WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CRISIS? THE CULTURE OF CONFRONTATION IN THE GREEK CITY *

1. *Crisis and democracy*

In the bleak days of the Great Depression, while the rest of the world was acquiescing to authoritarian regimes, the Hon. Albert C. Ritchie, Governor of Maryland, delivered this heartfelt acclamation of America's democracy:

> So far as our own country is concerned, we are all conscious of serious maladjustments and readjustments. Perhaps a good deal of our demoralization is due to fear that this world crisis has put democracy to a test it cannot meet, and that instead of the war making the world safe for democracy it has done quite the opposite. What we should realize is the superb showing our own democracy is making in this crisis. Abroad we see the tumultuous play of all sorts of forces-socialism, communism, Hitlerism, "dictatorships of the unfit", the rule of autocracy, plutocracy, black shirts, red shirts and what not. Doubtless many of us are wondering how our own democracy will react to ferments of the same kind. But if any of them are here, it is only to an unappreciable extent. With us, very few revolutionary tendencies, hardly any demagoguery and no disorder. [1]

Many a commentator has described the current financial downturn by recalling the memories of the post-1929 recession; not too many, however, would be ready to say that our political institutions are making a «superb showing» in this crisis; on the contrary, we are pretty certain that, had politics kept under tighter control the financial-economic system, we would not have witnessed the latter's spectacular collapse. Nowadays, Governor Mitchell's granitic trust in democracy would be the object of envy in Washington or Westminster: good

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1) Ritchie 1932, pp. 137-138.

and bad, right and wrong we can no longer identify and localise as clearly as he did; the present crisis therefore appears much more pervasive. As President Obama said in his inauguration speech, «the question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works».

Asking questions is in many ways the actual essence of democracy: laws have to undergo parliamentary debate before being approved; the work of politicians is regularly tested at elections. Sometimes, when the system seems to be particularly struggling, citizens might question its actual validity. According to its ancient as well as modern critics, democracy might appear to be marred by an excess of political activity, so much so that, according to the Old Oligarch, sometimes a magistrate could complete his year in office without ever appearing before the assembly or the council,

> διὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν πραγμάτων οὐχ οἷοί τε πάντας ἀποπέμπει εἰσὶ χρωματίσαντες.[2]

Alexis de Tocqueville also highlighted the fragilities of democratic politics by observing that «when elections occur frequently, their recurrence keeps society in a feverish excitement and gives a continual instability to public affairs. Thus, on the one hand, the state is exposed to the perils of a revolution, on the other to perpetual mutability; the former system threatens the very existence of the government, the latter prevents any steady and consistent policy»[3].

The perils of the democratic constitution were not unknown to the ancient Athenians, the fathers of all democracies, who, in moments of particular strain, such as the aftermath of a military defeat, were inclined to question the effectiveness of their regime. This was pretty much the case following the disastrous campaign against the fellow-democratic Syracuse, launched in the midst of the Peloponnesian War. The Athenians thought that it was just a matter of time before their enemies of Sicily would set sail against Piraeus, while the Spartans had already resumed operations by land and sea[4]. The citizens were determined to resist, but also thought that, to make the most of their military effort, they needed to reform and rationalise the constitution. A board of elders were therefore appointed, οἵτινες περὶ τῶν παρόντων ὡς ἂν καιρὸς ᾖ προβουλεύσουσιν[5]: in the time of strain, the proud citizens accepted to give up part of their political power. Thucydides gives an intriguing interpretation of that decision: πάντα τε πρὸς παραχρῆμα περιδεές, ὅπερ φιλεῖ δῆμος ποιεῖν, ἑτοῖμοι ἦσαν εὐτακτεῖν[6]. According to some scholars, what Thucydides is describing here is one of those momentary spells of political wisdom, which the Athenians could achieve when

[2]) [Xen.] *Resp. Ath.* 3.1: «owing to the quantity of business they are not able to deal with all persons before sending them away» (tansl. by E.C. Marchant).

[3]) A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, book I, chapter. 13.

[4]) Thuc. 8.1.

[5]) Thuc. 8.1.3: «to advise upon the state of affairs as occasion should arise» (transl. by R. Crawley); see Yunis 1991, p. 181.

[6]) Thuc. 8.1.4: «in short, as is the way of a democracy, in the panic of the moment they were ready to be as prudent as possible».

the enemy had them in the corner [7], but the matter at stake is probably more complex and concerns the nature itself of democratic culture.

In the opening chapter of the eighth book of his *Histories*, Thucydides tells us that the Athenians initially did not believe the words of the first soldiers arriving from Sicily [8]; then, when reality could not be denied any further, they turned against the orators who had promoted the enterprise, as though they had not voted it, and finally against the oracles, omenmongers and all the likes, who had given favourable auspices for the campaign. The Athenians were distressed, seized by fear and consternation. When they saw their army decimated and their fleet annihilated, the citizens decided to constitute the board of elders, as a necessary measure to face the inevitable assault of their enemies of Greece and Sicily [9]. Thucydides does not fail to observe that the citizens who were now desperately looking for scapegoats (just before trying to restore some order by appointing the board) were in all likelihood the same people who had so enthusiastically endorsed the campaign a mere couple of years earlier [10].

