CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Athenian Revolution of 508/7 B.C.E.

Violence, Authority, and the Origins of Democracy

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The periodization of history is, of course, a product of hindsight, and most historians realize that any past era can accurately be described as an "age of transition." The problem of fixing the end of the archaic period and the transition to the classical is thus a historiographic problem, one that reflects contemporary scholarly inclinations more than it does ancient realities. Nevertheless, since historians cannot work without periodization, and since English-language historiography seems to be entering a post-Annales phase characterized by a renewed interest in the significance—especially the symbolic and cultural significance—of events, it may be worthwhile to look at a series of events that can be taken as the beginning of a new phase of Greek history. The events we choose to mark the transition will be different for any given region or polis, but for those interested in Athenian political history, the end of the archaic and the beginning of something new may reasonably be said to have come about in the period from ca. 510 to 506 B.C.E., with the revolutionary events that established the form of government that would soon come to be called demokratia.

If the "Athenian Revolution" is a historically important event (or series of events), it is often described in what seem to me to be misleading terms. Historians typically discuss the revolution in the antiseptic terminology of "constitutional development" and their narrative accounts tend to be narrowly centered around the person and intentions of Kleisthenes himself. Putting Kleisthenes at the center of the revolution as a whole entails slighting significant parts of the source tradition. And that tradition, which consists almost entirely of brief discussions in Herodotus (5.66, 69–78) and the Aristotelian Athenaios Politeia (20–1), is scanty enough as it is. The reconstruction of the events of 508/7 offered here is simultaneously quite conservative in its approach and quite radical in its implications. I hope to show that by sticking very closely to the primary sources, it is possible to derive a plausible and internally coherent narrative that revolves around the Athenian people rather than their leaders. A close reading of the sources shows that the dominant role
ascribed to elite leaders in modern accounts of a key point in the revolution is supplementary to the ancient evidence. All historians supplement their narratives with assumptions, models, and theories; supplementation of the source material, in order to fill in apparent gaps and silences, is an inevitable part of the process of even the most self-consciously narrative (rather than analytical) forms of historical writing. But such supplements (especially those that are widely accepted) must be challenged from time to time, lest they become so deeply entrenched as to block the development of alternative readings that may explain the source tradition as well or better.

Both of our two main sources state that during a key period of the revolution, Kleisthenes and his closest supporters were in exile and imply that the main Athenian players in the revolt were corporate entities: the Boule and the demos. The ascription of authoritative leadership in all phases of the revolution to Kleisthenes may, I think, be attributed to the uncritical (and indeed unconscious) acceptance of a view of history that supposes that all advances in human affairs come through the consciously willed actions of individual members of an elite. In the case of other historical figures — for example, Solon — proponents of this elite-centered "great man" approach to history can at least claim support in the primary sources. But although he is regarded by the sources as the driving force behind important political reforms, Kleisthenes is not described in our sources as a Solon-style nomothesēs. The Athenaion Politeia (20.4) calls him τοῦ δήμου προστάτης (the leader who stands up before the people) and, while the label is anachronistic for the late sixth century, it seems to me a pretty reasonable description of Kleisthenes' historical role: like that of later Athenian politicians, Kleisthenes' leadership was not dependent on constitutional authority, but rather on his ability to persuade the Athenian people to adopt and to act on the proposals he advocated. In sum, I will attempt to show that while Kleisthenes was indeed a very important player in Athens' revolutionary dramas, the key role was played by the demos. And thus, démokratia was not a gift from a benevolent elite to a passive demos, but was the product of collective decision, action, and self-definition on the part of the demos itself.

Having advocated the study of historical events, and having simultaneously rejected the individual intentions of the elite leader as the motor that necessarily drives events, I shall go one step further out on the limb by suggesting that the moment of the revolution, the end of the archaic phase of Athenian political history, the point at which Athenian democracy was born, was a violent, leaderless event: a three-day riot in 508/7 that resulted in the removal of Kleomenes I and his Spartan troops from the soil of Attika.

