From Innovative Democracy to Warfare State: Ancient Athens as a model of hegemonic decline

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The attempt to write another book on a subject so old and so often treated requires an explanation, perhaps even a defense... Each generation needs to write its history for itself. Our questions are likely to differ from our fathers’ and grandfathers.¹

This chapter focuses on less popularised aspects of Athenian hegemony and decline, starting from the capture of hegemony after the Persian wars, exploring specific strengths and weaknesses of the Athenian system, and debating the causes and the effects of that violent architect of hegemonic decline, the Peloponnesian war. The chapter sheds light on the disastrous effects of the hunt for regional hegemony and power for Ancient Greek city states, the role of political innovation through the establishment of knowledge networks in Ancient Athens, both as an enabling force to capture hegemony, but also as a factor for inciting fear and suspicion in Athens’ own allies, in their fluctuating relationship with Sparta and elsewhere, especially with the halt of that innovation by war, resulting in Athenian hegemonic decline.

Hegemonic transition after the Persian wars

By 525 BC Spartan hegemony was established, with Sparta eventually leading the other Greek states during the Persian wars. The original Spartan alliance (Peloponnesian League) extended to the Isthmus of Corinth and included all the Peloponnesians, except Argos and Achaea. The allied states promised to have the same friends and enemies and to follow Spartan leadership. The alliance was primarily based on the fear of Argos, and the fear of having oligarchies replaced by tyrannies.² There were weaknesses to the alliance both internally and externally. Internally, conflicts between Spartan kings, the rotation of ephors and conflicts between kings and ephors caused instability, which, paradoxically for a strong constitution, produced a very unstable foreign policy. The always present threat of helot rebellion or Argive attack, meant that the Spartans could never leave the Peloponneso for long, which meant losing allies that depended on them to defend them.³ It is worth noting that the Peloponnesian League did not meet throughout the fifteen years of the First Peloponnesian War, until 432 when the Spartans had to call a meeting before launching the second war. By
the fourth century, with Athens defeated, Sparta did not consult her allies and found herself at war with stronger ones, such as Corinth and Thebes:

As an Athenian spokesman complained to the Spartans in 371, “You declare enemies for yourselves without consulting your allies whom you lead against them. The result is that often people who are said to be autonomous are forced to fight against their own friends.” (Xen. Hell. 7.3.8).

During the Persian wars, the Hellenic Alliance united the Greek states, but it was different to the Peloponnesian League, as it was not based on separate treaties between states and a hegemonic power, but a general covenant freely accepted, while not permitting secession. Sparta was the hegemonic power, as a Spartan was the commander in chief, but the consent of the allied states’ generals was nevertheless necessary. Meanwhile, the alliance between Sparta and Athens was never an alliance of states, but of factions. As Kagan notes, it was the faction of Cimon in Athens and the faction of King Archidamos in Sparta that were willing to accept limits to the hegemonic claims of their states, but in each state there were factions that were not: “The Spartans simply were not yet prepared to share hegemony with Athens, nor were the Athenians prepare to accept Spartan checks on their ambitions”.

After the Greek victories against the Persians at Plataea and Mycale in 479, Spartan unwillingness or inability to extend its boarders and take responsibility of the Aegean, combined with the behavior of the Spartan Pausanias towards the Ionians and the islanders meant that the allies were seeking a new leader. Although the initiative for the Athenian-dominated Delian league was not taken by Athenians themselves, “Herodotus spoke the simple truth when he said that the Athenians ‘offered the hubris of Pausanias as a pretext’ when they took away the Spartan hegemony”. In the early period of the Delian League, hegemony was not domination, as Athenians exercised “what Thucydides called a ‘hegemony over autonomous allies who participated in common synods’...In this synod, all members, including Athens, the hegem, on had only one vote”.