The Sicilian expedition is the turning point of Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War, and a crucial episode to understand his analysis of Athenian democracy. The enterprise revealed all the fragility of the political system based on assembly debate and competitive oratory (and, indeed, «competitive interpretation») [11]: the Athenians decided to send the fleet to Sicily upon a specious pretext, lured by the seductive words of their Sicilian allies [12]. The *ekklesia* proved a more suitable stage for Alcibiades' daring ambition and youthful flamboyance rather than Nicias' cautiousness [13]. The Athenians seemed to realise the magnitude of the task facing the city only at the moment of parting from their relatives and acquaintances, but still they found comfort and reassurance in the sight of the prodigious armaments, which they had prepared for that eventful campaign [14].

Overwhelmed by the strong passions arisen by the Sicilian expedition, not to mention the Hermae scandal [15], the *demos* was at its most frantic and volatile, and we might easily associate the impulsive reaction at the tragic news from Sicily with other episodes in which the moody Athenians suddenly repented and decided to revise their decisions, like at the time of the campaign of Mitylene [16],

7) See Rahe 1996, p. 139.

8) Cfr. also Thuc. 1.20.3, on Thucydides and the Athenians' «unwillingness to test the truth», see Ober 1998, pp. 54-55.

9) Thuc. 8.1.

10) See Thuc. 6.24.2.

11) Ober 1998, p. 49.

12) Thuc. 6.6.3, 8.1-4.

13) Thuc. 6.15.2-3, 17.1, 24.2.

14) Thuc. 6.31.1.

15) Thuc. 6.27-29.

16) Thuc. 3.36.1-4: «Upon the arrival of the prisoners with Salaethus, the Athenians at once put the latter to death, although he offered, among other things, to procure the withdrawal of the Peloponnesians from Plataea, which was still under siege; and after deliberating as to what they should do with the former, in the fury of the moment determined to put to death not only the prisoners at Athens, but the whole adult male population of Mitylene, and to make slaves of the women and children. It was remarked that Mitylene had revolted

or, some years later, in the days of the trial of the generals who had fought at the Arginusae [17]. Not that this inclination to repentance was an exclusively Athenian trait: just as the defeated Athenians were lamenting the destruction of their mighty fleet, the victorious Syracusans, who had so much in common with the Athenians, including a democratic constitution and the pestering presence of demagogues and sycophants in their town [18], first decided to spare the lives of the captured Athenians, then changed their mind and opted for putting the generals to death and throwing the other prisoners into the quarries, until some members of the local *jeunesse dorée*, ashamed as they were by the actions of their fellow-citizens, took the step of rescuing the better educated among the prisoners [19].

As far as Thucydides is concerned, it is indeed easy to say that he criticises democracy and that the Sicilian episode highlights all the problems with democracy. Interpreting the nature of this criticism is a much trickier matter. The history of democracy has hardly followed a straightforward path: from its origins as «parochial eccentricity» democracy has now become «the embodiment of political power in itself», but only after enduring «protracted ignominy» [20]. Such oblivion lasted in fact for a couple of millennia, until the enlightenment [21], during which the Athenian *demos* was constantly described as a capricious and virulent mob, led by a bunch of ruthless agitators. Plutarch himself observes that the building programme of Pericles, which had given the Parthenon to the world, and brought adornment and honour to Athens, was most maligned by his short-sighted opponents [22]. In a passage of Tacitus' *Dialogus de oratoribus*, Maternus says that the ignorance of the democratic Athenians was equal only to their licence (*omnia imperiti, omnia … omnes poterant*) [23]. A few centuries later, Thomas Hobbes would praise Thucydides for having shown the ineptitude of the democratic masses:

Sed mihi prae reliquis Thucydides placuit.
Is Democratia ostendit mihi quam sit inepta,
Et quantum coetu plus sapit unus homo.

without being, like the rest, subjected to the empire; and what above all swelled the wrath of the Athenians was the fact of the Peloponnesian fleet having ventured over to Ionia to her support, a fact which was held to argue a long-meditated rebellion. They accordingly sent a trireme to communicate the decree to Paches, commanding him to lose no time in despatching the Mitylenians. The morrow brought repentance with it and reflection on the horrid cruelty of a decree, which condemned a whole city to the fate merited only by the guilty».

17) Xen. *Hell.* 1.7.35; Diod. 13.103.1-2.

18) Thuc. 7.55.2; Diod. 11.87.5; cfr. Asmonti 2008, p. 80.

19) Diod. 13.33.1.