In order to explain the events of 508/7 we need to review the revolutionary period that began in 510 B.C.E. — a fascinating few years characterized by a remarkable series of expulsions from the territory of Attika and returns to it. The series opened with the ouster of Hippias, son of Peisistratos. In 510 the Spartans, urged on by multiple oracles from Delphic Apollo, decided to liberate Athens from the rule of the Peisistratid tyrant. A preliminary seaborne invasion of Attika was repulsed by the tyrant's forces. King Kleomenes I then raised a second army, which he marched across the Isthmus into Athenian territory. This time Hippias' forces failed to stop the invasion. With the Spartans in control of Attika, the tyrant and his family were forced to retreat to their stronghold on the Acropolis. The Acropolis was a formidable obstacle, and the Spartan besiegers were initially stymied. Indeed, it looked as if they might abandon the attempt after a few days (Hdt. 5.64–5). But then Hippias made the mistake of trying to smuggle his sons past the besiegers and out of Athens. They were caught by the Spartans and held hostage. Hippias then surrendered on terms and was allowed to leave Athens with his family. Thus ended the tyranny. But the liberation raised more questions than it answered. Who would now rule Athens? One might suppose that the spoils of political authority would end up going to the victors. But as Thucydides (6.53.3; cf. Ar. Lys. 1150–5) pointed out, few Athenians had played much part in the expulsion. The victorious Spartans, for their part, had no interest in progressive political innovation. They surely intended Athens to become a client state, with a status similar to that of their allies in the Peloponnesian League. This would presumably mean that Athens would be governed by a rather narrow oligarchy, the form of government that (at least in the mid-fifth century; Thuc. 1.19) Sparta mandated as standard for all members of the League. The Spartans did not permanently garrison Athens (this was not their style), but after withdrawing their forces they remained very interested in Athenian politics. In the aftermath of the "liberation," King Kleomenes, the dominant figure in late-sixth-century Sparta, encouraged attempts by Isagoras and other Athenian aristocrats to establish a government that would exclude most Athenians from active political participation.

In the period from 510 to 507 the political battlefield of Athens was not disputed between men who called themselves or thought of themselves as oligarchs and democrats, but rather between rival aristocrats. We cannot say exactly what sort of government Isagoras envisioned, but in light of subsequent developments it seems safe to assume that he intended to place effective control of affairs into the hands of a small, pro-Spartan elite. Isagoras' main opponent was Kleisthenes the Alkmeonid. Despite the fact that Kleisthenes himself had been willing to accept the high office of archon under the tyranny, some elements of the Alkmeonid family had probably been active in resistance to the tyrants. Kleisthenes, obviously a leading figure among the Alkmeonids by 508/7, may have felt that his family's anti-tyrannical activity had earned him a prominent position in the political order that would replace the tyranny. But that position did not come automatically. Indeed, Isagoras, with his Spartan connections, was gaining influence and was elected archon for 508/7 B.C.E. Thus as Herodotus (5.66.2) tells us, Kleisthenes was getting the worst of it. In response Kleisthenes did a remarkable thing: τον δήμου προστάτης. I will leave this phrase untranslated for the time being, for reasons that will become clear later. At any rate, because he had in some way allied himself with the demos (the Athenian citizen masses) Kleisthenes now began to overshadow his opponents in the contest for political influence in Athens (Hdt. 5.69.2).

It is worth pausing at this point in the narrative to ask what the social and institutional context of the struggle between Isagoras and Kleisthenes would have been. Herodotus and the Athenaion Politeia employ the political vocabularies of the mid-fifth and late fourth centuries, respectively. But we must not apply the model of politics in Periclean or Demosthenic Athens to the late sixth century.
Isagoras and Kleisthenes had recourse to few if any of the weapons familiar to us from the political struggles of those later periods – ideologically motivated hetairiai, ostracism, graphè paranomôn, and other public actions in the people’s courts, finely honed orations by orators trained in the art of rhetoric. What shall we imagine in their place?

Late archaic Athens was surely more dominated by the great families than was the case in the fifth and fourth centuries. Yet it would be a serious mistake to suppose that the scion-of-a-great-family/ordinary-citizen relationship can be seen in fully developed patron/client terms – the model of Roman Republican politics is as anachronistic as that of democratic politics for late archaic Athens. The reforms of Solon had undercut the traditional authority associated with birth. The policies of the tyrants themselves had gone a long way in breaking down the traditional ties of dependence and obedience between upper- and lower-class Athenians. Moreover, Solon’s creation of the formal status of citizen – a result of prohibiting debt slavery and of legal reforms that made Athenians potentially responsible for one another’s welfare – had initiated a process whereby the demos became conscious of itself in fortrightly political terms. The tyrants had encouraged political self-consciousness on the part of the masses of ordinary citizens by the sponsorship of festivals and building programs. The upshot was that by 510–508 B.C.E. the ordinary Athenian male had come a long way from the status of politically passive client of a great house. He saw himself as a citizen rather than as a subject and at least some part of his loyalty was owed to the abstraction “Athens.”