The transition of hegemony from Sparta to Athens after the Persian wars was a significant factor contributing to the Athenian overall pre-eminence in the early fifth century, while the defeat of the Persians was seen as a triumph for their democratic system of government. Athenians remembered Marathon and Salamis as their finest hours, with Marathon won by the hoplites, from the wealthier classes, and Salamis won by the rowers of the triremes, from the poorer classes. In Demosthenes’ time, Athenians considered their
“golden age” to be different eras, depending on the issue. The Persian wars and the Delian League were the golden age in foreign policy terms, while they went further back when discussing their constitution to Cleisthenes, Solon and even the mythical king Theseus.\textsuperscript{10}

Lastly, suffice to say, both Sparta and Athens, “despite their rival protestations that they stood for the autonomy of the Hellenes or liberty and democracy, in fact used their leagues to secure their own political supremacy”.\textsuperscript{11}

**Political strengths of the Athenian system**

The political strengths of the Athenian system of government were many, but here the focus is on specific innovative aspects, which contributed to the supremacy of their governance structure and their hegemonic status among Greek states. These innovations are important to explore here, as they both inspired admiration in other ancient Greek states and led to Athenian hegemony, but also inspired the fear and suspicion, which alienated Athens’ allies and enemies alike. These aspects can be summarized as follows: political networks and *philotimia*,\textsuperscript{12} the public-private distinction,\textsuperscript{13} hostility to political professionalism,\textsuperscript{14} and more importantly the innovation-promoting and learning-based context of democratic institutions and culture.\textsuperscript{15}

Political networks were operating on the basis of what all Athenians were expected to do; help their friends and harm their enemies. At the same time, honor and power were the benefits of leadership, beside the obvious material awards.\textsuperscript{16} Personal relationships were central to these networks and there was an evolution of significance, from family and marriage ties in the mid-fifth century to wider ties of friendship in the fourth, while as “the individual extended the basis of his support, vertical alignments were likely to become more important than horizontal dimensions”.\textsuperscript{17}

The love of honor or *philotimia* was another central element in Athenian politics. Although *philotimia* was an ambiguous term, used to mean honor in the polis derived form good services done to the polis, but also, as part of the ethos of aristocratic competition conflicting with the ethos of the polis or the family. In its worst incarnation, it meant excessive, selfish or misdirected ambition and it was used this way in Thucydides’ analysis of the policies of Pericles’ successors.\textsuperscript{18} At the time of decline, in the middle of the fourth century, it was used in honorific degrees to encourage the Athenians to emulate the example of *philotimia* and the readiness of Demos to return favors, especially in periods when “serious
doubts had arisen among the well-to-do whether love of honor expressed in benefits to the polis still brought fitting rewards”. 19 “We often meet in the sources the idea that reward and punishment are the two main driving forces of democracy: willingness to take the initiative must be encouraged with rewards, but promoting private interest to the detriment of the common weal must be punished by the law’s harshest penalties”. 20

Another political strength of the Athenian polis was a strict distinction between the private and the public. As Hansen explains:

…according to the Greek conception, most clearly formulated by Aristotle, a polis was, ‘a community [koinonia] of citizens [politai] with regard to the constitution [politeia] Arist. Pol. 1276b1, and politeia is further defined as the ‘organization of political institutions, in particular the highest political institution’. Arist. Pol. 1278b8-10. 21

In this conception of the polis, territory was not left out by chance, because it was always the people who were stressed and not the territory - it was not Athens and Sparta that went to war, but always “the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians” (Thuc. 5.25.1). 22

More importantly, the Athenians were firmly against the polis controlling every aspect of the life of its citizens. Athenians could do as they pleased in their private lives as long as they obeyed the laws and did not do any harm to their fellow citizens. 23 In fact, the polis, which was the political community, was separate from the private sphere in ancient Athens. The private sphere was not focused on the individual. It encompassed, not only family life and personal relationships, but the overall society, business, industry, and religion. The public sphere was essentially the polis, the public administration, governance and political community of the city-state. Therefore, the Athenians distinguished, not between the individual and the state, but the individual as a private person and the individual as a citizen; 24 in contrast to contemporary societies where the state prevails overall, despite privatization. 25 One only has to look to the UK as a contemporary example with its hyper surveillance, over regulation of the life of its citizens and failure to effectively manage finance and trade.