20) Dunn 2005, pp. 17-18.

21) See Hansen 2005, p. 7.

22) Plut. *Per.* 12.1.

23) Tac. *De or.* 40.3: *Quem enim oratorem Lacedaemonium, quem Cretensem accepimus? quarum civitatum severissima disciplina et severissimae leges traduntur. ne Macedonum quidem ac Persarum aut ullius gentis, quae certo imperio contenta fuerit, eloquentiam novimus. Rhodii quidam, plurimi Athenienses oratores extiterunt, apud quos omnia populus, omnia imperiti, omnia, ut sic dixerim, omnes poterant.*

Hunc ego scriptorem verti, qui diceret Anglis,
Consultaturi rhetoras ut fugerent. [24]

This kind of attitude still exercises a certain influence on those scholars who point out the masochistic "foolishness" of some of the *demos*' decisions, like that the Sicilian campaign or the execution of the Arginusae generals. In an intriguing paper published in 1988, M. Pope questioned the extent to which Thucydides really disapproved of democratic practice: as he correctly observes, the historical mistakes of the Athenian people – from Mytilene and Melos to the Sicilian expedition – Thucydides never blames directly on the democratic constitution [25], nor does he ever imply that the democratic citizens were inept and politically ignorant, rather the opposite: throughout the *Histories*, the citizens of various *poleis* are consistently described as competent and informed political communities, able to act on their own initiative, revealing «extreme competence in argument and negotiation»; the citizens were able to construct innovative policies and to maintain their purposes [26].

As far as the working of politics was concerned, democratic citizens were not *imperiti* at all: the Old Oligarch himself had to admit that the Athenian masses, despicable as they were, knew very well how to exploit the mechanisms of the democratic constitution to their own advantage [27]. In democratic Athens, politics was part of the everyday life of a citizen, and a topic for conversation at the dining table. Lysistrata is the Aristophanean heroine, who convinces all the women of Greece to withhold sex from their husbands in order to bring the Peloponnesian War to an end, and so she addresses her fellow-conspirators:

ἐγὼ γυνὴ μέν εἰμι, νοῦς δ᾽ ἔνεστί μοι,
αὐτὴ δ᾽ ἐυματῆς οὐ κακῶς γνώμης ἔχω,
τοὺς δ᾽ ἐκ πατρός τε καὶ γεραιτέρων λόγους
πολλοὺς ἀκούσας᾽ οὐ μεμούσωμαι κακῶς. [28]

At this point, we might wonder whether the problem with democracy was just this continuous and passionate and involvement of the citizens in the political debate: the *polis* was not marred by widespread ignorance, but – rather paradoxically – by an excess of political knowledge and participation. In Athens the assembly was the seat of the supreme political authority: here the people listened to the diverging speeches of orators, contending to obtain the favour of the audience; hence, the *demos* had to judge whose opinion or proposed course

[24]) T. Hobbes, *Vita carmine expressa, authore seipso*, 80-84: «Thucydides pleased me above the others; he showed me how inept is Democracy and how much wiser a single man is than a gathering. I translated this author so that he could warn the Englishmen to shun the orators when they are to deliberate» (my transl.); cfr. Pope 1988, p. 276.

[25]) *Ivi*, p. 287.

[26]) *Ivi*, pp. 279-281.

[27]) [Xen.] *Resp. Ath.* 1.1-3.

[28]) Ar. *Lys.* 1124-1128: «Here you, / Athenians. Both hearken to my words. / I am a woman, but I'm not a fool. / And what of natural intelligence I own / Has been filled out with the remembered precepts / My father and the city-elders taught me» (transl. by J. Lindsay).

of action appeared more profitable, and finally they would deliberate according to «what seemed them best».

From Plato on, the innate fragility of the decision-making process based on competitive oratory has been duly emphasised [29]. The problem, however, was not only the risk of some naïve Athenians being deceived by the sophistic tricks of the orators. The inventors of democracy, therefore, were well aware that popular government was a risky and tricky business. Sometimes democracy needed some reining in, in order to avoid disorder.

By inventing democracy, the Athenians also invented crisis.

2. *The birth of "polis" and the birth of "krisis"*

The meaning of the noun "crisis" is rather difficult to capture; we might all more or less agree that the term refers to a dangerous and unstable situation in a number of spheres (political crisis, social crisis, personal crisis). The Oxford English Dictionary defines crisis as «a time of intense difficulty or danger» or «the turning point of a disease». Both definitions highlight the temporal nature of crisis, which is generally seen as a phase, an interruption of the regular flow and order of things.

In this respect, the analysis of the Greek notion of crisis is particularly interesting. The noun *krisis* has the same stem as the verb κρίνω, whose original meaning is "to divide", "to separate"; hence it acquires that of "to choose" or "to prefer". *Krisis* is the process through which decisions are made and preferences are expressed. *Krisis*, for instance, is the title of a lost tragedy by Sophocles on the trial of Paris, who was called on by Zeus to judge a beauty contest between Hera, Aphrodite and Athena.

