Thucydides on Athens' Democratic Advantage in the Archidamian War**.**

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Abstract:
In book 1 Thucydides' Corinthians attribute Athenian military success in the Archidamian war to an inherent national character. They empahsize the characteristics of agility, speed, and common-good seeking. Thucydides' readers come to realize that the Athenian "democratic advantage" stemmed from a superior capacity to organize useful knowledge. Knowledge management in military affairs can be learned; the Athenians fared poorly in the later stages of the war in part because they failed to countenance the possibility that their own techniques could be adapted by their rivals.

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Any community hoping to be successful in a hard-fought war, or any other competitive undertaking, must address the problem of social cooperation among its members. States with great human and material resources fail to realize their potential if they are incapable of eliciting adequate levels of cooperation. We might think, for example, of Macedon in the fifth-century. Macedon clearly had tremendous resources (as Philip II and Alexander III were later to demonstrate), yet until the mid-fourth century the rulers of Macedon were unable to capitalize upon them. One familiar means used by rulers to secure cooperation is coercion: Subjects do as they are told by the authorities, whether they want to or not, because they fear punishment. Centralized authority, in the form of hierarchical command and control, thus results in the desired ends of ensuring cooperation and capturing its value for public purposes. If the central political authority is weak, as evidently it was in fifth-century Macedon, high levels of cooperation are difficult to achieve, and state effectiveness is likely to suffer accordingly.[1]

1. The puzzle of democratic advantage

To the extent to which people are genuinely free to do as they wish, the power of public authorities to coerce is, by definition, correspondingly weak. In a democracy that values freedom (for example, fifth-century Athens), there is relatively less room for hierarchical command and control; social cooperation is to a greater degree dependent on voluntary choices by individuals. In this case, if the community is to realize the public benefits of cooperation, citizens must be offered good reasons to cooperate. If citizens of a democratic state do not believe that they have good reasons to choose cooperation, and if, consequently, citizens attempt to free ride on the cooperation of others by defecting from their military duties in time of war, the democratic state is unlikely to succeed against authoritarian rival states better able to coerce cooperation. Based on this sort of argument, some influential contemporary theorists of organizations have argued that democracies are inherently inefficient and therefore likely to be uncompetitive relative to authoritarian systems.[2]

How, then, are we to explain documented cases in which a democracy, for example Athens in era of the Archidamian War, does well in fierce and sustained competition? Following a recent article by Kenneth Schultz and Barry Weingast (2003), we may call this the puzzle of democratic advantage.[3] This chapter argues that Thucydides addressed a version of the democratic advantage puzzle, and did so in a way that anticipates some important modern developments in social science. I have argued in detail elsewhere (Ober 1998, chapter 2) that Thucydides was a stern critic of core aspects of Athenian democracy. There, I argued that Thucydides provides his readers with a structural explanation for Athens' failure in the second phase of the Peloponnesian War, an explanation that centers on what he supposed was an inherently flawed relationship

between democratic political orators and their mass audiences. I concluded that Thucydides' implicit chain of reasoning -- that the structural flaws of democracy led inevitably to catastrophic policy failures, that in turn inevitably triggered a downward spiral of civil conflict, and would ultimately spell the end of democratic Athens as a major player on the Greek scene -- was falsified by post-Peloponnesian War history. Although I see little value in rehearsing at length my assessment of Thucydides' explanation for how democracy may have contributed to Athens' failure, or the limitations of that explanation, readers of this chapter should keep in mind the fact (as I take it to be) that explaining Athenian success in the Archidamian War was only one part of Thucydides' larger argument about democracy and state capacity.

Thucydides' historical narrative of the Archidamian phase of the war describes a democracy that did much better against Sparta and its Peloponnesian League than some contemporary observers had imagined would be possible (e.g. Thuc. 5.14.3). Thucydides' narrative presents Athens in the era of the Archidamian War as a state that was outstanding in its capacity to elicit voluntary social cooperation in wartime – this is the case both before and after the onset of the plague and the death of Pericles. I will argue that, through his presentation of both speeches and narrative, Thucydides provides his readers with an implicit explanation for Athens' democratic advantage: In the period of the Archidamian war, Athenian democratic institutions and political culture successfully overcame two related problems that make it hard for free societies to secure the benefits of social cooperation. These problems are now discussed by modern social scientists under the rubrics of collective action and knowledge management.[4]

My aim in this chapter is to show that explaining the roots of Athens' democratic advantage was an important part of Thucydides' account of the first phase of the Peloponnesian War, and that his explanation hinged on collective action and knowledge management. I have recently argued at length (Ober 2008) that Athens' democratic institutional arrangements *did in fact* solve problems of collective action and knowledge management, and that this provides at least a partial explanation for Athens' relative success in the competitive environment of the Greek poleis from the late sixth century through the late fourth century B.C. Thus, one conclusion of this chapter will be that Thucydides' explanation for Athens' democratic advantage was basically right, even though (per my earlier work, cited above) his implied theory regarding democracy's structural flaws was wrong insofar is it could not explain Athenian resilience in the post-war era.

This chapter proceeds as follows: Section 2 defines collective action and knowledge management, and argues that these problems were familiar to Athenians by the early fourth century B.C. Section 3 introduces Thucydides as a theorist of the democratic advantage. Section 4 uses a speech by the Corinthians in book 1 of Thucydides' history to establish the basic scheme of innovative Athens versus path-dependent Sparta. Section 5 assesses key passages in Pericles' Funeral Oration to show that Thucydides recognized the centrality of collective action and knowledge management to Athens' democratic advantage. Sections 6 and 7 consider Thucydides' historical narrative of the military campaigns at Mytilene in 428/7 and Pylos in 425, demonstrating that Athenian capacity to overcome collective action and knowledge management problems is elucidated by Thucydides' narrative of each campaign. Section 8 offers some general conclusions, returning to the issues of why, according to

Thucydides, Athens' democratic advantage did not result in victory in the Peloponnesian War, and the validity of Thucydides' analysis of Athenian success and failure.