And yet the political institutions in which an Athenian man could express his developing sense of citizenship were, in early 508, still quite rudimentary and were still dominated by the elite. We may suppose that the traditional “constitution,” as revised by Solon, still pertained. Thus there were occasional meetings of a political assembly that all citizens had the right to attend. But it is unlikely that those outside the elite had the right or power to speak in that assembly; nor could they hope to serve on the probouleutic council of 400, as a magistrate, or on the Areopagos council.7 Kleisthenes, as a leading member of a prominent family and as an Areopagite, surely did have both the right and the power to address the Assembly. It seems a reasonable guess that it was in the Assembly (although not necessarily uniquely here) that he allied himself to the demos, by proposing (and perhaps actually passing) constitutional reforms. The masses saw that these reforms would provide them with the institutional means to express more fully their growing sense of themselves as citizens. By these propositions and/or enactments Kleisthenes gained political influence and so Isagoras began to get the worst of it (Hdt. 5.69.2–70.1).10

But if Kleisthenes now had the people on his side, Isagoras was still archon and moreover he could call in outside forces. No matter what measures Kleisthenes had managed to propose or pass in the Assembly, a new constitutional order could become a practical political reality only if the Assembly’s will were allowed to decide the course of events. Isagoras, determined that this not be allowed, sent word of the unsettling developments to Kleomenes in Sparta. Kleomenes responded by sending a herald to the Athenians, informing them that, ostensibly because of the old Kylonian curse, they were to expel (ἐξέβαλε) Kleisthenes and many others from the city (Hdt. 5.70.2). Kleisthenes himself duly left (ἀπόθεσε; Hdt. 5.72.1).

Even after Kleisthenes’ departure, Isagoras and/or Kleomenes must still have felt uneasy about the Athenian situation. A smallish (οὐ... ἔχετε) mixed-nationality military force, featuring a core of Spartans and led by Kleomenes, soon arrived in the city (παρά τίν οὖν Θέασις; Hdt. 5.72.1). Kleomenes now, on Isagoras’ recommendation, ordered further expulsions; Herodotus (5.72.1) claims that a total of seven hundred families were driven out (ἔγγικεν Αθηναίων). The archon Isagoras and his Spartan allies were clearly in control of Athens. That could have been the end of what we might call the progressive movement in Athenian politics. Athens might well have become another Argos – an occasionally restive but ultimately impotent client-state of Sparta. After all, the Spartans were the dominant military power in late-sixth-century Greece, while Kleisthenes and the other leading Athenians who opposed Isagoras were now powerless exiles.

But, of course, that was not the end of it. What happened next is the moment of revolution I alluded to earlier. According to Herodotus, Isagoras and Kleomenes next (δεότερο) attempted to abolish the Boule (τὴν βουλὴν κατολείψαν ἐπεμάκρατο),11 and to transfer political authority to a body of three hundred supporters of Isagoras. But when the Boule resisted and refused to obey (ἀντιστασίας ἀπεκατάστασις τῆς βουλῆς καὶ οὐ βουλομένης πεθεροῦσα), Kleomenes, together with Isagoras and his supporters, occupied the Acropolis (καταλαμβάνον τὴν άκροπόλιν). However, the rest of the Athenians (Ἀθηναῖοι δὲ οἱ λοιποί), who were of one mind (τὰ οὐδὲ φρονούσαντες [regarding these affairs], besieged them [on the Acropolis] for two days. But on the third day a truce was struck and the Lakedaimonians among them were allowed to leave the territory [of Attika]. (Hdt. 5.72.1–2)

In the aftermath of the expulsion of the Spartans, at least some of the non-Spartan members of Kleomenes’ army (perhaps including Athenian supporters of Isagoras, although not Isagoras himself), who had been detained in Athens, were summarily executed (Hdt. 5.72.4–73.1). After these events (μετὰ ταύτα) the Athenians recalled (μετασημανήσαντες) Kleisthenes and the seven hundred families (Hdt. 5.73.1). A new constitutional order (presumably resembling the order proposed by Kleisthenes or enacted on his motion before he was expelled) was soon put into place.14