As we know, Aphrodite came out victorious and rewarded Paris by giving him Helen, the beautiful wife of Menelaus. Paris duly went to Sparta to reclaim his prize, took Helen to Troy, causing a coalition of Greek kings to attack the town. According to Thucydides, the war of Troy was the first enterprise, which the Greek peoples carried out in common, before they were even called «Ἕλληνες» [30]. Thucydides also tells us that Menelaus, Agamemnon and their companions were the holders of a pre-political and informal power, which was not yet institutionally endorsed:

> ἐφιέμενοι γὰρ τῶν κερδῶν οἵ τε ἥσσους ὑπέμενον τῶν κρεισσόνων δουλείαν, οἵ τε δυνατώτεροι περιουσίας ἔχοντες προσεποιοῦντο ὑπηκόους τὰς ἐλάσσους πόλεις. Καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τῷ τρόπῳ μᾶλλον ἤδη ὄντες ὕστερον χρόνῳ ἐπὶ Τροίαν ἐστράτευσαν. [31]

[29]) Ober 1998, p. 58.

[30]) Thuc. 1.3.1-3.

[31]) Thuc. 1.8.3-4: «For the love of gain would reconcile the weaker to the dominion of the stronger, and the possession of capital enabled the more powerful to reduce the smaller towns to subjection. And it was at a somewhat later stage of this development that they went on the expedition against Troy».

The Greece of Agamemnon, not yet called Greece, was not yet the world of *poleis*; Homer, however, described it at a much later time and was therefore able to register that momentous passage of the earliest Greek archaic history, when the Hellenes began their journey towards the creation of *polis*, the most genuinely Greek form of social and political organisation. In the eight-tenth book of the *Iliad*, we find a very detailed description of the new shield of Achilles [32], part of a new armour, commissioned for him by his mother Thetis to replace the old one, which the hero had lent to Patroclus and was taken by the Trojans when Patroclus fell in battle. The shield is a masterwork by the divine ironsmith Hephaestus, embellished by an incredibly ambitious decoration:

> ἐν μὲν γαῖαν ἔτυξ᾽, ἐν δ᾽ οὐρανόν, ἐν δὲ θάλασσαν,
> ἠέλιόν τ᾽ ἀκάμαντα σελήνην τε πλήθουσαν,
> ἐν δὲ τὰ τείρεα πάντα, τά τ᾽ οὐρανὸς ἐστεφάνωται,
> Πληϊάδας θ᾽ Ὑάδας τε τό τε σθένος Ὠρίωνος
> Ἄρκτόν θ᾽, ἣν καὶ Ἄμαξαν ἐπίκλησιν καλέουσιν,
> ἥ τ᾽ αὐτοῦ στρέφεται καί τ᾽ Ὠρίωνα δοκεύει,
> οἴη δ᾽ ἄμμορός ἐστι λοετρῶν Ὠκεανοῖο. [33]

This cosmic representation also includes the depiction of two cities of mortal men, two *poleis*, as the poet says, one in peace and one at war.

The theme of the comparison of two cities, usually one good and one bad, is not uncommon in western art. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's frescoes on the Sala dei Nove in Siena's Palazzo Vecchio are a famous example (*Fig. 1*). The paintings consist of two allegories of good and bad government and two visions of their effects in town and country. The scene is very placid: power, in the shape of a spear and a globe, is firmly in the hand of a wise-looking, appropriately white-haired sovereign, protected by the three theological virtues flying above his head. Justice, Temperance, Magnanimity, Prudence, Might and Peace are seated at his sides. In the lower part of the painting, we can see a procession of citizens, presenting the sovereign with the rope to administer justice, and a group of prisoners, kept out of the gates of Siena. Good and Bad here are clearly identified and physically kept apart from each other by a wall. In that perfect society, the citizens do not need to be involved in the administration of government and justice, they are happy to entrust it to their sovereign, who is indeed the beacon of justice and good government. For the purposes of our discussion, it is interesting to note that only two characters seem to be talking. Where good and bad are objectively recognised, there is no room for debate. There is no room for crisis.

Now let us have a look at the two cities of Achilles' shield. The poet does not seem to assume that the *polis* in peace is anyhow better than the one at war:

[32]) Hom. *Il.* 18.478-608.

[33]) Hom. *Il.* 18.483-489: «He wrought the earth, the heavens, and the sea; the moon also at her full and the untiring sun, with all the signs that glorify the face of heaven – the Pleiads, the Hyads, huge Orion, and the Bear, which men also call the Wain and which turns round ever in one place, facing. Orion, and alone never dips into the stream of Okeanos» (transl. by S. Butler).