**Innovation and the knowledge-based organizational model in Athens**

Ober, in his recent work *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (2010), puts forward the hypothesis that democratic Athens competed successfully over time against hierarchical rivals:
...because the costs of participatory political practices were overbalanced by superior returns to social cooperation, resulting from useful knowledge, as it was organized and deployed in the simultaneously innovation-promoting and learning-based context of democratic institutions and culture.²⁶

Various intriguing arguments stemming from social network and organizational theory are utilised by Ober to understand the superiority of the Athenian system. For instance, process innovation, highly valued by knowledge-based organizations, is thought to be impeded by hierarchies, as they are favoring learning-as-routinizing at the expense of learning-as-innovation, which is paramount in highly competitive environments.²⁷ The Athenian system was operating in flexible small teams in horizontal governmental structures, where the mentality of peer production prevailed over rigid hierarchy. Moreover, in the participatory Athenian context, social knowledge served as a sorting device: “Experienced citizens learned habits of discrimination, of recognizing whom to attend to and whose opinion to trust in what context.”²⁸

Consequently, Ober identifies two features of Athenian decision-making institutions, which conjoin the innovation-promoting and routinizing aspects of organizational learning: social/knowledge networks and task-specific work teams.²⁹ By serving in rotation and being educated in the democratic machine, the Athenian system made experts out of life-long learning amateurs: “Through its day-to-day operations, the Athenian system sought to identify and make effective use of experts in many different knowledge domains.”³⁰ Moreover:

By participating in “working the machine” of democracy, the individual Athenian was both encouraged to share his own useful knowledge, and given the chance to develop and deepen various sorts of politically relevant expertise... learning as socialization helped to sustain democracy by granting it ideological legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry. Predictability, standardization, and legitimacy all lowered transaction costs and thereby reduced the friction inherent within every complex system.³¹

Cleisthenes is credited with making the most important of the democratic reforms in Athens, significantly enabling the golden era of participatory democracy by creating institutions built for knowledge sharing, lowering communication costs, and context-sensitive information sorting. He did that first of all by creating the weak ties that were crucial to uniting local strong-ties across Attica, bridges that were essential to knowledge aggregation. The blatantly artificial tribes in his system drew from three areas, communities located in
coastal, inland and urbanized regions of Athenian territory, whereby a stable local identity was linked to a desired national identity, participatory citizen of Athens. As Ober puts it:

The system very literally “intermixed” Athenians from different geographic/economic zones in a variety of psychologically powerful activities. The experience of marching, fighting, sacrificing, eating, and dancing, together in this newly “intermixed” grouping, would, according to Cleisthenes’ plan, lead to a strengthened collective identity at the level of the polis. Athenian citizens acted as individuals bridging holes in the network, linking sub-networks and gaining social capital in the process, similarly to the process described in Ron Burt’s theory on structural holes. The ability of the Athenian citizen to learn and be part of a knowledge network runs contrary to the ignorant-mob assumption often put forward by historians.

In terms of leadership, the Athenian polis did not depend on authoritarian leaders or hierarchy, and rejected Spartan-style hyper-socialization. Athens relied instead on choices freely made by free citizens to gain its public ends: “intermixing the four mechanisms…for facilitating complex coordination: first choice, informed leader, procedural rules, and credible commitments.” For example leadership would shift readily depending on which individuals or groups happen to know something useful, with consensus following from plurality and alignment. Balancing elite and non-elite preferences meant for example that someone like Themistocles in the debates leading to the Athenian decision to fight at Salamis in 480 were able to assume leadership roles by advocating and carrying through innovative policies. It was indeed his genius in Salamis of using the change of wing direction at a specific time of the day and the agile small Greek ships to devastate the large inflexible Persian ships. Lastly, Athenians valued innovation as a good in itself, because it was a manifestation of their communal identity, of what they supposed was special and excellent about themselves as a people—as well as valuing innovation as an instrument.