2. Collective action and knowledge management

The potential problems associated with collective action and knowledge management were well enough understood by the late fifth and early fourth century BC to provide some of the framing assumptions for Athenian Old Comedy. Consider, for example, a scene in Aristophanes' postwar play, *The Assembly-Women*.[5] Earlier in the play, the women of Athens had taken over the polis and had passed legislation mandating that all movable property is to be brought to a communal storehouse. Citizens were to dine at public expense from these communal stores. As our scene opens, a citizen is collecting his household goods, preparing to transport them to the common storehouse in conformity with the new law. He is confronted by a skeptical second citizen, who tells the first citizen that it as foolish to cooperate with the new rules. The second citizen asserts that he will not transport his own goods until he sees everyone else bringing *theirs*. (lines 770-72). The two citizens argue over the rationality of cooperation with the new regime, and the scene ends with the first citizen continuing with his cooperative plan of contributing his goods and the second citizen hoping to avoid contributing anything while gaining a share of the common meal.

This vignette captures, in a few witty lines, the problem of collective action: How can a free society enjoy the benefits of social cooperation in the face of rationally self-interested behavior of individuals who may choose courses of action that promote their own private utility at the expense of the public good? The skeptic is an aspiring free rider who seeks to persuade the first citizen that cooperation will result in a "sucker's payoff." By this I mean that if some do cooperate by donating their goods to the public store, others may choose to free-ride on his cooperation by sharing in benefits they refuse to help to provide: In this scenario cooperators are losers because their own costly cooperation subsidizes the welfare of non-cooperators.[6]

The democratic system may be robust enough to survive a few free riders, but free riding threatens the large-scale voluntary cooperation that, in Aristophanes' play, the new social order will require. Even if there are no actual free riders, even if everyone actually prefers the new order, in the absence of common knowledge regarding preferences and intentions, there remains a problem of pluralistic ignorance. No one can be sure that there are no free riders, and thus everyone fears a sucker's payoff. The only way anyone can be sure that be there is no reason to fear a sucker's payoff is to know that everyone else is cooperating. But if each of us refuses to cooperate until he sees everyone else doing so first, then no one will make the first move. The coordination problem arises because it is irrational for the skeptic *or anyone else* to cooperate until he sees everyone else doing so first. Of course, some people, like the cooperative first citizen in *Assemblywomen*, may choose to cooperate in the absence of knowledge of all others' behavior; if enough citizens do so it may induce a cascade of cooperation and thus solve the problem. Thucydides was well aware of this problem. He sought to define the ideological conditions under which politically relevant common knowledge could be produced among free citizens, and under which cooperation under conditions of incomplete common knowledge would be the default choice of free citizens.[7]

Thucydides was also aware of two related knowledge management problems. The problem of dispersed knowledge arises because the information necessary for achieving some social good is dispersed among many minds – it is possessed by many different individuals. Each holds, as it were, one piece of the puzzle, but the puzzle cannot be solved unless each chooses to disclose his or her information. Privately held information, like privately held goods, may be valuable. Thus, holders of private knowledge may be unwilling to disclose what they knows for fear of a sucker's payoff: The collective action problem, discussed above, may prevent a community from finding the answer to a problem that could, theoretically, be answered if all were willing to disclose what they know. Even if all are willing to disclose their private information, there must be proper mechanisms in place to organize the solution space in which knowledge will be shared and transformed into policy. Dispersed knowledge is especially important for organizations operating in changing environments, because when dispersed knowledge is disclosed, under the right conditions, the result is innovation.[8]

Thucydides was very concerned with the balance between innovation and learning. It is obvious that some kinds of social learning (mastery of routines) can be valuable for collectivities – including business organizations and states. Learning allows people jointly involved in productive processes to reap the benefits of routinization. By figuring out a good way to do something, and then teaching people consistently to do things that same way, the collective can save time and effort -- think of a production line in a factory, or the Spartan phalanx. Yet, as modern organizational theorists have demonstrated, too much routine learning can be counter-productive. When people invest a lot of energy in learning to do something one way, they typically become deeply invested in doing it that way, even if some new approach would work better because the external conditions have changed. This is sometimes described as the problem of path dependency. Changed environments require organizations to develop innovative responses if they are to continue to do well relative to innovating competitors. It made every good sense for Greek poleis to seek to gain the value associated with routine learning. Certainly this is one reason for Sparta's success in the later sixth and fifth centuries. But in the face of new conditions that, as Thucydides repeatedly emphasizes, emerge in times of war, poleis capable of experimentation and innovation were likely to do relatively better than their more path-dependent rivals. Of course innovation without routinization can lead to continually reinventing the wheel and making unnecessary mistakes. Getting the learning/innovation balance right was a major challenge to the leading Greek poleis in the era of the Peloponnesian War.[9]

Democratic states, ancient and modern, confront collective action and knowledge management problems, as do all other forms of purposeful organization. As Aristophanes and Thucydides recognized, these issues are especially clear in democratic states, which lack some of the coercive apparatus of authoritarian states. States at war are particularly hard pressed to solve problems of collective action and knowledge management. As Thucydides saw, the success or failure of a democracy at war will be, in part, a function of how well or poorly collective action and knowledge management problems are addressed.

3. Thucydides as a theorist of democratic advantage

Like Aristophanes, Thucydides was very concerned with collective action. He saw that opportunities for free riding were, to an extent, regime-specific. That is to say, by expanding the range of choices available to free citizens, and by eliminating social sanctions typical of traditional face-to-face Greek communities, democracy in the Athenian style also opened up new opportunities for aspiring free-riders. Moreover, the relationship between political regime and the management of useful knowledge was, for Thucydides, integrally related to the problem of collective political action – especially in democracies like Athens. Along with his concern for explaining the roles played by the choices of leaders and by the power-seeking behavior of states, Thucydides explored the social effects of political institutions. He shows his readers why certain poleis with democratic institutions and political ideology did better than expected in competition with their rivals. This positive institutional/ideological effect of democracy on performance was, in Thucydides' analysis, in large part a product of an enhanced capacity for innovation and more flexible forms of social learning associated with the democratic management of useful knowledge.

