to the contestable nature of the claims.

In this situation the critical examination of this or that aspect of Greek culture to see whether it was really revolutionary or novel is not necessarily to the point. The revolution and the novelty were never as complete as its more enthusiastic proponents will claim, but that revolutions can always be redescribed in less dramatic language does not mean there is nothing to discuss. This is a point strongly made by Louis Gernet in the essay which gives the title to the collection *Les Grecs sans miracle*.¹⁶ Geoffrey Lloyd provides an excellent example of careful negotiation over the nature of radical change in his discussions of the development of Greek rationalism:

But if there can be no doubt about the continuous importance of myth and magic throughout antiquity, it is also agreed on all sides, at the broadest and most general level, that inquiries that are recognisable as science and philosophy were developed in the ancient world. However much scholars differ in their detailed interpretations, they acknowledge that certain significant changes or developments occurred during the period from the sixth to the fourth centuries BC.

From the Renaissance on, the myths and realities of Greek science have been enormously influential: myths, because the ancients' ideas have often been distorted when invoked on either side of later disputes, whether to be idealised or to be reviled; realities, because not everything that Greek science has been taken to stand for is mere fantasy, in particular not certain key methodological notions, including those of the value of empirical research, of the application of mathematics to the understanding of the physical world, and of an axiomatic deductive system.¹⁷

Having some grip on what it is reasonable to ascribe to the Greeks is clearly vital to any assessment of claims that the Greeks were revolutionary, but understanding those claims demands more than knowing the evidence upon which those claims were based. Just as Greek claims that there had

¹⁶ Gernet (1983) 21. Vernant, in his Preface to this collection of essays, stresses that the 'revolution' that occurred in the archaic Greek world was the abiding centre of Gernet's interests (Gernet (1983) 12).

¹⁷ Lloyd (1979) 5, (1987) 330.

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been past advances from a state of primitivism were part of an argument about current perfection,¹⁸ so subsequent claims about the advances made in archaic or classical Greece have been part of arguments firmly situated in the contemporary society of those making the claim. It is because the West claims to be heir to the Greeks that what is said of Greek achievements has direct consequences for contemporary debates.¹⁹

One aspect of Western use of Greek originality, and part of the phenomenon Edward Said describes as 'Orientalism', has become a focus of attention in an era of post-colonialism, and has been stressed by Martin Bernal in the first volume of *Black Athena*.²⁰ By stressing that the Greeks were innovative in every branch of culture scholars have justified treating Greece and Rome as *the* ancient world (expertise in Greek and/or Roman history alone is sufficient to qualify one for a degree, or indeed a chair, in Ancient History), and the ancient civilisations of the Near (let alone the Far) East as 'other'.

This identification with the Greeks and alienation of the rest of the ancient world is itself part of a rather larger issue which is about whether the Greeks were 'like us' or were 'desperately foreign'. This unreal dichotomy acquires its interest precisely because so much has been built upon assuming the former. To claim that the Greeks were desperately foreign is to align the study of the Greeks with the study of other 'desperately foreign' peoples studied by anthropologists: such study may be interesting for its own sake and interesting for sharpening one's perceptions of one's own society, but it sheds no direct light on Western heritage. It also endangers the notion that Greek texts can be read unproblematically by us because we have privileged access to them through a direct inheritance.²¹ Divisions over this issue are both national and political. Both the earliest and the most persistent questioning of the Greeks being like us has come from France, and an intellectual tradition running from Constant through Fustel to Gernet and scholars associated with what is now the Centre Louis Gernet.

One nice example of what is at stake and how scholars divide comes over the question of liberty. Those who claim that freedom 'was invented and discovered by the Greeks',²² depend upon identifying the ancient ideal of 'eleutheria' with modern 'liberty'. That modern American scholars should want to do so, and that Benjamin Constant wished not to do so, is a matter more about modern politics than about Greek realities. The resurgence of

¹⁸ Dodds (1973) ch. 1. ¹⁹ Compare Vidal-Naquet (1990/1995). ²⁰ Said (1978), Bernal (1987).

²¹ Compare Detienne's essay 'Les Grecs ne sont pas comme les autres', Detienne (1977) 17–47.

²² Cartledge (1993) 5 summarising the view of Bernard Knox, Jacqueline de Romilly and Orlando Patterson.

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work on liberty in the last decade or so is arguably a direct response to the increasingly critical gaze being applied to versions of 'liberty' that have been on offer from western imperial powers.