**Weaknesses in the Athenian democracy**

The crisis of the late fifth century saw a short-term collapse of democratic institutions, disruption of the Athenian social equilibrium, and a corresponding decline in productive capacity.

It is well known that slaves, women and foreigners were excluded from citizenship, and this is seen as a major weakness of the Athenian state. There were also age limits, such as the rule
that jurors, legislators and magistrates had to be over thirty years of age. This meant that, because one third of all citizens were the age-bracket eighteen to thirty, every third Athenian had only limited citizen rights. They could attend the Assembly and vote, but could not be a juror or magistrate.\textsuperscript{41} Another frequently mentioned flaw in the Athenian democracy is the growth of professionalism in politics, especially toward the end of Athenian hegemony. In the golden age of Athens all citizens were encouraged to take part in running the state, but all were to be amateurs, and professionalism and democracy were regarded as, at bottom, contradictory.\textsuperscript{42} As Hansen explains, Athenians were hostile to professionalism, because they believed political participation as compatible with one’s every day job, as something citizens did in their spare time and participation was at the height of democracy astonishingly high.\textsuperscript{43} In the fourth century, the ordinary citizen was much less able to lead in the political field, as the recruitment of leaders was from the wealthier classes, as well as due to the growth of professional politicians.\textsuperscript{44}

Often mentioned, as the reason for success and high political activity, is slavery. Although having a slave would have made political activity easier, Athenians did work for a living, and often slaves were wealthy and had their own slaves. It is not easy to explain away the rise of the Athenian democracy through slavery as a necessary precondition.\textsuperscript{45} Neither was the Athenian democracy dependant on the proceeds of a naval empire. Some historians have coincided hegemonic decline with the collapse of democratic institutions. Hansen explains that such assertion is not valid, because payments to attend the Assembly, and the \textit{theorika} were introduced in the fourth century, when Athens had already lost her empire. Furthermore, democracy in Demosthenes’ time was far costly than in that of Pericles.\textsuperscript{46} A more likely explanation for the bankruptcy was the endless wars Athens was engaged in and not the political payments and the running of the democratic institutions.\textsuperscript{47}

To conclude the discussion on Athenian strengths and weaknesses, the presence of unique and mostly organically evolved traditions enhanced the political environment in Athens, and enabled its citizens to advance new ways to govern themselves as people, and to attract the initial admiration of other city-states and Athenian leadership in war, politics, culture and trade. The same traditions were responsible for the major advances in terms of innovation in the creation of knowledge networks to support the Athenian ideal of humans as political beings seeking honor and power, as \textit{philotimia} for the common good; acting within established knowledge networks of participation, power and civil engagement, resulting in innovative democratic mechanisms of government as peoples and not as territories. In
conjunction, the decadence of the traditions, which came during war, when politics became more professionalized, and more about the individual advancement and not the common good of the community and the polis, contributed to the breakdown of innovation and the eventual decline of Athens. It is this time one needs to turn to, at a time when Athens was at its greatest hegemonic peak, in order to understand how this great innovative power was suddenly overwhelmed with the weaknesses identified above, and how these failures in the democratic system rendered the innovative aspects not only useless, but also a symbol of fear of Athens by allies and enemies alike.