In his famous assessment of Pericles in book 2, Thucydides offers a retrospective of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides is at pains to show that that *Athens could have won*. He notes (2.65.13) that Pericles was confident that Athens would prevail if the Athenians avoided foolish strategic errors. Thucydides makes it clear that, in his view, Pericles was correct in this assessment because of Athens' superiority in human and material resources. Thucydides explains, early in his *History* (1.89-117), how the sources of Athenian greatness had been identified and built up under thoughtful leaders, especially Themistocles and Pericles. The two Periclean speeches to the Athenian assembly in Thucydides' text focus on Athenian resources and the importance of national cohesion.[10] The later books of Thucydides' *History* recount how those extraordinary resources were subsequently squandered. The fault is laid at the door of inferior post-Periclean leaders who proved incapable of controlling a willful demos. But that failure of leadership was exacerbated, according to Thucydides, by the degeneration of the high level of willed social cooperation and effective knowledge management that had characterized Athens in the era of Pericles' leadership.[11]

Here, we focus first on Thucydides' assessment of the habits of behavior that allowed Athens to arrive at its position of preeminence in the years before the outbreak of the war and his account of complex and effective Athenian military operations in the early years of the war. Thucydides' narrative demonstrates that democratic Athens had grown to a position of greatness in the Greek world because the Athenians proved capable of identifying and consistently capturing the benefits of social cooperation among a population of free citizens, each of whom was rationally seeking his own advantage and making choices accordingly. The result of the Athenian alignment of *rational* individual-good-seeking and *political* common-good-seeking was a record of state growth fueled by successful innovation across a range of public endeavors – from the development of a great naval empire, to a sophisticated and ambitious program of public architecture, to the efflorescence of intellectual, artistic, and performance culture. Cooperation was encouraged by ideological as well as by institutional means. Athenians were convinced, both by the rhetoric of their leaders and by the evidence of growing Athenian power and wealth, that acting in the common good was indeed conducive to the benefit of each individual. Free-riding was discouraged by legal sanctions while informal

cultural sanctions took on new forms in the democratic institutional contexts of the people's courts and the citizen assembly.[12]

Meanwhile, the Athenian state developed new ways to aggregate what its diverse membership knew and to coordinate action across that diverse membership. The net result of the Athenian socio-political system, as depicted by Thucydides, was to foster the potential of a high-performing polis, one that excited wonder and fear among its Greek rivals. That is only part of the story -- we must never forget that Thucydides is also concerned with an institutionalized Athenian tendency to error, and with how Athenian potential was squandered. But he clearly wanted his readers to understand how democratic Athens became capable of flourishing in the hyper-competitive environment of the Greek city-states.

4. Corinthian assessment of Athenian exceptionalism

In a much-discussed passage in Book 1 of Thucydides' history, ambassadors from Corinth urged their Spartan allies to declare war upon Athens by describing the underlying character of the Athenian people.[13] Although this dramatic and rhetorically elegant description of the Athenian character is put in the mouths of Athens' enemies, its basic points are substantially confirmed in the course of Thucydides' history. I suggest that the Corinthian assessment is a reasonably good guide to Thucydides' own understanding of why Athens was successful in the Archidamian War.[14]

The passage focuses on three key Athenian characteristics, and blends these into a "character portrait" of the highly productive and overall successful polis. This is summed up in the first column of Table 1.

[Table about here]

According to Thucydides' Corinthians, Athenians manifest three success-related characteristics. First, they are *agile* -- fast, innovative, and flexible. By seamlessly conjoining deliberation with action, they accomplish their designs more quickly than expected. They are technically advanced, experienced, and constantly seek to increase technical capacity by refining their skills and finding new uses for them. Next, they are *ambitious*. They are resilient risk-takers, dissatisfied with current possessions and accomplishments, believing that they can always do and get more. They take pleasure in hard work. They willingly face danger and are undeterred when certain of their enterprises fail. They are restless, future-oriented, outward-looking and thus do not spend much time resting at home or in crying over spilt milk. Finally, they *cooperative*, working together to seek common-ends. They sacrifice short-term individual and private goods for the long-term common advantage of the polis.

Although the Athenians appear, in one sense, unique among the Greek poleis, they were also, in the Corinthian estimation, exemplary. Because of their foreign policy successes, the Athenian behavioral style was coming to define the cutting edge of contemporary Greek political culture. The thrust of the Corinthians' critical contrast between the agile, ambitious, and rationally cooperative Athenians and the path-dependent, complacent, and self-centered Spartans is that those who are unwilling or unable to adopt Athenian methods are doomed to be left behind in the race for preeminence.

Thucydides' subsequent narrative of events complicates this scenario, and each of the positive Athenian attributes turns out to have a negative corollary – these are listed in the Table, column 3. Negative factors were exacerbated by the changing environment of interstate competition. The power gained through Athenian innovation, hard work, and social cooperation led to the growth of fear among other states. There was a growing realization among the other Greeks that allowing Athenian power to grow unchecked would result in their own permanent eclipse. With this realization came increasing willingness to take risks by challenging Athenian hegemony. Moreover, although in the early stages of the war Athens enjoyed clear technical advantages, e.g. in sophisticated strategic planning and complex land/sea operations, Athens' rivals eventually caught on. Thucydides' narrative repeatedly demonstrates that Athens had no monopoly on innovation.[15]

Thucydides suggests that in the end negative structural features internal to Athenian democracy, in conjunction with the growing ability of Athens' rivals to innovate new solutions, to take risks, to build coalitions, and to learn from the Athenian example, led to Athens' failure to fulfill Pericles' expectations of victory over the Peloponnesians. Yet Thucydides' historical narrative of the Archidamian War also demonstrates the general validity of the Corinthian portrait. Despite their mistakes and the loss of Pericles' leadership early in the war, the Athenians prove to be formidable and resilient opponents to the Spartans. What accounts for the emergence and persistence of Athenian agility, ambition, and cooperation? For Thucydides' Corinthians these three core attributes were simply facts of Athenian character (*êthos*): Athenians were just naturally agile, ambitious and rationally cooperative, in the same way that Spartans were naturally slow, risk-averse, and self-centered (Table 1, column 2). But for Thucydides, and for us, as his readers, innate national character is an inadequate explanation for the behavior typical of a given human community.[16]

5. Pericles on Athenian exceptionalism

In Thucydides' history political culture offers one key to unlocking the mysteries of social cooperation. He recognized that political culture is learned behavior, arising from a community's political and legal institutions and its established political practices.[17] This political explanation of Athenian exceptionalism is to the fore in the famous Funeral Oration of Pericles in Thucydides book 2. Two important passages bear directly on why free citizens might rationally choose to cooperate in the face of collective action problems, and on how dispersed knowledge could be brought together in ways that would facilitate innovation without losing the benefits of social learning. Thucydides' Pericles asserts that Athens is characterized by a culture of open access and he describes the Athenian participatory decision-making process.[18] Pericles asserts that, in stark contrast to the paranoiac, secretive, and discipline-obsessed Spartans, Athenians enjoy an equal opportunity to learn from all those public sources that render the city "a common possession," as well as an equal opportunity to share the fruits of their own learning.[19] Pericles embraces the notion that there is no "standard Athenian civic curriculum" nor specialized institutions for teaching courage; all that (and more) is learned by free citizens as part of their life in a free city. Nor are there any pre-established criteria for assuming the role of public teacher. It is simply a matter of manifesting a demonstrable

"excellence" – of possessing political skills and voluntarily disclosing such knowledge as benefits the society as a whole.