But defence of what the West likes to think of as its 'liberalism' is by no means the only driving force behind Greek revolutions. Di Donato notes that 'Historiciser les débuts de l'hellénisme de 1939 à 1960, signifiait donc, pour Gernet, discuter les dogmes de la civilisation occidentale et affirmer la nécessité d'une anthropologie historique contre tout postulat d'une raison pure qui serait faite homme grec au v siècle av. J.-C.' The enthusiastic acknowledgement by English and American scholars of crucial developments in 'Western Civilisation' made by the Greeks that I have quoted were almost all written in the 1950s and 60s, and belong with those decades' keenness to abandon 'old' technologies and strange confidence in the entirely beneficial possibilities unleashed by new technological and scientific developments. These were years in which very little study was made by Anglo-American historians of the material conditions behind the Greek revolution – Finley's studies of slavery being a notable exception. When a theory of the 'birth of Greek thought' was offered it was offered and developed by scholars, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Geoffrey Lloyd, who would not regard themselves as historians, and it emphasised the political not the social or economic: the development of Greek philosophy went hand in hand with the development of political debate within the Greek city. The parallels between the confidence of Anglo-American society that technical breakthrough could bring the better tomorrow without social conditions being directly addressed and the propensity of scholarship to analyse and admire the manifestations of Greek reason without reference to the material conditions of the Greek city cannot be accidental.

Emphasis on the ways in which constructions of the Greek revolution have been historically situated must not themselves occlude the fact that what happened in Greece was really new. Contemporary interests often sharpen insight into aspects of past societies which are no less real for having been overlooked. Gernet, again, observed this very sharply in his essay 'De la modernité des Anciens'. In this essay, published in 1939, he drew attention to the Greek recognition of certain fundamental values, precisely because these values were 'aujourd'hui, tant près de nous, non pas seulement contestées, mais renversées.'²³

Our aim in this volume is to move the debate on from the ever more judicious assessment of just how revolutionary the Greeks were, which is

²³ Gernet (1983) 344–55 at 351.

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represented by Geoffrey Lloyd's work on science or Richard Buxton's *From Myth to Reason?*²⁴ collection.²⁴ At the same time as we ask whether or not there was a revolution in this or that aspect of culture for which the ancient Greeks can be ascribed responsibility, we want also to ask what is at stake in our responding in the affirmative or the negative. Who needs the Greeks to be revolutionary? What difference has telling a story of revolution, as opposed to a story of continuity, or of graduated change, made? What difference does it make?

This book does not aim to be a systematic analysis of every claim that the Greeks were revolutionary, or of every aspect of the claimed revolution. (That would be an impossibly huge undertaking.) Nor is it a history of classical scholarship, tracing what scholars have deemed revolutionary when (another massive task). Rather, it selects some paradigmatic cases of the different types of claims that have been made to single out Greece as a revolutionary society. It sets out to reveal how these modern claims mirror or appropriate or challenge claims already explicitly or implicitly formulated in the ancient world. It aims to situate both ancient and modern arguments about revolution in a context that goes beyond merely academic or cultural politics. It offers itself both as a contribution to our understanding of the ancient world and of the way in which it has been studied, and to our understanding of the rhetoric and politics of academic claims about the value of particular objects of study.

Here is the briefest of maps of the book.

The volume starts with politics and with two chapters looking in very different ways at two very different sorts of potential Greek political revolution. In the first chapter I examine a revolution the consequences of which have been claimed to be massive and far reaching; in chapter two James Davidson examines a revolution which has gone unnoticed until the last fifteen years. My chapter is concerned with that most central and most obviously political revolution, the democratic revolution. I examine where anglophone scholarship has located the democratic revolution, and look at the motives and consequences of particular decisions to claim Solon or Cleisthenes or Ephialtes as *the* democratic revolutionary. James Davidson's chapter is both about revolution and makes revolutionary claims, arguing that there was 'a revolution in time' as Greek societies embraced a system of age classes. Davidson explores some of the consequences of the cyclical construction of time produced by age classes and looks at the ways in which those age classes came to be seen to be inscribed upon the human body.

²⁴ Buxton (1999a).

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The concern for the body and its visual construction dominates also the third and fourth chapters. Jaś Elsner's chapter is concerned with what Gombrich explicitly termed 'the Greek revolution', the invention of Western art. Elsner argues that the changes in visuality need to be seen and redescribed against a wider background. Caroline Vout's chapter is the first of several chapters which take us out of classical Greece to see how the classical world was constructed in later antiquity. Vout is concerned with how Greekness was, or was not, signalled with the body in second-century AD Rome. By looking at what was happening in the Roman world Vout gives an exemplary study of the ways in which ancient and modern claims to a privileged status have often rested upon claims about what it was and is to be Greek.