Meanwhile, Kleomenes felt that the Athenians had “outraged” him “with words and deeds” (περιεβρίσθοι ἔτειοι καὶ ἱργωμένοι; Hdt. 5.74.1). I would gloss Herodotus’ statement as follows: Kleomenes had been outraged by “the words” (of the bouleutai when they refused the dissolution order) and “the deeds” (of the demos in its uprising against the Spartans and the Athenian quislings). The Spartan king wanted revenge. He still planned to put Isagoras into power in Athens, but his counterattack of 506 fizzled owing to a lack of solidarity in the Peloponnesian ranks on the one side and Athenian unity and military discipline on the other (Hdt.
5.74-7). Within just a few years Athens had moved from the position of Spartan client-to-be to that of a powerful, independent polis. Athens twice had been occupied by an outside power and the Athenians had rejected the rule of a narrow elite in favor of a radical program of political reforms, risen up successfully against their occupiers when the reform program was threatened, institutionalized the reforms, defended the new political order against external aggression, and were on the road to democracy. It is an amazing story, and Herodotus (5.78) points out to his readers just how remarkable was the Athenian achievement. This, then, was the Athenian Revolution.

Herodotus’ account is quite closely followed, and perhaps in a few places amplified, by the account of the Aristotelian *Athenaiion Politeia*. I will focus on three aspects of the story that seem to me particularly notable. Two are familiar toposes of Kleisthenic scholarship; the third is not.

The first peculiarity is that Kleisthenes, an Areopagite and a leading member of a fine old family, was willing in the first place to turn to the demos – the ordinary people who, as Herodotus points out, “formerly had been held in contempt” (πρώτερον ἀποστολευόντων; Hdt. 5.69.2). The second striking thing is that, after his recall from exile, Kleisthenes fulfilled the promises he had made to the demos (in the form of proposals or enactments of the Assembly). He fully earned the trust they placed in him by establishing a form of government that, at least in the long run, doomed aristocratic political dominance in Athens. Much ink has been spilled over Kleisthenes’ apparently peculiar behavior. Since Kleisthenes’ actions seem to fly in the face of the aristocratic ethos (Thou shalt not mix with the lower sort) and to contradict a common assumption about human nature itself (Thou shalt always act in self-interest), sophisticated explanations have been devised to explain what he was up to. Among views of Kleisthenes in the scholarly literature, two dominate the field, at least in the English-speaking world. One, well represented by David M. Lewis’s influential article in *Historia*, is what we might call the “cynical realist” view, which holds that Kleisthenes was no true friend of the Athenian demos, but instead he benefited (at least in time to benefit) the Alkmeonids by extraordinarily clever gerrymandering in his establishment of the demos.13 Lewis’s “realist” view was advanced to counter the other dominant view – the “idealist” view of an altruistic Kleisthenes. This second viewpoint is perhaps best exemplified by the work of Victor Ehrenberg, who saw Kleisthenes as a selfless democratic visionary.14

I would not want to deny that Kleisthenes embraced a vision of a new society (discussed later) or that he hoped for a privileged place for his own family in that society. Yet neither the “realist” view of Kleisthenes the diabolically clever factional politician nor the “idealist” view of Kleisthenes the self-consciously altruistic Father of Democracy adequately accounts for the third peculiarity in Herodotus’ story – the uprising that doomed Isagoras and his partisans by forcing the surrender and withdrawal from Attika of the Spartans. Although Herodotus’ and *Athenaiion Politeia*’s bare-bones accounts of the event do not give us a great deal to work with, it appears that a spontaneous insurrection against Isagoras and the Spartans followed in the wake of Kleomenes’ attempt to abolish the Boule and his occupation of the Acropolis. Without the uprising, the Kleisthenic reforms would have remained empty words: proposals or enactments voided by the efficient use of force by an outside power.