Fig. 1. - Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Allegoria del buon governo, Siena, Palazzo Pubblico.

they are both καλάς, "beautiful". Nothing impedes us to think that they are in fact the same city, captured in two different moments of its life. The town at war is surprisingly orderly; the personages in this scene are clearly divided into four groups: the besieging warriors, the soldiers of the besieged city, their wives, then their children and the elderly; each group seem to have a specific role to attend to: war is an important moment in the life of a community, which is supposed to follow a detailed protocol:

τὴν δ᾽ ἑτέρην πόλιν ἀμφὶ δύω στρατοὶ ἥατο λαῶν
τεύχεσι λαμπόμενοι· δίχα δέ σφισιν ἥνδανε βουλή,
ἠὲ διαπραθέειν ἢ ἄνδιχα πάντα δάσασθαι,
κτῆσιν ὅσην πτολίεθρον ἐπήρατον ἐντὸς ἔεργεν·
οἳ δ᾽ οὔ πω πείθοντο, λόχῳ δ᾽ ὑπεθωρήσσοντο.
τεῖχος μέν ῥ᾽ ἄλοχοί τε φίλαι καὶ νήπια τέκνα
ῥύατ᾽ ἐφεσταότες, μετὰ δ᾽ ἀνέρες οὓς ἔχε γῆρας·
οἳ δ᾽ ἴσαν· ἦρχε δ᾽ ἄρά σφιν Ἄρης καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη
ἄμφω χρυσείω, χρύσεια δὲ εἵματα ἕσθην. [34]

Just like the well-governed town painted by Lorenzetti, the Homeric *polis* at peace presents a busy community involved in many everyday activities, with one important difference:

ἐν τῇ μέν ῥα γάμοι τ᾽ ἔσαν εἰλαπίναι τε,
νύμφας δ᾽ ἐκ θαλάμων δαΐδων ὕπο λαμπομενάων
ἠγίνεον ἀνὰ ἄστυ, πολὺς δ᾽ ὑμέναιος ὀρώμρει·
κοῦροι δ᾽ ὀρχηστῆρες ἐδίνεον, ἐν δ᾽ ἄρα τοῖσιν
αὐλοὶ φόρμιγγές τε βοὴν ἔχον· αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες
ἱστάμεναι θαύμαζον ἐπὶ προθύροισιν ἑκάστη.
λαοὶ δ᾽ εἰν ἄγορῇ ἔσαν ἀθρόοι· ἔνθα δὲ νεῖκος
ὠρώρει, δύο δ᾽ ἄνδρες ἐνείκεον εἵνεκα ποινῆς
ἀνδρὸς ἀποκταμένου· ὃ μὲν εὔχετο πάντ᾽ ἀποδοῦναι
δήμῳ πιφαύσκων, ὃ δ᾽ ἀναίνετο μηδὲν ἑλέσθαι·
ἄμφω δ᾽ ἱέσθην ἐπὶ ἴστορι πεῖραρ ἑλέσθαι.
λαοὶ δ᾽ ἀμφοτέροισιν ἐπήπυον, ἀμφὶς ἀρωγοί·
κήρυκες δ᾽ ἄρα λαὸν ἐρήτυον· οἳ δὲ γέροντες
ἥατ᾽ ἐπὶ ξεστοῖσι λίθοις ἱερῷ ἐνὶ κύκλῳ,
σκῆπτρα δὲ κηρύκων ἐν χέρς᾽ ἔχον ἠεροφώνων·
τοῖσιν ἔπειτ᾽ ἤϊσσον, ἀμοιβηδὶς δὲ δίκαζον.
κεῖτο δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ἐν μέσσοισι δύω χρυσοῖο τάλαντα,
τῷ δόμεν ὃς μετὰ τοῖσι δίκην ἰθύντατα εἴποι. [35]

[34]) Hom. *Il.* 18.509-517: «the other city lay in leaguer two hosts of warriors gleaming in armour. And twofold plans found favour with them, either to lay waste the town or to divide in portions twain all the substance that the lovely city contained within. Howbeit the besieged would nowise hearken thereto, but were arming to meet the foe in an ambush. The wall were their dear wives and little children guarding, as they stood thereon, and therewithal the men that were holden of old age; but the rest were faring forth, led of Ares and Pallas Athena, both fashioned in gold, and of gold was the raiment wherewith they were clad».

[35]) Hom. *Il.* 18.491-508: «there were marriages and feastings, and by the light of the blazing torches they were leading the brides from their bowers through the city, and loud rose the bridal song. And young men were whirling in the dance, and in their midst flutes and

Whereas in Lorenzetti's frescoes justice and the just town are two separated bodies, because the former does not belong to the citizens, but to a perfect and superior sovereign, who rules them from above their heads. Homer presents a much more mundane image of justice. Far from describing an *allegory* of justice, Homer delivers a lively and indeed noisy trial scene: two citizens are arguing about the compensation for a homicide, the trial is not taking placing in an indoor tribunal, but in the *agora*, the market-square. The proceedings are presided over by a council of elderly, whose official rank is marked by the «polished stones» upon which they seat and by the staves, which they hold. However, in spite of the presence of a formal jury, the defendant declares his cause to the people, the *demos*, who are following the trial with passion, noisily taking side with either contestant.

