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Alcibiades and the Politics of Rumor in Thucydides

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Around a god, so it is said, a world forms, and around a controversial and brilliant figure, a world of rumor.

Rumor,
Whose life is speed, whose going gives her force.
Timid and small at first, she soon lifts up
Her body in the air. She stalks the ground;
Her head is hidden in the clouds...
fast-footed
and lithe of wing, she is a terrifying
enormous monster with as many feathers
as she has sleepless eyes beneath each feather
(amazingly), as many sounding tongues
and mouths, and raises up as many ears.
(Virgil, *Aeneid* Book IV, lines 173–188. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum)

When this monster set her claws on Alcibiades in 415 BC, she not only frightened Athens, she contributed substantially to its ruin. My story is that story. It is about Alcibiades, therefore, about Athens, and about the politics of rumor.

I begin with Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*:

Alcibiades, the son of Clinias, made the most spirited case for the [Sicilian] expedition, partly because [1] he wanted to cross Nicias (with whom he had other political differences), and because Nicias had made a slanderous reference to him [in his speech to the Assembly opposing the expedition]. Mainly, however, [2] he desired to take command [of the expedition], hoping that it would be because of himself that Sicily and Carthage would be conquered—successes which would at the same time bring him personally both wealth and fame. [3] For because he was highly esteemed by the citizens (*tôn astôn*), he had desires that were too vast for his actual estate to support, both for horse-breeding and for other luxuries as well. [4] Later on, in fact, this had not a little to do with the downfall of the city of Athens. For [5] the common people (*hoi polloi*) were [6] frightened by the magnitude of the *paranoia* he exhibited with regard to his own person in his mode of life, and [7] by the ambition he showed in absolutely everything he undertook. So they believed that he wanted to become tyrant, and became his enemies. And even though [8]

his public management of the war was excellent, [9] each of them was so offended by his private habits that [10] they entrusted their affairs to other hands, and before long ruined the city.

(VI.15.2-5. Trans. Paul Woodruff)

Here [1-2] explains why Alcibiades opposed Nicias: [1] he was politically opposed to him, and annoyed by his slanderous remarks, and [2] he was ambitious for the honor and desirous of the wealth that defeating Sicily would bring. [3] explains why Alcibiades needed that money: the position of honor he enjoyed among the citizens led him to expenditures he couldn't afford. [4] explains what the consequences of [2-3] were: the common people were frightened [6] by the *paranomia* that Alcibiades exhibited in his private life and [7] by the ambition he exhibited in his public life into believing that he wanted to become tyrant, so that even though [8] in public life his conduct of the war was excellent, [9] the offensiveness of his private habits led them [10] to put public affairs into other hands.

Three contrasts are crucial in the passage: that between the (urban) citizens mentioned in [3] and the common people mentioned in [5]; that between public and private in [6-9]; and that between *paranomia* and its (implicit) opposite-what is in accord with *nomos*. Each requires discussion.

Of the eight occurrences of *astos* in Thucydides (II.34.4, 36.4, IV.94.1, VI.15.3, 16.3, 27.2, 30.2, 54.2), almost all are used to pick out the (free) citizens of Athens, as opposed to the foreigners (resident aliens) or slaves. *Hoi polloi*, on the other hand, are invariably the poor and pro-democratic among the citizens, by contrast with the few usually pro-oligarchic wealthy ones. The idea, then, is that it is Alcibiades' rank among the citizens in general that has led him to the extravagant expenditures which, together with his private *paranomia*, have made him suspect among the poor. Alcibiades tells us himself what these expenditures have been, what the fruits of his *paranomia* have been for Athens, and what their bearing is on his fitness to lead the Sicilian expedition:

Really, Athenians, I have a better claim to this command than anyone else. (I am compelled to begin with this issue since Nicias raised it.) At the same time, I believe myself to be worthy of it. For what has made me notorious has also won fame for my ancestors and for myself, and has benefited my country besides. For the other Greeks thought our city to be even more powerful than it really was because of the magnificence with which I represented it at the Olympic games, when before they had hoped they'd beaten us down in the war. I entered seven chariots there (more than any private individual had entered before); I won first, second, and fourth place; and in everything I displayed the magnificence