**Empire Decline: The Transition to Warfare State**

Athens’ loss of her empire to Sparta in 404 B.C.E., came after a catastrophic expedition to Sicily, which started in 415 with Athens attempting to expand her hegemony with loyal support from her allies. By the autumn of 413 though, their force in Sicily was annihilated, while oligarchic factions in allied states, encouraged by Sparta, revolted. The Spartans, with Persian funding, built triremes with which they challenged the Athenian naval supremacy and eventually won the Ionian War (412–405) at Aigospotamoi in the Hellespont. The Athenians were starved to death having lost their navy, without which, they could not protect the grain from the Black Sea. 48

One of the popular explanations for the two Peloponnesian wars, with a thirty-year peace in between, was the fear of Sparta for Athens. De Ste. Croix mentions the now famous Thucydides quote: “It was the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon which made war inevitable” Thuc. i.23.6. 49 After the defeat of the Persians, Athens and her allies, the Delian League, pursued aggressive wars against the Persians and succeeded in driving the Persians out of the Aegean, with a *Pentecontaetia* or fifty years of Athenian Empire established, transforming allies into paying subjects of the empire and using their money to fund public works glorifying the Athenian state. This caused fear in Sparta and resentment in Athens’ allies, especially when Cleon, who replaced Pericles, persuaded Athenians to let their lazy subjects eastwards and westwards pay for the privilege of Athenian rule. Athens broke the Charter of her Empire – the contract drawn up two generations before the Aristeidis the Just between Athens and her Allies – and doubled the rates of tribute. 50 In 413 the *phoros* was replaced by a 5 per cent duty on seaborne goods.

In the massive bibliography on the Peloponnesian wars, the wars that contributed, if not outright, caused Athenian hegemonic decline, there is plenty of controversy over what
were the underlying causes, whether war could have been avoided and where lay the responsibility for war. It has been argued, that setting the fear and resentment of Athens aside, the two powers were dragged into war due to alliance commitments and rivalries between allied states, such as Corcyra and Corinth that could not be left unchallenged lest the balance of power be disturbed. In fact, the role of proxies/allies in the break up of Athenian hegemony cannot be overstated. In the first war in 459, during a rivalry between Corinth and Megara, both Spartan allies, Athens took the Megarian side, and a fifteen-year war ensued, which only ended when Attica was invaded and both sides agreed to respect each other’s territories and alliances. A Thirty-year peace was signed in 446, which broke when Corinth was defeated by their colony Corcyra. Athens supported Corcyra and then in turn faced Corinth’s wrath and meddling in the Athenian ally Potidaea, which was encouraged to revolt against Athens. The Corinthians ferociously pressed the Spartans at a meeting of the Peloponnesian League to declare war on Athens, while Athens was asking Sparta to resolve the conflict through arbitration as the Peace treaty allowed for.

The role of the Corinthians was paramount, as they used propaganda and going to individual states to convince them to vote for war. They argued that war was absolutely necessary, as Athens was so powerful that she could defeat all the Greek states one by one, so the only chance was to unite against her. They argued that submission to Athens was an automatic establishment of a tyranny. The Spartans did decide that the Athenians broke the peace and by default went to war, the Archidamian War (431–421). A plague in Athens during which Pericles died, was a contributing factor to the initial defeat which was overturned when Athens made a comeback with Cleon.

Eventually a truce was signed, the peace of Nicias, which was broken this time when Argos, an independent state in the Peloponnesian decided with the help of the Athenians to create a coalition of democratic states in the region. This culminated in the battle of Mantinea, the biggest land battle of the war, which Sparta won, breaking up the new democratic alliance in the Peloponnese, restoring her regional hegemony. The Sicilian expedition, which followed, was linked again to an Athenian ally in Sicily being under attack from Syracuse. The biggest protagonist, the Athenian Alcibiades, who encouraged the expedition, was accused for religious crimes in Athens, but was allowed to leave for Sicily without being tried, and was subsequently immediately recalled upon arrival. He defected to Sparta and encouraged them to aid the enemies of Athens, with Athens eventually defeated by the Syracusans and their allies. As Kagan explains:
The personal rivalries, factional disputes, and general distrust that swirled around this unique figure in Athenian life did cause his city great harm and had much to do with Athens’ loss of the war. The most serious consequence of Alcibiades disgrace was that it removed his friends and associates from influence and command when their military and political skills were most needed.52