We will probably never know the details of what actually happened between Kleomenes’ attempt to dissolve the Boule and his surrender on terms, but we can at least say what did not happen, and this may be useful in itself. First, and perhaps foremost, we should not imagine the siege of the Spartans on the Acropolis as an organized military campaign. Whatever may have been the form of the pre-Kleisthenic Athenian military forces, there is no mention in Herodotus’ or *Athenaiion Politeia*’s accounts of the siege of military leaders or any sort of formal leadership – no reference to a polemarch or strategoi, no naukraroi calling in their clients from the fields. Now the silence of our sources is a notoriously slippery ground for argument, but (as demonstrated by their accounts of, e.g., Kylon and the naukraroi, Solon and the Eupatrids, and Peisistratos and the Alkmeonids) both Herodotus and the author of the *Athenaiion Politeia* were very interested in aristocratic leadership – whether it was individual or collective and institutional. I find it hard to suppose that the identity of the aristocratic leaders of the insurrection could have been forgotten or fully suppressed in the sixty years between the revolution and Herodotus’ arrival in Athens. Surely this brave resistance to the Spartan occupiers of the Acropolis is just the sort of thing that aristocratic families would remember for several generations. And it was just this sort of family tradition that formed the basis of much of Herodotus’ Athenian narrative. One cannot, of course, rule out the possibility that Herodotus intentionally covered up the role played by leaders. But why would he want to do so? To further glorify the Alkmeonid Kleisthenes? Yet even if Herodotus did favor the Alkmeonids (which is far from certain), the hypothetical leaders would have been Alkmeonid allies, since Kleisthenes was immediately recalled and his constitutional reforms enacted.15 In the end, positing aristocratic leadership for the action that expelled the Spartans is an ignor ﬂatus per ignotum argument, a modern supplement which relies for its credibility on the unprovable (and elitist) assumption that aristocratic leadership in such matters would have been sine qua non. It seems to me preferable in this case to trust our only sources and suppose that Herodotus and *Athenaiion Politeia* mention no leaders because Athenian tradition recorded none, and that Athenian tradition recorded none because there were none – or at least none from the ranks of the leading aristocratic families.

Moreover, there is no mention in Herodotus or *Athenaiion Politeia* of Athenian hoplites at the siege of the Acropolis; according to Herodotus it is Ἀνθρώπων οἱ λοιποὶ (the rest of the Athenians) who, united in their view of the situation, do the besieging. *Athenaiion Politeia* 20.3 mentions to πλῆθος καὶ ὁ δῆμος. This does not, of course, mean that no men wearing hoplite armor took part in the siege – but it is noteworthy that there is no suggestion in either source that anything resembling a “regular” army formation was called up. This might best be explained by the hypothesis that no “national” army existed in the era before the carrying out of Kleisthenes’ constitutional reforms. If there was no national army properly speaking, then archaic Athenian military actions were ordinarily carried out by aristocratic leaders (presumably often acting in cooperation with one another), men
who were able to muster bodies of armed followers. If this is right, the mass expulsion recommended by Isagoras and carried out by Kleomenes (which no doubt focused on aristocratic houses) would have completely disrupted the traditional means of mustering the Athenian army — and this may well have been among their motives for the expulsion. It is not modern scholars alone who doubt the ability of masses to act without orders from their superiors.

If we choose to stick with the two main sources, we may suppose that the action that forced the surrender of the Spartans was carried out in the absence of traditional military leaders and without a regular army. How, then, are we to visualize this action? The Athenian siege of the Acropolis in 508/7 is best understood as a riot — a violent and more or less spontaneous uprising by a large number of Athenian citizens. In order to explain Kleomenes’ actions, we must assume that the riot broke out very suddenly and was of relatively great size, intensity, and duration.

After their occupation of the Acropolis, Kleomenes and his warriors were barricaded on a natural fortress, one that had frustrated the regular Spartan army during the siege of Hippias only a couple of years earlier. Yet on the third day of the siege the royal Spartan commander agreed to a humiliating conditional surrender — a surrender that left his erstwhile non-Lakedaimonian comrades to the untender mercies of the rioters. Kleomenes’ precipitous agreement to these harsh terms must mean that he had regarded the forces arrayed against him as too numerous (throughout the period of the siege) to contemplate a sortie. Why could the Spartans not simply wait out the siege, as Hippias had been prepared to do? Given the undeveloped state of archaic Greek siegecraft, it is unlikely that the Spartans feared a successful assault on the stronghold. It is much more likely that (unlike Hippias) they had not had time to lay in adequate supplies. This suggests that Kleomenes had occupied the Acropolis very quickly, which in turn probably means that he was caught off guard by the uprising. This inferential sequence supports a presumption that the uprising occurred quite suddenly. What, then, was the precipitating factor?

Herodotus’ account, cited earlier, describes the action in the following stages:

1. Isagoras/Kleomenes attempts to dissolve the Boule.
2. The Boule resists.
3. Kleomenes and Isagoras occupy the Acropolis.
4. The rest of the Athenians are united in their views.
5. They besiege the Spartan force.
6. Kleomenes surrenders on the third day of the siege.