With Thomas Harrison's chapter we turn away from the physical world. His chapter and Simon Goldhill's are both concerned with the construction or deconstruction of the supernatural world. Harrison revisits the contested issue of the rationality and irrationality of classical Greece and the implications of scholars' positions on this for their approach to the understanding of Greek religion. Goldhill further explores Greek identity in the Roman period with an examination of the construction of cult activity. Goldhill uses the vantage point of writers from this later period, looking at traditional religious cult activity from a world in which religious activity was increasingly diverse, to assess both the rhetoric and the performance of tradition and novelty.

In chapters seven and eight the spotlight returns to politics. Carolyn Dewald looks at the interaction of politics and the writing of history as she re-examines two thinkers whose own work is at the heart of the rationality/irrationality debate, Herodotus and Thucydides. She explores the 'development of secular narrative' against the background of modern discussions of the nature of the writing of history. Danielle Allen looks at the interaction of politics and philosophy as she puts a crucial move in the history of ethical philosophy into a larger political context, raising the issue of what is occluded by histories of ancient philosophy that look only at philosophical texts and by histories of politics which take account only of what was done.

The last three chapters take up further aspects of the history of philosophy, broadly understood. Catherine Osborne takes further the discussion of rationality, examining the way in which the history and revolutions of Greek philosophy have been constructed in the case of the history of Presocratic philosophy. She exposes the assumptions that have been imported in order to make the development of pre-Socratic thought a neat matter of one thinker responding to another, and the way in which

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Parmenides has been turned into a pivotal figure despite the absence of ancient evidence to support that view. While Osborne concentrates on modern constructions of the history of philosophy, Helen King examines the way in which medicine constructed a history for itself in antiquity, and explores the developing position of Hippocrates in that constantly re-invented history. In the final chapter Armand D'Angour focuses attention upon what does – or does not – make a major technological breakthrough in fact revolutionary via a discussion of musical technology and the 'New Music' of the later fifth century BC. D'Angour offers a number of ways of thinking about revolutions more generally, and so very helpfully serves to draw together ideas that are raised in other chapters in the collection.

What we hope is that by the end of this volume readers will both have rethought a number of aspects of what might be claimed to be revolutionary about the classical Greek world, and have given themselves a powerful reminder of the way all claims to revolution are situated – intellectually, socially, morally, politically (for a start) – given themselves a clearer sense of what those who write about it are doing to classical Greece as they make claims for what Greece has done for us.

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CHAPTER I

*When was the Athenian democratic revolution?**Robin Osborne*

If Greek had known revolutions there is a good case for thinking that the Aristotelian author of the *Constitution of the Athenians* might have reckoned Athenian political history to have been full of them. The chronological account of the Athenian constitution that makes up the first part of the work is summed up in chapter 41 by a list of the *metastaseis* that the Athenian constitution had undergone.¹ His third revolution, after those of Ion, Theseus and Draco, is that of Solon ‘from which the beginning of *dēmokratia* occurred’ (41.2). Cleisthenes’ constitution is then listed as ‘more populist (*dēmotikotera*) than Solon’s’, and after a sixth, entirely mythical, reactionary constitution reasserting the powers of the Areopagus after the Persian Wars, the seventh, marked out by Aristides but completed by Ephialtes, ushered in the age of the demagogues. The revolutionary importance of Athenian democracy is something of a given in modern literature, but whether Solon, Cleisthenes or Ephialtes should be credited as the revolutionary has been the object of prolonged dispute which still continues. In this chapter I look at both ancient constructions and modern anglophone constructions of the history of Athenian democracy, and try to tease out what is at stake in the arguments.²

I. ANCIENT CONSTRUCTIONS OF DEMOCRACY’S REVOLUTION

Herodotus both dates *dēmokratia* at Athens to the time of Cleisthenes and explicitly regards Cleisthenes’ reforms as a revolutionary moment. At 6.131.1,

¹ On *metastasis* see Rhodes (1981) on the *Constitution of the Athenians* 41.2. For the translation of *metastasis* as ‘revolution’ compare Todd (2000) 301 translating Lysias 30.10.

² I restrict myself to anglophone scholarship partly because situating scholars in their political context demands a greater knowledge of political history and academic politics than I can claim for the non-anglophone world and because for the French tradition, at least, others have covered much of the ground already. See Vidal-Naquet (1990/1995) chh. 7 and 8. Readers may find it both amusing and instructive to compare my explanation of scholarly constructions with that offered by Hansen (1994).