The burden of Pericles' speech is that democratic Athens is distinctively meritocratic, distinctively free and open, and distinctively great.[20] Pericles describes Athens as a community of responsibly self-interested individuals. He asserts that politically relevant knowledge is indeed widespread among Athenian citizens -- even among those who focus primarily upon their own affairs. He also seeks to explain the role of mutual instruction and deliberative rhetoric in democratic decision-making bodies. Pericles' Athenians recognize that in a given public discussion, only some people will actually serve as public speakers. But *all* citizens can, and indeed are expected to share in making decisions as participating members of the judging audience of voters. This means that the voters are not passive recipients of the rhetorical performances of public speakers. Rather they are expected to be active judges, fully capable of dismissing the incompetent. Pericles acknowledges the possibility that some may seek to free-ride on the public goods produced by the political activity of others. He states that those who do *not* engage in the give and take of mutual instruction, those who would selfishly restrict their acquisition or employment of knowledge to serve only their private ends, are not just as "apolitical" but "useless." By implication these free riders deserve to be exposed as contemptible and sanctioned as such.[21]

According to Thucydides' Pericles, it is a conjunction of a unique form of government and a unique public culture that fosters the rational fusion of public and private interests. This is what facilitates the unique Athenian capacity to conjoin bold and decisive action with thoughtful public deliberations. Deliberation over policy becomes a public process of teaching and learning by accessing openly available information and judging reasoned arguments. Pericles describes the democratic collectivity as a set of choice-making individuals, each freely striving to improve his personal position. He overtly contrasts this democratic Athenian "collective action based" understanding of a cooperative group, an understanding that emerges from an equilibrium among the rational individual choices made by free agents, with the Spartan approach to community. He suggests that Sparta's approach is ultimately based on coercion: on compulsory conformity, education as indoctrination and routinized learning, conditioned behavior, hostility to any expression of individual difference, and rejection of new or foreign ideas. Pericles' speech culminates in his vision of Athens, not only as an education to its own citizens, but also as a model that others might fruitfully seek to emulate.

Thucydides' method, as a historian and social theorist, is to intersperse speeches with historical narrative (Ober 2001). Accordingly, the idealizing theoretical account of how the roots of democratic advantage in Pericles' Funeral Oration ought to be confirmed in to his historical narrative. I focus here on two incidents that Thucydides describes in very considerable detail: the revolt of Mytilene in 428-27 and the campaign at Pylos in 425. One could, of course, choose other incidents from the Archidamian war to show how things sometimes went badly wrong in Athenian military operations.[22] But, as noted above, the primary concern here is to understand how Thucydides explains Athens' remarkable rise to power and wealth, which led to the huge resource base with which the Athenians began the war, and why, contrary to contemporary Greek expectations, Athens did relatively well in the Archidamian War.

6. Mytilene, 428-427 B.C

Thucydides provides his readers with a vivid account of the Athenian response to the revolt of the oligarchic polis of Mytilene in the summer of 428 B.C.[23] After news of the revolt was brought to Athens from several quarters, the Athenians dispatched 40 warships to Lesbos. The Mytilenean oligarchs proved ill-prepared to defend themselves. After the Athenians arrived at Lesbos and established a naval blockade, the oligarchs' hopes were pinned on receiving support from Sparta. Mytilenean envoys ran the blockade. Arriving in Olympia, they emphasized to the Peloponnesians that the Athenians were stretched thin as a result of plague and multi-theater operations; they claimed that a renewed Spartan land/sea operation against Athens would be sure of success. The Spartans were persuaded, but in the event their allies were slow to muster, "being both engaged in harvesting their grain and sick of making expeditions" (3.15.2).

Meanwhile the Athenians responded to the renewed Peloponnesian threat with a devastating show of force, manning 100 more triremes by embarking most of the available manpower of the city. Thucydides notes that this summer (428) saw a record number of Athenian ships in service, some 250 in all, and that the expense was immense.[24] In order to pay for the necessary operations, the Athenians levied upon themselves a 200-talent property tax and also sent commanders abroad to collect imperial funds. With their 100 extra warships the Athenians descended upon the Peloponnesian coast, ravaging at will. The discouraged Spartans disbanded their half-assembled invasion force. They did, however, prepare to send a fleet to Mytilene under the Spartan general Alcidas.

With the invasion threat from the Peloponnese stymied, the Athenians dispatched their general, Paches, to Mytilene, along with additional forces,. The Athenian hoplites sent out with Paches rowed themselves in triremes to Lesbos, and then built a siege wall to complement the naval blockade. The Spartan fleet under Alcidas failed to show up in Lesbos. Hard pressed by the siege, the Mytilenean oligarchs armed their lower classes, who then demanded distributions of grain. The oligarchs now surrendered unconditionally to Paches.

The revolt suppressed, Paches chased Alcidas and his fleet out of the Aegean. The Spartan admiral had botched what Thucydides regarded as real opportunities, accomplishing little beyond slaughtering some prisoners of war taken from Athens' subject allies. Paches meanwhile crushed the remaining pockets of resistance and was able to demobilize most of his Athenian forces before summer's end. He awaited orders from Athens regarding the disposition of his Mytilenean prisoners. In the aftermath of the famous Mytilenean Debate, the Athenians spared the bulk of the population, but executed over 1000 Mytileneans whom they regarded as especially culpable, and confiscated the agricultural land of Mytilene.