The *polis* at peace, in sum, is not a pacified *polis*; the city community is supposed to gather together to argue and debate, social interaction is bound to bring about division and *krisis*; even the besieging army of the city at war is captured while holding some form of debate to decide how to deal with the "lovely" *polis*, and one of the options at stake, the second one, actually implies a division of the booty, which in its turn would require another debate and some degree of *krisis.* In the Homeric *polis*, therefore, *krisis* is not an obstacle to social life, but seems to constitute its very essence. Since its origin, the *polis* was meant to be a very dialectic society, where any good citizen was expected to get involved in the quarrels, which spiced up the life of the community.

The acropolis, the citadel on the top of the city, was the seat of power of the Mycenaean kingdoms, the world preceding the *polis*, which Agamemnon and Achilles were supposed to belong to. From the citadel, power was irradiated down to the lower areas of the territory and to the lower orders of society. In Homer this order was finally called into question; a new, horizontal form of power is emerging: the kings now have to assert their authority in the assembly; the agora, the place where the people meet and discuss: division and *krisis* do not undermine authority and justice; rather, they create them. The notion of *krisis* is therefore a constructive one, it is the phase of division and debate is supposed to lead to a synthesis and to reach a resolution.

lyres sounded continually; and there the women stood each before her door and marvelled. But the folk were gathered in the place of assembly; for there a strife had arisen, and two men were striving about the blood-price of a man slain; the one avowed that he had paid all, declaring his cause to the people, but the other refused to accept aught; and each was fain to win the issue on the word of a daysman. Moreover, the folk were cheering both, shewing favour to this side and to that. And heralds held back the folk, and the elders were sitting upon polished stones in the sacred circle, holding in their hands the staves of the loud-voiced heralds. Therewith then would they spring up and give judgment, each in turn. And in the midst lay two talents of gold, to be given to him whose among them should utter the most righteous judgment».

3. *The necessity of "krisis"*

Obviously, this was not always the case. Homer does not tell how the trial did end, but his polis being a «beautiful *polis*», perhaps an ideal one, we might suppose that the jury did reach a verdict and that the people, supporting either party, were happy with it. Reality was often very different, often the dynamic and steady debate did not lead to any constructive conclusion: *krisis*, in these cases, became civic strife, or *stasis*.

Stasis refers to two or more factions standing still against each other, without moving forward; in a situation of *stasis*, the city loses its dynamism. The *polis* was always walking on the brink of *stasis*, healthy confrontation could easily lead to political, sometimes physical violence, especially in the moments of military difficulties, such as the last years of the Peloponnesian War for Athens. The Greeks were very well aware that the *polis* was indeed supposed to be unquiet, social and political tension was innate to the polis and propelled a process of unceasing constitutional transformation, marked by more or less violent changes of the regime in force (μεταβολαί), as the readers of the Aristotelian *Constitution of Athens* know very well [36].

Athens was pretty much on the brink of *stasis* at the end of the sixth century, when the citizens appointed the aristocratic Solon as an impartial arbiter to restore peace and reorganise the state [37]. Solon was not successful in bringing durable peace in Athens, but his fellow-citizens remembered him as a father of democracy.

What did he do? In Solon's Athens the control of the state was still firmly in the hands of a handful of wealthy aristocratic clans. Solon gave the blueprint to full democracy by entitling all the citizens to take part to the *ekklesia*, the general assembly, which little by little would become the supreme political institution of the city. Solon wanted to bring peace to Athens, but he was also aware that without open confrontation, without *krisis*, there could be no *polis*. In some way, the citizens revealed their belonging to the same community by gathering together – let us remember that the *agora,* from Achilles' shield on, had replaced the acropolis as the pulsating heart of the state – discussing, and, inexorably, getting divided.

This issue Solon addressed in a particularly curious edict:

> ὁρῶν δὲ τὴν μὲν πόλιν πολλάκις στασιάζουσαν, τῶν δὲ πολιτῶν ἐνίους διὰ τὴν ῥαθυμίαν ἀγαπῶντας τὸ αὐτόματον, νόμον ἔθεκεν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἴδιον, ὃς ἂν στασιαζούσης τῆς πόλεως μὴ θῆται τὰ ὅπλα μηδὲ μεθ᾽ ἑτέρων ἄτιμον εἶναι καὶ τῆς πόλεως μὴ μετέχειν. [38]

[36]) See Finley 1983, pp. 100-103.

[37]) [Arist.] *Resp. Ath.* 4.4-5.2; Plut. *Sol.* 13.2-14.1.