worthy of a winner. Custom regards such displays as honorable, but they earn a reputation for power as well. As for my expenses in the city for dramatic festivals and my other splendid largesse, it is only natural that my fellow-citizens envy it; but, as in the previous case, foreigners see it as strength. And this so-called ambition is really quite useful, when a man helps both himself and his city at private expense. At any rate, there's no injustice in being above equality if you think well of yourself. For a person who is doing badly does not make anyone else a partner in his fortune either. If a man will not even greet us when we are down on our luck, then, when things go well for us, he should be equally content if we look down on him—or else, if he insists on equality, he should give the same in return. I know that all of those people who are as brilliantly successful as I am will cause pangs of envy as long as they live (especially to their peers, but also to everyone they meet); after their deaths, however, they will leave a legacy of people who claim a kinship with them that never existed, and a country that boasts of them not as strangers or sinners, but as their very own citizens who have done fine things. That is what I aim at, that is what has made me notorious in my private affairs. Now consider whether I handle public affairs any the worse. Without great risk to you I brought together the greatest powers of the Peloponnesus and made the Lacedaemonians stake everything they had on one day's battle at Mantinea and though they won the battle they have not yet recovered their confidence. Here is the work of that youth and ambition (*anoia*) of mine which is supposed to be beyond what is natural: I dealt with the Peloponnesian power by giving good arguments, my enthusiasm won their confidence, and I persuaded them. Don't be afraid of these qualities now, but make use of our services while I am still in my prime and Nicias is thought to be lucky. (VI.16–17)

It is envy, Alcibiades claims, that begets the sorts of rumors that surround anyone as brilliantly successful as himself. Yet these successes, though they bring personal and family honor, also benefit the city. For while they cause envy at home among the citizens, foreigners (in particular, foreign enemies) see them as a sign of the city's strength. Moreover, even citizens acknowledge such achievements later on, when they lay (empty) claim to a kinship with the very one they envy when he is alive.

The intended effect of this discussion is to cause the audience to see these achievements in a new light by inviting them to view them, first, from the perspective of an enemy of Athens, and then from a time after Alcibiades' own death. It is a brilliant and much used rhetorical stratagem. But it also reveals something of great significance about the politics of rumor. For the very traits

that make Alcibiades a public asset are the ones that give rise to the rumors that eventually make him politically ineffective. Democracies, the thought is, are hotbeds of the envy, and so of the rumors that tend to make suspect and alienate their best and brightest.

What is also noteworthy about Alcibiades' reply is that it focuses on his *public* services, giving even his private expenditures (for example, on race horses) a public twist. In essence, he is saying that his private excesses were also good for Athens, and were motivated in part by his concern for its welfare. Moreover, when he turns to the qualities of character that have made him suspect, he focuses on the expression they have found in public affairs, in his dealings with the war with the Spartans. What he avoids altogether is his strictly private life and the offense that the qualities he exhibits there has given to *hoi polloi*. In other words, he seems to offer no response to the worry raised in VI.15 (6),(9) about the *paranoia* and luxury of his strictly private life.

No doubt his thought is that his private life is his own business. A legitimate thought, surely, and one for which Pericles' funeral oration provides a foundation in Athenian democratic ideals:

We have a form of government here that does not try to imitate the practices of our neighboring states. We are more of an example to others, than they to us. In name it is called a democracy, because it is managed in the interest not of a few people, but of the majority. Yet even though there is equality of law here for everyone in private disputes, whenever an individual has earned recognition he is singled out for public service in accordance with his claim to distinction, not by rotation but on the basis of his excellence [virtue]; and no one is held back by poverty or because he is not well-known, as long as he can do good to the city. We are free and generous not only in our public activities as citizens, but also in our everyday lives: there is no suspicion in our dealings with one another, and we are not offended with our neighbor for following his own pleasure. We do not cast on anyone the censorious looks that—though they done real harm—are nevertheless painful. We live together without taking offense on private matters; and as for public affairs, we respect the law greatly and fear to violate it, since we are obedient to those in office at any time, and also to the laws—especially to those laws that were made to help people who have suffered an injustice, and to the unwritten laws that bring shame on their transgressors by the agreement of all. (Thucydides, II.37)

In the ideal, then, private life is no hindrance to public advancement and success, since public life is a meritocracy to whose operations private life must

set no obstacles. On the other side, private life is a realm not of public judgment, evaluation, and criticism but of tolerance and respect.

That, of course, is the ideal. In reality, however, Alcibiades' private life is not tolerated and is an obstacle to his public career. We need to understand, then, what it was about that life that was found so frightening—what the rumors about it were.