The operations of 428-427 seem to confirm the Corinthian contrast between agile, ambitious, and cooperative Athenians and inept Spartans -- and indeed to highlight a distinction between Athenian capacities and those of the Peloponnesian coalition. Each side attempts to launch a complex land/sea operation on short notice, an operation which requires both coordination and resources. The Peloponnesians fail to pull it off because they put the continuity of their own agricultural enterprises ahead of defeating Athens and have become sick of service in foreign expeditionary forces. The Spartans eventually launch a fleet, but its commander moves too slowly to aid the Mytileneans, and thinks too

narrowly to accomplish any other strategic end. The Mytilenean oligarchs themselves seem incapable of reasoning through their planned revolt; when the distant hope of effective Spartan intervention falls through, the only card they have to play, arming the Mytilenean demos, proves fatal to their enterprise: The gap between the interests of rulers and ruled in oligarchic Mytilene dooms the capacity of Mytilene, as a community, to cooperate in resisting Athens' attack.

By contrast, the Athenians act according to the spirit of the Corinthian assessment, despite the devastation of the plague and their multiple commitments elsewhere. Their informal intelligence network brings advance warnings of Mytilenean intentions which allows them to intervene before the enemy's essential preparations have been completed. Athenian military pressure can thus achieve more with less force. The Athenian military response to the revolt is masterful and multi-faceted. The closely coordinated naval blockade of Mytilene, siegeworks, land operations against the other Lesbian cities, and naval patrols in the Aegean accomplish the desired end with dispatch.[25] The threat of a Peloponnesian land/sea invasion of late summer 428 fails to panic the Athenians. By digging deep into their reserves of human and material resources they launch a stunningly large naval force with which they ravage the Peloponnesian coast. This force, like the reinforcements that accompany Paches to Mytilene, is manned by Athenians heavy infantry: Athenian hoplites, it turns out, are capable oarsmen, and they take up oars without the foot-dragging that stymied plans for a Peloponnesian land/sea expedition.[26]

The operations of 428 and 427 reveal that the all-important technical expertise of rowing warships at an "Athenian standard" was widely dispersed within the Athenian citizen population.[27] When the occasion demanded it, there was no resistance on the part of "middling" hoplites to take on the oarsman's role usually fulfilled by "lower-class" citizens. Athenian infantrymen willingly risked their bodies, not only by standing tall on the battlefield, but also by bending over an oar. Athenian military proficiency would not suffer because the hoplites refused to assume the role of oarsmen; neither technical incapacity nor social distaste stood in the way of generating the required level of projectile power and at the right moment. Once again, there seems to be a clear connection between democratic culture, with its emphasis on basic equality among a socially diverse citizenry, the wide distribution of certain kinds of technical expertise, and Athenian military proficiency. Just as the Athenian hoplite accepted a lower-class fellow citizen as an equal when sitting in Assembly or on a jury, so too he accepted the "lower-class" role of rower when the common good demanded it. And upon arrival at his destination, he proved to be a willing and skilled wall-builder in the bargain.[28]

The capacity of the individual Athenian to acquire a wide range of technical skills, and to recombine various of his diverse abilities into new "skill sets" as the situation demanded, meant that the Athenians could be flexible in deploying their manpower reserves. The military narrative gives substance to what might otherwise seem an empty boast in Pericles' funeral oration: "I doubt if the world can produce a man, who where he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies, and graced by so happy a versatility as the Athenian. And that this is no mere boast thrown out for the occasion, but plain matter of fact, the power (*dunamis*) of the state acquired by these habits proves (*semainei*)" (Thuc 2.41.1). For Thucydides' Pericles, then, it is the *dunamis* produced by individual Athenian technical versatility that it the proof of Athenian

exceptionalism, an exceptionalism that is (earlier in the funeral oration) explicitly associated with the democratic *politeia*, and with the special education and unlimited opportunity to excel that it offers to each Athenian citizen. What is particularly striking about the Mytilene narrative is that Thucydides' readers now realize that the ability to excel is not limited to upward social mobility, but implies mobility to any point on the "social status/labor map" that the state demanded.

7. Pylos, 425 B.C.

In the summer of 425 the Athenians dispatched 40 ships to Sicily. Demosthenes, a sporadically successful general, currently out of office, sailed along; he had received special permission from the Assembly to borrow this fleet for side-operations against the Peloponnese en route to Sicily if the situation seemed to warrant it.[29] Badgered by Demosthenes and then forced by the weather, the fleet commanders ordered a stop-over at Pylos, a headland on the southwestern Peloponnesian coast in the Spartan-controlled territory of Messenia. Demosthenes urged that the strategic site be fortified and employed as a base for supporting local anti-Spartan Messenian resistance fighters. Soon the Athenian rowers, "wanting occupation" (4.4.1), began to fortify the place. They had no masonry tools to cut stone blocks, but they made do, fitting field stones together to form walls and carrying mortar on their backs.

The Spartans at first failed to respond to the Athenian landing, and within six days the fortification at Pylos was defensible. Demosthenes was left at Pylos with a small garrison as the rest of the fleet continued on to Sicily. The Spartans now awakened to the danger; they dispatched 60 ships and a land force to Pylos, hoping to retake the headland before Athenian naval reinforcements could arrive. In preparation, the Spartans landed some 420 soldiers on the island of Sphakteria, which lay before Pylos. Faced with a formidable Spartan assault force, Demosthenes armed the oarsmen of his garrison with whatever weapons and shields he could assemble. Two days of Spartan assaults failed to budge the Athenian defenders. Now an Athenian relief fleet arrived, disabled the Spartan naval force and, immediately began circling Sphakteria, thereby preventing the safe withdrawal of the Spartan soldiers stranded on the island. Meanwhile, the Spartan land force maintained its land siege of the fort at Pylos.

While diplomatic negotiations attempted to resolve this double blockade/siege situation, the Spartans resupplied their men trapped on Sphakteria. Helot blockade-runners were paid by their Spartan masters to smuggle provisions over to the island by boat and by divers who swam under water, dragging skins packed with prepared food. The siege ended when the Athenian politician Cleon arrived with a large force of light-armed men, landed on Sphakteria, killed half of the Spartan soldiers and brought the rest back to Athens as prisoners of war – all within 20 days of setting out from Athens.