[38]) [Arist.] *Resp. Ath.* 8.5: «and as he saw that the state was often in a condition of party strife, while some of the citizens through slackness were content to let things slide, he laid down a special law to deal with them, enacting that whoever when civil strife prevailed did not join forces with either party was to be disfranchised and not to be a member of the state» (transl. by H. Rackham); cfr. Plut. *Sol.* 20.1.

According to an intriguing thesis proposed by Victor Bers, the goal of this bizarre law was to press shy supporters of Solon into active service [39]. For the purpose of our discussion, what is interesting here is that Solon seems to consider *krisis* not as the cause of party strife, but as its solution: every issue, every problem had to be brought into the political arena, had to be everyone's concern: for *stasis* was the effect of a sort of civic sloppiness, a lack of participation which allowed factional leaders to take advantage of the common good for their own interest, and that of their acolytes.

4. *Aeschylus, "krisis" and democracy*

The articulate process which Solon had begun at the end of the sixth century gained further momentum a fifty years later, in 460, when a mysterious figure called Ephialtes decided to transfer to the popular assembly and to the senate most of the powers traditionally held by the Areopagus, the council formed by the ex archons, Athens' most senior magistrates, a bastion of aristocratic supremacy [40]. The people were now completely in control of the elaboration, promulgation and custody of the laws, while the Areopagus continued to exist as a tribunal for murder trials.

Probably, Ephialtes was not fully aware of the revolutionary effects of this measure. Our sources tell us that he was mainly interested in undermining the ascendancy of his political enemies, most of whom were members of the Areopagus [41]. A couple of years later, however, the new role of the Areopagus was solemnly celebrated on the stage of the tragedy contest at the Dyonisia festival, in a play by Aeschylus called *Eumenides*. This play is the final part of a trilogy on the saga of Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who killed his mother and her lover Aegisthus to revenge the assassination of his father. Aeschylus shows us Orestes, cursed by the Furies, primordial deities who avenge patricide and matricide, as he comes to the temple of Athena, in Athens, seeking sanctuary.

The issue at stake here is a typical tragic dilemma, a case too great for any mortal, or even god, to pass judgement on: Orestes does admit to having killed his mother, but only to revenge the murder of his father; the Furies, on the other hand, reclaim their ancestral duty of punishing the murders of relatives [42].

39) See Bers 1975, pp. 496-497.

40) [Arist.] *Resp. Ath*. 25.

41) See [Arist.] *Resp. Ath.* 25.1-2: «As the population increased, Ephialtes son of Sophonides, having become head of the People and having the reputation of being incorruptible and just in regard to the constitution, attacked the Council. First he made away with many of the Areopagites by bringing legal proceedings against them about their acts of administration; then in the archonship of Conon he stripped the Council of all its added powers which made it the safeguard of the constitution».

42) Aesch. *Eum*. 336-337, 463-464.

Who is right? Or rather: can either party be completely right and the other one perfectly wrong? How does Athena decide to deal with a case, which is bound to bring «an intolerable, perpetual plague» [43] to her land? The *krisis* is apparently irresolvable and Athena knows it; a new tribunal must be established to deal with this case; Athena thus creates the new Areopagus:

> τοιαῦτα μὲν τάδ᾽ ἐστίν· ἀμφότερα, μένειν
> πέμπειν τε δυσπήματ᾽ ἀμηχάνως ἐμοί.
> ἐπεὶ δὲ πρᾶγνα δεῦρ᾽ ἀπέσκηψεν τόδε,
> φόνων δικαστάς ὁρκίων αἱρομένη
> θεσμὸν τὸν εἰς ἅπαντ᾽ ἐγὼ θήσω χρόνον.
> ὑμεῖς δὲ μαρτύριά τε καὶ τεκμήρια
> καλεῖσθ᾽, ἀγωρὰ τῆς δίκης ὁρκώματα·
> κρίνασα δ᾽ ἀστῶν τῶν ἐμῶν τὰ βέλτατα
> ἥξω, διαιρεῖν τοῦτο πρᾶγμ᾽ ἐτητύμως,
> ὅρκον περῶντας μηδὲν ἔκδικοις φράσειν. [44]

The jurors selected by Athena did not manage to reach a verdict, their votes being equally split between Orestes and the Furies: *krisis* could not be more perfect; Orestes, however, is in the end acquitted, after Athena casts her vote for him, because – she says – she is «for the male and entirely on the father's side» [45]. The creation of the new tribunal is a new beginning, the birth of a fuller, stronger *polis*, where even the harshest and most abrasive divisions, like the contrast between maternal and paternal rights, on which no citizen is entitled not to take a side.