Ober makes the point that the costs to an organization before making major policy choices can be extraordinary high, especially as knowledge collection becomes more complicated.53 The Alcibiades story points to such failures, even after Athens managed to recover parts of the Empire between 410 and 406, when Alcibiades returned, despite having been condemned as a traitor. Finally, Athens lost their navy and their empire in a freak and unexpected Spartan naval victory in Aigospotamoi, never to recover. An oligarchic regime was set up by Sparta, the Thirty Tyrants, but democracy was restored by Thrasyboulos in 403. Thebes and later on the Macedonians sealed the fall of Athens from a hegemonic power.

Aside from the role of the interlocking alliances intensifying the struggle for hegemony between Athens and Sparta, the role of factions inside allied states was also critical. From one moment to the next, factions in allied cities would take over and pledge allegiance to the Spartans, if oligarchic and to Athenians, if democratic. Within the Athenian empire, patterns often corresponded to the fluctuating successes of military fortunes with J. de Romilly even suggesting that there was an exact correspondence between Athens’ military position and the power of the democratic and oligarchic factions in the allied states of the Empire.54 There were some not wholly unselfish incidents, for example in Samos, when a coup was mounted in favor of democratia, but later Samos itself became oligarchic. Even worse, in Athens in 411 the plotters were willing to hand the keys to the city and the empire to Sparta, provided their lives were spared. There is therefore a connection to be made about the internal politics of allied states’ contribution to the break up of hegemony, and the constant pressure for the hegemon to intervene. “The link between internal politics between factions and external military balances also has parallels in the positions of pro-US and communist forces in various countries in the Cold War”.55

Furthermore, the effects of civil strife across the Ancient Greek world at the time are reflected in chilling accounts by Thucydides, Xenophon and Diodorus, with anger, frustration and violent outbreaks of vengeance accelerating as the war dragged on:
...they produced a progression of atrocities that reached the point of maiming and killing captured opponents, throwing them into pits to die of thirst, starvation, and exposure, hurling them into the sea to drown, enslaving and killing women and children, and destroying cities with their entire populations. This war, more than most, was “a violent teacher”.

When the war started the Athenians having had success at little cost to human life were reluctant to do what was necessary for victory. Kagan argues that the innovative, swift, aggressive Athenians were less able to adjust to the new situation than the slow, traditional, unimaginative Spartans, the Corinthians described. More importantly, warfare in democracies where everything must be openly debated, it is harder to adjust to the necessities of war than in less open societies. This type of argument was famously made also in the case of the U.S. during the Vietnam War.

In the final analysis a lot can be said about the transition of Ancient Athens from an innovative democracy to a warfare state. Perhaps the elements that made Athens great, as described above, political networks and philotimia were breaking down due to factional disputes and a spell into oligarchy on the way to decline. The public-private distinction was blurred due to the wars, while political professionalism became the order of the day during hegemonic decline. The innovation-promoting and learning-based context of democratic institutions and culture was also disrupted severely due to the wars and their devastating effects on society and culture.

The Problem with Thucydides

One of the most notorious moments for the Athenians was the Melian incident, also described as a war crime and a massacre. Thucydides has penned a dialogue between the Athenians and the Melians, which raises issues both about Athenian hegemony, but moreover Thucydides’ motivations and understanding of the event and the Athenian warfare state. The Melians in Thucydides’ account are pleading with the Athenians not to destroy their city:

It is expedient that you should not destroy what is our common protection, the privilege of being allowed in danger to invoke what is fair and right. Surely you are as much concerned in this as any, since your fall would be a signal for the heaviest vengeance, and an example to all the world.

The Athenians supposedly reply to this:
‘We feel no uneasy about the end our Empire, even if end it should,’ came back the proud answer, as if to challenge the high gods; ‘a fellow Empire, like Lacedaemon—though it is not she who is our real enemy—is not so terrible to the vanquished as subjects who by themselves attack and overpower their rulers. This, however, is a risk that we are content to take.’  