The Pylos campaign reprises key Athenian characteristics. Athenian commanders at Pylos are innovative and effective: Lacking formal authority, Demosthenes employs persuasion to accomplish his strategic ends. As soon as Cleon assumes command he recruits exactly the right forces needed to reduce the Spartans on Sphakteria. At Pylos Cleon and Demosthenes work smoothly together; the two "unofficial" generals launch the assault with neither delay nor undue haste, and Cleon meets his self-imposed deadline without apparent difficulty. The Athenian oarsmen go their fellow-citizen hoplites, who had rowed themselves to Mytilene and built a siege wall, one better. Unwilling to remain

inactive, they take up Demosthenes' suggestion that they build a fortification capable of holding off the Spartan army, and they then fight successfully as infantrymen with improvised weaponry against overwhelming odds.[30]

Thucydides' narrative invites us to compare the self-confident, proactive behavior of the Athenian oarsmen at Pylos with the passivity of the Spartan hoplites on Sphakteria. The Spartans prove incapable of formulating a plan to save themselves. It is not surprising, in retrospect, that they failed to defeat the huge force of light-armed men brought against them. But why need they have remained stranded on Sphakteria in the first place? Thucydides tells us that helots, motivated by promise of material gain, successfully transported supplies to the island by boat and by swimming. Why, then, could the Spartans on the island not risk using the boats or swim back from the island, to the safety of their comrades on the shore? Did it never occur to the Spartan soldiers on Sphakteria to take any action for which they had not been trained and had not been mandated by their home government? Thucydides does not tell us.[31] But the contrast between the innovative, active Athenian oarsmen at Pylos and the passive Spartan infantrymen on Sphakteria underlines the contrast between Athenian and Spartan behavior patterns set out in the Corinthian assessment and in Pericles' funeral oration.

The Mytilene and Pylos campaigns illustrate Athenian naval and land-sea operations at their most effective and are clearly meant by Thucydides to make a point. They stand as practical manifestations of the "Corinthian Assessment" and therefore of the organizational proficiency that enabled democratic Athens to build an Aegean empire, to confront Sparta head-on during the Periclean era, and then to fight the Peloponnesians successfully in the years following Pericles' death.

8. Conclusions

Thucydides saw that Athenian military success was substantially based on coordinated cooperation among citizens and the efficient use of social and technical knowledge – just as he regarded Athenian military failures (most spectacularly in Sicily in 415-413) as examples of what happens when democratic management of knowledge goes awry. Taken together, the Corinthian assessment and the Funeral Oration offer a theory of democratic advantage, suggesting that Athenian military proficiency arose and was sustained by a distinctive approach to coordinating the actions of large numbers of uncoerced volunteers and the effective management of knowledge. The Athenian approach to managing knowledge drew upon the talents of leaders (like Pericles, Paches, Demosthenes, and Cleon). But it also rested upon a broad and deep foundation: Shared social knowledge that transcended class lines, widely distributed expertise in regard to key skills (e.g. rowing), and deep experience in the exercise of deliberative capacity by a sociologically diverse population. The distinctive Athenian approach to the distribution and employment of useful knowledge is linked with the political practices and ideological commitments that Pericles argued were characteristic of Athens' participatory democracy. It was because they were well-schooled in the civic culture of democracy that the Athenians were willing to disclose what they knew, to aggregate their knowledge via deliberative processes, and to act cooperatively and decisively in consequence of collective decisions.

While Thucydides is certainly attentive to the issue of institutionalized leadership, he also points to the essential role played by the versatility of the individual Athenian

trooper. The Mytilenean and Pylos operations demonstrate the asymmetry between the capacity for collective action of Athens and the Peloponnesian alliance and between the knowledge-bases and potential for innovation of the individual Athenian combatant and his Spartan counterpart. In 428/7 the Peloponnesians prove utterly ineffectual at coordinated land-sea operations. At Sphakteria the Spartan hoplites are rendered passive victims by their incapacity to think or act outside of their accustomed roles as hoplites – their highly routinized specialization in land war seemingly incapacitates them when confronted by an unexpected situation. By contrast the Athenian warrior (whether hoplite or oarsman) possessed a broad-based skill-set. He had both the capacity and willingness to adapt his skills to unfamiliar conditions, improvising tools as necessary to accomplish the goals that he set for himself in conjunction with his fellows.

It is all too easy to essentialize that difference, to treat it as a matter of inherent national character rather than learned (and thus potentially imitable) behavior. The Corinthians, of course, *do* essentialize Athenian character in their assessment of the two sides before the war. But, so, Thucydides suggests, did the Athenians. In the run up to the attack on Sicilian Syracuse in 415, the Athenian citizenry willingly bought into Alcibiades' jingoistic claim (Thuc. 6.18) that Athenians would betray their own nature if they deferred ambitious imperialist projects. In reality, Athenian abilities were gained through the process of being educated in an openly accessible democratic culture. Imitation was not a simple matter, but it was quite possible.

In coming to believe, falsely, that their organizational capacities were both unique and innate, the Athenians failed to see that they faced in the Syracusans opponents who mirrored their own core attributes. In retrospect, Thucydides suggests, it was predictable that Syracuse would prove a much steeper challenge than Mytilene. Thucydides makes much of the similarities between Athens and Syracuse. Like Athens, Syracuse was a very large polis, with a democratic constitution -- and with the same associated habits of innovation, tenacity, and capacity to organize useful knowledge that, as I have argued, constituted Athens' own core capacity as a state organization.[32] Urged on by Alcibiades' rhetoric to "become their own true selves" by attacking Syracuse, Thucydides suggests that the Athenians began to believe in over-optimistic image of themselves and their capacities. They came to imagine that Athens was not only exceptional, but unique and imitable. As they debated whether and then how to invade Sicily they formed the false idea that a big enough invasion force would also be invincible.[33]

In seeking to understand the sources of democratic success and failure in war, we can learn a good deal from Thucydides' account of the Athenian approach to joint action and dispersed knowledge. Yet his history leaves much obscure. While Thucydides may have intended his history as a fully adequate account of the relationship between democracy and military success and failure (Ober 2005), taking it as such can lead to serious misunderstanding of fundamental processes. Thucydides focuses his historical attention on a war, rather than its aftermath. He focuses his institutional attention on rhetorical performances and the Athenian assembly. This double focus allows him to explain, to his own satisfaction, how Athens' democratic advantage was squandered in the later phases of the war. His approach cannot, however, adequately explain the growth of Athenian capacity, nor can it adequately explain Athens' democratic resilience in the years after 410 B.C. or the postwar recovery of the Athenian economy.