In a city that worshipped male beauty Alcibiades was an acknowledged star:

As for Alcibiades' physical beauty, we need say no more than that it flowered at each season of his growth in turn, and lent him an extraordinary grace and charm, alike as a boy, a youth, and a man. Euripides' saying that even the autumn of beauty possesses a loveliness of its own is not universally true. But if it applies to few others, it was certainly true of Alcibiades on account of his natural gifts and his physical perfection. Even his lisp is said to have suited his voice well and to have made his talk persuasive and full of charm. (Plutarch, *Alcibiades* I.3. Trans. Jan Scott-Kilvert)

He was, Socrates attests, "the tallest and best-looking man around" (Plato, *Alcibiades*, 104a, *Symposium* 218e). Not surprisingly, then, when he was a teenager he was lusted after by many older men. No harm in that, of course; it was the done thing. What was not a done thing, however, was for the boy to feel lust himself and act on it. Athenian boys, like Victorian ladies, were supposed to be sexually passive and unresponsive, so that just as the latter were supposed to close their eyes and think of the British Empire during sex, the former were supposed to close their thighs (for intercrural sex) and think of nothing.

Two stories suggest that Alcibiades was not content with this passive role and actively sought the sex he was forbidden. The first, from a source that even Plutarch dismisses as prejudiced, is as follows:

When Alcibiades was a boy [i.e. ready to have older male lovers], according to one of the malicious stories which Antiphon has circulated, he ran away from home to Democrates, one of his lovers. Antiphon wanted to have it proclaimed by the town-crier that he had disappeared. But Pericles [Alcibiades' guardian] refused. "If he is dead," he said, "we shall only know the news a day sooner, whereas if he is alive it will be a reproach to him for the rest of his life." (*Alcibiades* III)

The second story is more famous, and somewhat more reputable. It comes from Plato's *Symposium* (216d–219e), where it is put into Alcibiades' own mouth. There Alcibiades tells of his various, increasingly blatant, attempts to seduce an older man, who ought to have been trying to seduce him, namely, Socrates. Sensing

false encouragement in the early stages of his attempt, he resorts to more overt advances:

I didn't give him a chance to say another word. I stood up immediately and placed my mantle over the light cloak which, though it was the middle of winter, was his only clothing. I slipped underneath the cloak and put my arms around this man—this utterly unnatural, this truly extraordinary man—and spent the whole night next to him.

As for what happens in the end, that is another story. For our purposes we have enough. Alcibiades, in pursuit of something that he ought not pursue, knows no bounds. It is as if a proper Victorian lady were to tell her family that she had behaved like a whore to seduce a man who finally spurned her. The social opprobrium that would attach to her we must imagine attaching to Alcibiades.

One other story, also sexual in nature, is of a somewhat different sort. I retell it, not just for its own sake, but because of a revealing editorial comment that Plutarch makes about it.

Hipparete was a decorous and affectionate wife [to Alcibiades], but she was distressed by the liaisons her husband continually carried on with Athenian and foreign courtesans, and finally she left his house and went to live with her brother. Alcibiades paid no attention to this and continued his debaucheries, so that she was obliged to lodge her petition for divorce with the magistrate not by proxy, but in person. Whence appeared in public for this purpose, as the law demanded, Alcibiades came up, seized her and carried her home with him through the market-place, and not a soul dared to oppose him or take her from him. Indeed, she continued to live with him until her death, for she died not long after this, while Alcibiades was on a voyage in Ephesus. (*Alcibiades* VIII.3-4).

Now for the editorial comment:

I should explain that this violence (*bia*) of his was not regarded as *paranomos* or inhuman. Indeed, it would appear that the law (*nomos*), in laying it down that a wife who wishes to separate from her husband must attend the court in person, is actually designed to give the her husband the opportunity to meet and recover her. (*Alcibiades* VIII.5)

The weakness of the rationale that Plutarch gives, combined with the fact that he raises the matter at all, suggests that what Alcibiades did was in fact regarded as an example of the *paranomia* that Thucydides mentions in VI.15.

Such behavior might not have shocked Alcibiades' wealthy friends but among the sexually more conservative poor citizens it was no doubt a cause of outrage and rumor. A man who would so treat his own wife, in the one case, and his own body, in the other, what might he not do to the body politic if given the chance? Alcibiades' *paranoia*, in other words, is at least in part sexual *paranoia*—a tendency to violate or not to respect sexual norms.

Such behavior may, of course, engender envy, but it is much more likely to offend the *pudour*—the sense of modesty or decency—of the sexually more conventional. Think of homophobia in our own society and the types and classes of people who are most likely to exhibit it.

The connection between such behavior and tyranny is made for us in Herodotus, whose tyrants are forever engendering envy in their subjects and violating sexual *nomos*—think of Candaules and Gyges. But in any case it a crucial part of the popular portrait of the tyrant. For the tyrant is canonically someone who does not respect *nomos*, especially not when it comes to his own sexual appetites and desires. Plato's brilliant probing of the psychology of the tyrant in *Republic IX* is a case in point.