It is worth pointing out that Thucydides cannot have had any information on the Melian debate, because it was held behind closed doors between the Athenian commissioners and the Melian government, who were subsequently executed, so it must be regarded as a free composition. It is essentially what Thucydides imagined to have been said between the two parties before the massacre took place. In fact, Arnold Jones rightly challenges these speeches. He finds it remarkable that the Athenians of the fifth century would openly admit in this manner that their policy was guided purely by selfish considerations and that they had no regard for political morality, but also that they underwent a complete transformation in the fourth century, when we possess genuine speeches. Jones actually has a point, when he concludes that Thucydides put into the mouths of Athenian spokesmen what he considered to be their real sentiments, stripped of rhetorical claptrap, in effect revealing his own opinion of the empire:

His view was that Athens was universally hated by her allies or subjects, who were held down by fear or force only, and were eager to revolt at every possible opportunity—this thesis he twice states in his own person apart from the speeches—and that Athens was wrong in ‘enslaving’ them, by her refusal to allow them to secede from the league and by her interference in their internal government. Furthermore, that the Athenians, to enforce their tyranny (as with Mitylene) or to enlarge it (as with Melos) committed or very nearly committed acts of the grossest brutality.

Melos was not an unoffending neutral, as it was an ally of Sparta at the beginning of the war, subscribing to her war fund and sheltering her fleet in 427. Athens had been at war with Melos since 426. Athenians were accused for barbaric acts against the Mitylenaeans and Scionaeans, who in their eyes were traitors, while Melians assisted their enemies. By contrast, in the Spartan massacre against the Plataeans, the Plataeans were defending their own city being attacked by Thebes in peacetime. Jones puts forward the thesis that Thucydides lived in exile in oligarchic circles, and he appeared to have really believed the Athenians were hated by their allies, whereas the Peloponnesian League was a free association of cities. For a
historian of Thucydides’ caliber, this is quite hard to believe though. It is easier to believe that he greatly desired to find a moral justification for the fall of Athens: “It was not enough to say that it was due to the folly of the democratic politicians whom he so much disliked. It must have been deserved. Athens had suffered grievously; this could not have been so if she had not sinned greatly.” Powell explains that Thucydides had a low opinion of the conduct of the war by both great powers, but he believed that Athens was brought down not by Spartan genius, but by Athenian mistakes.

Moreover, Thucydides’ explanation that war was inevitable, because of the growth of Athens and its insatiable demand for expansion, has not persuaded everyone. Kagan for example argues that:

Athenian power did not grow between 445 and 435, that the imperial appetite of Athens was not insatiable and gave good evidence of being satisfied, that the Spartans as a state seem not to have been unduly afraid of Athenians, at least until the crisis had developed very far, that there was good reason to think that the two great powers and their allies could live side by side in peace indefinitely, and that it was not the underlying causes but the immediate crisis that produced the war.

Similarly, Kagan counters the belief that the causes of war can be found between Athens and Sparta, as the Greek world between the years of the Persian and the Peloponnesian wars was not bipolar. Even if Athens dominated her allies, Sparta did not with Thebes and Corinth (who had a special role to play throughout the Peloponnesian War) being free agents. The Spartan alliance permitted a power of the second magnitude to drag the regional hegemon into war for its own interests. As explained above, the interlocking alliances affected the Athenians, who could not permit Corinth to attack Corcyra and add that fleet to the Spartan alliance therefore questioning naval supremacy, the basis of Athenian security.