Explaining the emergence and persistence of democratic Athenian political culture, and determining how the democratic system of government worked to aggregate dispersed knowledge while balancing routinization with innovation, requires going beyond Thucydides' speeches and military narrative. We need to look beyond public rhetoric in mass assemblies and beyond the conduct of war. Thucydides' history can help us to formulate hypotheses about democracy and performance, and that his is an essential first step. The next step is testing those hypotheses which entails investigating a variety of Athenian governmental and economic institutions. It demands that we study how institutions and cultural practices changed over time. This extended investigation should help us to better grasp the relationship between democracy and war, by setting that relationship in the broader context of the relationship between democracy and social cooperation.[34]

I. "Modern" Athens: Strong performance	II. Traditional Sparta: Weak performance	III. Negative side of Athenian "modernity"
Agility • Speed • Innovation • Flexibility/versatility across domains	Clumsiness • Slowness • Conservatism • Domain-specific expertise	Decision gridlock, as a result of too much information, conflicting information
Ambition • Hard work • Risk taking • Future orientation	Complacency • Laziness • Risk averse • Past orientation	Rashness, failure to calculate downside risk. Over-ambitious leadership
Common-ends seeking • Public goods • Long term goals	Narrow, short-term self-interest seeking by groups and individuals	Free-riding, factionalism,

Table. The "Corinthian Assessment," in the context of Thucydides' narrative.

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Notes.

[1] Of course, fear of punishment is not the *only* reason that a subject of an authoritarian regime cooperates with orders; the authority may gain perceived legitimacy in various ways, e.g. via ideologies of divine right or national destiny. This chapter is adapted from a chapter in Ober in progress; for an overview of that larger project, see Ober 2009.

[2] See Michels 1962 [1911]; Williamson 1975, 1981, with discussion in Ober 2008, 102-106.

[3] On the empirical evidence for a democratic advantage in modern warfare, see Reiter and Stamm 2002. Modern explanations for the democratic advantage include the credibility of the commitments of democratic governments to repay sovereign debt (Schultz and Weingast 2003) and the so-called "bargaining hypothesis," that suggests that democracies will be able to mobilize large numbers of troops by offering the privileges of citizenship in exchange for military service (Scheidel 2005, with special reference to Athens). Balot (2001, 2004, and this volume) notes that democracy may encourages a rational form of courage. Hanson (1999) suggests that the ideological goals of democratic "wars of liberation" are enthusiastically endorsed by men under arms.The related issue of relationship between democracy and economic growth is also much debated; see Acemoglu and Robinson 2006 and summary of earlier work in Friedman 2005. Here, my goal is not explaining the democratic advantage, but explicating Thucydides' discussion of it.

[4] Thucydides as anticipating some key ideas of modern social science: Ober 2006.

[5] For Aristophanes in light of contemporary political theory, see Zumbrunnen 2004, 2006.

[6] On collective action problems as a product of rational choice see Olson 1965 and Hardin 1982. For a recent critique, see Tuck 2008. I discuss the application of rational choice theory to classical Greek history, and especially to Athenian democracy, in much greater detail in Ober 2008 and Ober 2009.

[7] On pluralistic ignorance and common knowledge, see Kuran 1995; Chwe 2001.

[8] The problem of dispersed knowledge was defined by Hayek 1945. On the value of Hayek's insight about dispersed knowledge, see, further, Anderson 2006; Sunstein 2007. Disclosure and innovation: Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus 1997; Wenger 1998.

[9] On innovation and learning, see Levitt and March 1988, March 1991, pointing to the dangers of "competency traps" in which people learn an inferior process too well and thus fail to experiment with superior processes, "superstitious learning" arising from too much success or too much failure, the difficulty of accurately recording and routinizing what is known, and differing interpretations of history.

[10] I take no position here on the much-discussed question of Thucydides' authorship of speeches in his text. For fuller discussion of interpretive problems in Thucydides scholarship, see Ober 1998 (chapter 2), 2001, 2006, with literature cited.

[11] I assessed Thucydides' critique of Athenian democracy and democratic knowledge in detail in Ober 1998, chapter 2. See also Kallet 2001.

[12] See, for example, Ober 1989, Christ 1990, Todd 1990, Johnstone 1999 for how this worked in practice.

[13] Thuc. 1.70.2-71: The Athenians are addicted to innovation (*neôteropoioi*) and their designs are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution …they are adventurous (*tolmêtai*) beyond their power, and daring (*kinduneutai*) beyond their judgment, and in danger they are sanguine (*euelpides*) … there is promptitude on their side … they are ever abroad … for they hope by their absence from home to extend their acquisitions … They are swift to follow up a success, and slow to recoil from a reverse. Their bodies they spend ungrudgingly in their country's cause; their intellect they jealously husband (*gnômê oikeiotatê*) to be employed in her service. A scheme unexecuted is with them a positive loss, a successful enterprise a comparative failure. The deficiency created by the miscarriage of an undertaking is soon filled up by fresh hopes; for they alone are enabled to call a thing hoped for a thing got, by the speed (*to tacheian*) with which they act upon their resolutions. Thus they toil on in trouble (*ponôn*) and danger (*kinduneuôn*) all the days of their life, with little opportunity for enjoying, being ever engaged in getting: their only idea of a holiday is to do what the occasion demands, and to them laborious occupation is less of a misfortune than the peace of a quiet life (*hêsuchia apragmona*). To describe their character in a word, one might truly say that they were born into the world to take no rest (*hêsuchia*) themselves and to give none to others. It is the rules as in craft, so in politics, that improvements ever prevail (*technês aiei ta epigignomena kratein*) and though fixed usages may be best for undisturbed communities, constant necessities of action must be accompanied by the constant improvement of technique (*epitechnêsis*) Thus it happens that the vast experience (*polupeirias*) of Athens has carried her further than you on the path of innovation.

[14] On the Corinthian assessment see Connor 1984, 43-47; Crane 1992, Kallet Marx 1993, 39; Crane 1998; Rood 1998, 235; Price 2001; Ober 2006.