So much for the type of *paranoia* that Alcibiades was thought to exhibit, and for the emotions and suspicions that it aroused in his fellow citizens. Now we need to consider whether those suspicions were justified. The natural place to turn for enlightenment on this issue is the speech Alcibiades makes to the Spartans, after he has defected to them. I shall examine only those parts of it crucial to my story:

If anyone [of you oligarchic Spartans] thought worse of me for siding with the people, he should recognize that he is not right to be offended. We [Alcibiades' family, which included Pericles] have always been opposed to tyrants, you see (and whatever is opposed to absolute rule is called popular), and because of this the leadership of the majority party has remained with us. Besides, in a city governed by a democracy we were generally compelled to conform to prevailing conditions. We have tried, nevertheless, to be more moderate in politics than the prevailing license. There have been others in the past—there still are some—who have incited the mob to greater malice; and these are the very ones who have driven me out. But as for us, we were leaders of the whole [city] collectively, and we thought it right to join in preserving the same system, just as it was handed down to us, under which the city turned out to be greatest and most free. For those of us with good sense, at least, understood what democracy is—I as well as anyone (that's why I could lambaste it if I wanted, although there is nothing new to say about what everyone agrees is foolish). Besides, we thought it was not safe to change it while

you were bearing down on us as enemies. (VI.89.3–6) ... And I do not expect any of you to think the less of me because I, who was once thought a lover of my own city, now vigorously attack her along with her worst enemies... I do love my city, but as a place where I could safely engage in public life, not as the site of injustice to me. I do not think the city I am going against is my own; it is much more a matter of my recovering a city that is not mine. A true lover of his city is not the man who refuses to invade the city he has lost through injustice, but the man who desire so much to be in it that he will attempt to recover it my any means he can. (Thucydides, VI.92.2, 4)

Read quickly, this speech might seem to support the suspicions that *hoi polloi* have of Alcibiades' political intentions. For he himself seems to admit that he was planning to overthrow the democracy, but was forestalled by the war with Sparta.

On closer inspection, however, the message of the speech proves to be quite different. In it, Alcibiades contrasts popular rule, which is opposed to tyranny and absolute rule, and which is in the interests of the whole citizen body, with democracy, which is, as we might put it, the tyranny of *hoi polloi*—the rule of the many poor citizens over the few rich ones in the interests of the former. Put another way, the democracy he opposes is not the traditional Athenian one that we find in the time of Pericles (“under which the city turned out to be greatest and most free”), but the subsequent radical democracy, under which the mob is incited to evil things by demagogues. (“Andocles, who was one of the chief leaders of the demos, and had also been largely responsible for the banishment of Alcibiades... was a demagogue” (VIII.65.2)).

What Alcibiades' is against, in other words, is democracy understood as mob rule, and what he favors is the inclusive moderate democracy that Athenagoras of Syracuse describes as follows:

Some will say that democracy is neither wise [on behalf of the collective] nor fair [equal]. But I answer, first, that demos is the name for the whole [city] collectively, oligarchy of a part. Second, though the rich are indeed the best guardians of the city's money, the best councilors are those who are wise [on behalf of the collective], and the best judges of what they hear are the common people; and in a democracy all three groups, whether as parts or collectively, have a fair [equal] share. (VI.39.1–2)

Alcibiades is not against the moderate Athenian democracy of Pericles, which treats both the few rich and the many poor fairly. But he is against the radical democracy in which he and other rich people are treated unjustly. For in such a political system the few rich are tyrannized by the many poor.

Later, to be sure, around 411 BC, when he is orchestrating his return to Athens, Alcibiades makes it plain that he was “willing to return home provided there was an oligarchy rather than the corrupt democracy that had cast him out” (VIII.47.2.) And this can seem to lend support to the idea that he was opposed not just to extreme democracy but even to the more moderate variety that he claimed to support in his speech to the Spartans. This is not so, however, for the government that in fact came to power in 411—in part because of Alcibiades’ own actions—was no narrow oligarchy, but “a reasonable and moderate blending of the few and the many” (VIII. 97). Just the sort of government, in other words, that Athenagoras describes as a democracy. The terminology is fluid, as we see, and we must take care not be fooled by it.