The question remains though, whether these alliances were more of a factor for the war, rather than the fear of Athens by allies and enemies alike. Despite certain weaknesses in Thucydides’ account identified above, his take remains the most plausible explanation for the cause of the war, and supports this author’s thesis that both allies and enemies of Athens were suspicious of and intimidated by Athenian innovations and overpowering influence during her hegemony. In turn, innovation can make it difficult for leadership to asses capabilities and this
is exacerbated when factions alternate internally in favor of different political systems, both internally and in the allied states. As Hall Gardner argues:

Alienation among states is further extended (in a psychological sense) by situations and conditions in which socio-political, political-economic and/or military-technological innovations of differing forms take place, often making it even more difficult to properly assess force capabilities. Changing socio-political circumstances make it more difficult to determine precisely which political faction might be in command and thus what is the true intent of the leadership. Alienation is likewise exacerbated if political factions (which may or may not be able to obtain strong domestic or external supports) use violence, strikes or acts of “terrorism” in order to assert their interests or gain recognition for their cause. If deterrence or dissuasion fails, then conflict can accordingly break out.

(Gardner, this volume).

Concluding Remarks

After the Peloponnesian Wars, Athenian political culture transformed, with loyalty to friends being valued before loyalty to country and ambition before morality, it was natural to seek scapegoats to save face, while vengeance was not seen merely acceptable, but a moral obligation. Between 403 and 386, over twenty generals, magistrates, ambassadors and orators stood trial in Athens, with more than half convicted and five executed -the Athenian leaders were more likely to fall in domestic politics than in battle during the Corinthian war. As Strauss argues, postwar politics were shaped by the loss of empire and confiscation of property, and the demographic consequences of battle: casualties, epidemic, hunger, poverty and perhaps birth control.

The democratic institutions that promoted knowledge networks and the innovative organizational model, which enabled Athenian hegemony, recurred as the ideal of the ‘ancestral constitution’ that the Athenians dreamt of re-establishing every time Athens lost a war. Hansen points to the constitutional debate being almost a function in foreign policy:

In 404 the Athenians suffered the most serious defeat in their history, and in the years that followed first the Thirty (in pretense) and then the returned democrats themselves
attempted to restore the ‘ancestral constitution’; in 355 Athens lost her war against the
Allies who had revolted and again the dream of the ‘ancestral constitution’ turns up in
the sources; in 338 Athens was finally defeated by Philip, and at once we meet
reforms designed to restore ‘the ancestral constitution’; in 322 Athens was actually
captured by the Macedonians, who set about re-creating the ‘ancestral constitution’ –
only this time since it was dependent on the military power of Macedon, it appeared in
an oligarchic guise, whereas changes up to then had never been more than
modifications of the democracy. 

Besides the failure to re-establish the democratic institutions and the innovative model of
organization accompanied by the devastation of war, as an explanation of Athenian
hegemonic decline, there might be more similarities with contemporary global politics than
initially meets the eye. As the bipolarity thesis is not credible in the Peloponnesian War, an
analysis would need to go beyond the obvious Cold War comparisons. In that fashion, as Ober
argues, the multi-state Greek world in certain ways seems a miniature version of the post-
1989 contemporary world:

…in both cases we find several hundred states of various sizes engaged in interstate
economic and military competition. Borders are, on the whole, fairly stable, and
systematic border violations by aggressor-states trigger vigorous military response.
Many of the most successful states feature republican/democratic institutions and
relatively open-access economies.

Ancient Athens owed its hegemony to innovation in knowledge networks permeated by
democratic traditions organically involved in a specific space and time. When this innovation
and the concentration of wealth and power resulted in hybris and threatened the other city
states, the decline inevitably came through the halt of innovation and the overpowering of the
Athenian system by its weaknesses.

The contemporary move toward sustainable ecology, ethical economy, fair trade and
alternative capitalism through horizontal peer production, knowledge and social networks
promoting innovation with successful examples in the technology industry, might be pointing
to an organizational environment that is “characterized by diversity rather than
homogenization, distributed knowledge rather than centralized expertise, democracy and
choice rather than command and control.” This appears to be an emergent environment
similar to the one responsible for the admirable Athenian golden age. It remains to be seen if
it will prove, in our times, one capable to overpower the weaknesses of democracy and capitalism to escape global catastrophic decline.

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