[15] The flame-thrower at Delium in 424 (4.100) and the reinforced prows of the Syracusan triremes in the harbor battle of 413 (7.36, following a Corinthian precedent) are obvious mechanical examples, but cf. also Brasidas', Gylippus' innovative military strategies, each highlighted by Thucydides (and followed by Lysander's innovations, noted by Xenophon). Athenian/Peloponnesian conflict after the first several years of the war may be seen as an example of the "Red Queen" phenomenon, in which fast-moving, rapidly innovating rivals paradoxically appear to be motionless in relationship to one another: Barnett 2008.

[16] On Greek thinking about ethnicity and character, see further, Hall 1997, 2002.

[17] I have argued (Ober 1996, ch. 3), that, despite some meaningful institutional reforms, the similarities in basic political commitments point to more continuity than discontinuity in Athenian political culture from the fifth to the fourth century; cf. Millett 2000 for further discussion.

[18] Thuc. 2.39.1: Just as we conduct our political affairs (*politeuomen*) in respect to the community (*pros to koinon*) in a way that is characterized by a spirit of liberty (*eleutherôs*), so too is our everyday conduct of affairs with one another (2.37.2)… And we are very different from our opponents in respect to military security in various ways. For example, we openly share our polis as a common (*koinê*) possession. And we have no need to engage in periodic expulsions of foreigners aimed at preventing someone from learning or seeing something secret that might be of advantage to our enemies, since we don't depend on advance preparation or deception, but rather upon our own genuine courage. Meanwhile, in terms of education (*paideia*): our rivals seek after manliness by instituting a painful discipline that begins at childhood. But we live exactly as we please, and yet we are just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger.

Thuc. 2.40.2-3: We cultivate refinement without extravagance and we cultivate knowledge (*philosophoumen*) without becoming soft; wealth we employ more for use than for show, and we place the real disgrace of poverty not in admitting the fact but in failing to struggle against it. Here [in Athens] we assume responsibility (*epimeleia*) both for our own private (*oikeia*) affairs and for public matters (*politika*), so even those of us especially concerned with their own business are not lacking in knowledge of public affairs (*ta politika mê endeôs gnônai*). For we alone judge someone who assumes no share in the public sphere, not as just "apolitical" (*apragmôn*) but useless (*achreios*). And we ourselves can [collectively] judge rightly regarding affairs, even if [each of us] does not [individually] originate the arguments; we do not consider arguments to be an impediment to actions, but rather [we regard it as] essential to be previously instructed (*prodidachthênai*) by speech before embarking on necessary actions. We are distinctive also in that we hold that we are simultaneously persons who are daring and who vigorously debate (*eklogizesthai*) what they will put their hands to. Among other men ignorance (*amathia*) leads to rashness, while reasoned debate (*logismos*) just bogs them down. But the palm of courage will surely be adjudged most justly to those who best know the difference between hardship and pleasure, and yet are never tempted to shrink from risk.

[19] Whether the Spartans actually did regularly expel foreigners (or only did so at times of military emergency) is debatable: Rebenich 1998. But once again, it is the argument that Thucydides (through Pericles) is developing that is the main issue for our current purposes.

[20] Cf. Manville 1997.

[21] Cf. Brennan and Pettit 2004.

[22] Roisman 1993 offers detailed analyses of failed campaigns in the 420s, led by the general Demosthenes.

[23] Mytilene was among a handful of states within the empire that still contributed ships rather than tribute. The Athenian empire other included prominent oligarchic poleis (e.g. Chios and Miletus) as well as democracies.

[24] 3.17: the passage is regarded by some as spurious or misplaced. Cf. discussion of Gomme 1945 and Hornblower 1991 ad loc.

[25] It is important to avoid overstating the case: the Athenians never succeed in creating an impenetrable cordon, by land or sea (Greek navies were not good at blockades for technical reasons discussed by Gomme 1937; Harrison 1999). Spartan envoys get in and out of besieged Mytilene more or less at will, and Alcidas manages to get to the Ionian coast and back to the Peloponnese with his fleet intact. The point is not that the Athenians were flawless, but that they accomplished what they needed to, despite setbacks, and did so quickly.

[26] Things are different during the crisis period: Xenophon *Hell*. 1.6.31 claims that in 406 B.C. Athenian crews at Arginousai were inferior to the Peloponnesian counterparts. Presumably even in 427, the hoplite rowers could not be expected to carry out the highly sophisticated maneuvers characteristic of Phormio's squadron at Naupactus: 2.83-92.

[27] On the high level of skills demanded of the trireme rower, see Coates, Platis, and Shaw 1990; Rankov 1993; Strauss 1996. Many slaves and metics were also skilled rowers. Slaves in naval warfare: Hunt 1998 who argues in detail that Thucydides (like most other classical Greek historians) was averse to discussing the military contribution of slaves. Metics: Bakewell 2004.

[28] The ideology of the fifth-century Athenian hoplites is sometimes imagined as sharply distinguished from the ideology of the lower-class citizens (thetes) who served as rowers, e.g. by Raaflaub 1996 and Samons 1998. But see Hanson 1996; Pritchard 1998; Strauss 2000.

[29] On the Demosthenes' patchy record of as a commander, see Roisman 1993.

[30] Thucydides suggests that they were bored by inactivity, a suggestion which is no doubt correct, so far as it goes. But here Thucydides does not take us far enough. We must. I think, suppose that the Athenian troops had thought over Demosthenes' argument in favor of fortifying the headland, and had come to see his point. Although Thucydides tells us nothing of it, we should imagine a series of small-group face-to-face discussions taking place around camp fires and on work details. These discussions produce (through the overlapping memberships of these temporary sub-networks) an emerging consensus and

the oarsmen take action accordingly. They do so knowing full well that building the wall would leave at least some of them (those appointed to garrison duty) in a very high risk position for some time to come.

[31] Contrast, for example, the vivid account of the discussions, plans, and daring escape of the Plataeans, in the face of a Peloponnesian siege of their city: Thuc. 2.75-78, 3.20-24.

[32] On Thucydides' emphasis on the similarities between Athens and Syracuse in the late fifth century, see Ober 1996, 78-80.

[33] I offer a detailed analysis of the relevant passages in Ober 1998, chapter 2.

[34] This is the work undertaken, in a preliminary way, in Ober 2008.