What Alcibiades says to the Spartans would be little more than rationalization, of course, if he was not in fact treated unjustly by Athens. So our next task is to determine precisely how he was treated. Here is what Thucydides tells us:

Their preparations [for the Sicilian Expedition] were underway, but then, of all the stone Herms in the city of Athens... most had their face mutilated during a single night. No one knew who the perpetrators were, but there was a search for them with large rewards out of public funds... They took the matter seriously; it looked like an omen for the voyage, and furthermore as though it had been done as part of a conspiracy for revolution and the overthrow of the democracy. So information came in from some metics [resident aliens] and some servants about the mutilation of some other statues as acts of drunken sport on the part of some young men, though nothing at all about the Herms, and, in addition to this, that scurrilous celebrations of the [Elusian] mysteries were being held in private homes; they accused Alcibiades. Taking up the charges were those who especially resented Alcibiades for standing in the way of their assured ascendancy over the demos, and in the belief that by removing him they would rise to the top they exaggerated these charges and raised the cry that both the Mysteries and the mutilation of the herms were connected with the overthrow of the democracy, and that none of this had been done without Alcibiades’ complicity, adducing as evidence the undemocratic paranomia of his mode of [private] life. (Thucydides VI.27–28)

Plainly, the evidence against Alcibiades in connection with the mutilation of the herms was simply non-existent, and in the case of the Mysteries extremely unprepossessing. Blown out of proportion by demagogues playing on popular fears and superstitions, however, and on rumors about Alcibiades’ private life, it became a potent political weapon for enemies to use against him.

In a just political system, a person accused of serious charges of irreligion and

sedition—charges carrying the death penalty—is given the opportunity to confront his accusers and defend himself in court. Alcibiades asks for this opportunity, and is ready to accept the outcome, however dire:

Alcibiades defended himself against the informers then and there and was ready to stand trial before the voyage [to Sicily]... over whether he had done any of these things, and pay the penalty if he had, but to take command [of the expedition] after being acquitted. He appealed to them not to listen to slanders about him in his absence, but to put him to death immediately if he was guilty, pointing out that it was more sensible not to send him on so great an expedition, facing such an accusation, before he was judged. But his enemies... were opposed and put up an active resistance... wanting him to go on trial when recalled under heavier incrimination, which they expected bring about more easily in his absence. (VI.29)

Plainly, it is Alcibiades who is the voice of reason, justice, and good sense here. His enemies, by contrast, show themselves as indifferent to these things as they are to the fate of Athens herself. All they care about is their own power and influence. It is their *paranomia*, in other words, and not that of Alcibiades, that is the real threat to Athens.

The subsequent investigation of the accusations is equally telling:

After the fleet sailed, the Athenians in fact had not slackened in their investigation of the acts committed regarding both the Mysteries and the herms. But instead of checking up on the characters of the informers, they regarded everything they were told as grounds for suspicion, and on the evidence of complete rogues had arrested and imprisoned some of the best citizens, thinking it better to get to the bottom of things in this way rather than to let any accused person, however good his reputation might be, escape interrogation because of the bad character of the informer. For the demos, understanding through hearsay that the tyranny of Peistratus and his sons had become harsh in its last stage, and furthermore that it had been overthrown not by themselves, but by the Spartans, were in constant fear and saw everything as suspicious. (Thucydides VI.53)

But, of course, as Thucydides goes on immediately to show in his account of Harmodius, Aristogeiton, and the Peisistratid tyranny, the Athenians do not say “anything accurate about their own tyrants or about the incident” (Thucydides VI.54). Not only were the best citizens being arrested on the hearsay of scoundrels,

therefore, but the fear which led to their arrest was itself induced not by historical fact, but by hearsay and rumor.

Alcibiades *was* treated unjustly by the Athenians, therefore, and they paid grievously for their injustice: “even though his public management of the war was excellent, each of them was so offended by his private habits that they entrusted their affairs to other hands, and before long ruined the city.” What led the Athenians to act in this way, however, was their reliance on rumor. For it was rumor about Alcibiades’ private life that led them, even in the face of his public excellence, to suspect him, baselessly, of wanting to make himself tyrant; it was rumor that led them to suspect him in the affairs of the herms and the Mysteries; and it was rumor that fed the fears that led them to trust scoundrels rather than their best citizens in investigating those affairs and recalling Alcibiades from Sicily to stand trial.

It is in part because he sees so clearly the power of rumor, indeed, that Thucydides excludes the “romantic element”—the element of myth or rumor—so assiduously from his own histories (I.22.4). For he knows that most people “will not take trouble in finding out the truth, but are much more inclined to accept the first story they hear”—literally, the things that are ready to hand: rumors. That inclination, so much a part of all of us, is what Thucydides seeks to weaken, so that facts and not fables will become our more assured taste.

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