Says Athena:

> κλύοιτ᾽ ἂν ἤδη θεσμόν Ἀττικὸς λεώς,
> πρώτας δίκας κρίνοντες αἵματος χυτοῦ.
> ἔσται δὲ καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν Αἰγέως στρατῷ
> αἰεὶ δικαστῶν τοῦτο βουλευτήριον. [46]

This is the act of birth of democracy, the regime based on constructive debate and confrontation, the fullest and highest expression of *krisis*, meant as the process of constructive division, debate and judgement, regulated by the laws of the state, which the citizens have to respect in order to avoid the risks of tyranny and anarchy:

[43]) Aesch. *Eum*. 477-478.

[44]) Aesch. *Eum.* 480-489: «so stands the case: either course – to let them stay, to drive them out – brings disaster and perplexity to me. But since this matter has fallen here, I will select judges of homicide bound by oath, and I will establish this tribunal for all time. Summon your witnesses and proofs, sworn evidence to support your case; and I will return when I have chosen the best of my citizens, for them to decide this matter truly, after they take an oath that they will pronounce no judgment contrary to justice» (transl. by H. Weir Smyth).

[45]) Aesch. *Eum.* 734-741.

[46]) Aesch. *Eum.* 681-684: «Hear now my ordinance, people of Attica, as you judge the first trial for bloodshed. In the future, even as now, this court of judges will always exist for the people of Aegeus».

> Τὸ μήτ᾽ ἄναρχον μήτε δεσποτούμενον
> ἀστοῖς περιστέλλουσι βουλεύω σέβειν,
> καὶ μὴ τὸ δεινὸν πᾶν πόλεως ἔξω βαλεῖν.
> τίς γὰρ δεδοικὼς μηδὲν ἔνδικος βροτῶν;
> τοιόνδε τοι ταρβοῦντες ἐνδίκως σέβας
> ἔρυμά τε χώρας καὶ πόλεως σωτήριον
> ἔχοιτ᾽ ἂν, οἷον οὔτις ἀνθρώπων ἔχει
> οὔτ᾽ ἐν Σκύθαισιν οὔτε Πέλοπος ἐν τόποις.
> κερδῶν ἄθικτον τοῦτο βουλευτήριον,
> αἰδοῖον, ὀξύθυμον, εὐδόντων ὕπερ
> ἐγρηγορὸς φρούρημα γῆς καθίσταμαι. [47]

The politics of division and debate, therefore, does not «prevent any steady and consistent policy», as Tocqueville says, but represents the only legitimate form of order, because it draws its strength and dynamism from the involvement of all the citizens. Debate is the *conditio sine qua* a solution cannot be found. In the final lines of his *Hellenica*, Xenophon famously says that after the battle of Mantinea of 362, which was meant to determine the balance of power between Thebes and the allied forces of Athens and Sparta:

> νενικηκέναι δὲ φάσκοντες ἑκάτεροι οὔτε χώρᾳ οὔτε πόλει οὔτ᾽ ἀρχῇ οὐδέτεροι οὐδὲν πλέον ἔχοντες ἐφάνησαν ἢ πρὶν τὴν μάχην γενέσθαι· ἀκρισία δὲ καὶ ταραχὴ ἔτι πλείων μετὰ τὴν μάχην ἐγένετο ἢ πρόσθεν ἐν τῇ Ἑλλάδι. [48]

Confusion is *akrisia*, or non-*krisis*, a situation of political chaos in which it was impossible to conduct constructive political debate. Without *krisis*, there cannot be *polis* or politics.

5. *Conclusions*

In 1994 Robin Osborne celebrated the 2500th anniversary of the creation of Athenian democracy with a paper entitled *Athenian Democracy: Something to Celebrate* [49]*?*

The irony could not be more appropriate, for the ancient city-state, and Athenian democracy in particular, as we have seen, created a new, active, concept of citizenship based on confrontation and debate. The lesson which comes

[47]) Aesch. *Eum.* 696-706: «Neither anarchy nor tyranny – this I counsel my citizens to support and respect, and not to drive fear wholly out of the city. For who among mortals, if he fears nothing, is righteous? Stand in just awe of such majesty, and you will have a defense for your land and salvation of your city, such as no man has, either among the Scythians or in Pelops' realm. I establish this tribunal, untouched by greed, worthy of reverence, quick to anger, awake on behalf of those who sleep, a guardian of the land».

[48]) Xen. *Hell.* 7.5.26-27: «Neither was found to be any better off, as regards either additional territory, or city, or sway, than before the battle took place; but there was even more confusion and disorder in Greece after the battle than before» (transl. by C.L. Brownson).

[49]) Osborne 1994, pp. 48-49.

to us from that school that was ancient Athens is nowadays, in these times of crisis, as important as ever. Our social and political system is now called into question, demands radical changes, forces us to reconsider our role as citizens; but this is just how democracies reveal their vitality: it is up to us to keep the debate on track, to use all the multiplicity of our views and positions to reach positive conclusions, and so to avoid the risks of *stasis*.

Luca Asmonti
University of Warwick
l.asmonti@warwick.ac.uk

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