If we are to follow Herodotus, we must suppose that steps 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 are chronologically discrete and sequential events. Step 4 cannot, however, be regarded as a chronological moment; word of events 1 through 3 would have spread through Athens through the piecemeal word-of-mouth operations typical of an oral society. Presumably those living in the city would have learned what was going on first, and the news would have spread (probably very quickly, but not instantaneously) to the rural citizenry. Herodotus’ language (τὰ αὐτὰ εφορήσατες — “all of one mind”) supports the idea of a generalized and quite highly developed civic conscious among the Athenian masses — an ability to form and act on strong communal views on political affairs.

If we take our lead from Herodotus’ account, two precipitating factors can be adduced to explain the crystallization of opinion and the outbreak of violent anti-Spartan action on the part of the Athenian demos. First, the riot may have been sparked by the Spartan attempt to dissolve the Boule and the Boule’s resistance (thus the demos’ action would have commenced as a consequence of steps 1 and 2, but before step 3). According to this scenario, Kleomenes and Isagoras were frightened by the sudden uprising into a precipitous defensive retreat to the nearby stronghold of the Acropolis. Alternatively, the riot might have broken out only after the Spartan occupation of the Acropolis (thus after step 3). On this reading of the evidence, the riot would have been precipitated by the Spartan’s offensive (in both senses of the term) takeover of the sacred Acropolis. This second hypothesis would certainly fit in with Herodotus’ (5.72.3–4, cf. 5.90.2) story of Kleomenes’ sacrilegious behavior and disrespect for the priestess of Athena. Yet this scenario is not, to my mind, fully satisfactory. It does not explain why Kleomenes felt it necessary to bring his entire force up to the Acropolis. Why did Isagoras and his partisans (ὁ τε Κλεομένης καὶ ὁ Ἰσαγόρης καὶ οἱ στασιώται αὐτοί; Hdt. 5.72.2) go up to the Acropolis with Kleomenes? And if the occupation of the Acropolis by Spartan forces was a deliberate and unhurried act of aggression, how are we to explain the failure to bring up enough supplies to last even three days?

It is certain that the author of the Athenai on Politeia 20.3 saw Kleomenes’ move to the Acropolis as a defensive response to a riot: “the Boule resisted (τὴς δὲ βουλῆς ἄντιστάσεως) and the mob gathered itself together (καὶ συνεβροθέντος τοῦ πλῆθους), the supporters of Isagoras fled for refuge (κατέβησαν) to the Acropolis.” Here the move to the Acropolis is specifically described as a defensive reaction to the Council’s resistance and the gathering of the people. Athenai on Politeia’s statement has independent evidentiary value only if its author had access to evidence (whether in the form of written or oral traditions) other than Herodotus’ account — on which he obviously leaned heavily. This issue of Quellenforschung cannot be resolved in any definitive way here, but it is not a priori unlikely that the author of Athenai on Politeia, who certainly had independent information on Kleisthenes’ actual reforms, could have read or heard that Kleomenes and Isagoras fled to the Acropolis when a mob formed after the unsuccessful attempt to dissolve the Boule. At the very least, we must suppose that Athenai on Politeia interpreted Herodotus’ account of the move to the Acropolis as describing a flight rather than a planned act of aggression.

Finally, let us consider the only other classical source for these events: Aristophanes’ Lysistrata (ll. 273–82). Here the chorus of Old Athenian Men, girding themselves for an assault on the Acropolis (held by a mixed-nationality force of women), urge one another on, “since when Kleomenes seized it previously, he did not get away unpunished, for despite his Lakonian spirit he departed giving over to me his arms, wearing only a little cloak, hungry, dirty, hairy-faced . . . that’s how ferociously I besieged that man, keeping constant guard, drawn up seventeen ranks deep at the gates.” This is not, of course, history, but a poetic and comic
description. Kleomenes' surrender of arms and his hunger are plausible enough, but the overly precise reference to "seventeen ranks" is unlikely to reflect historical reality. Nevertheless, as Rosalind Thomas points out, the Aristophanes passage probably does represent a living popular tradition about the siege. And that tradition evidently focused on the military action of the people rather than any doings of their leaders.

Although certainty cannot be achieved in the face of our limited sources, I think it is easiest to suppose that a spontaneous riot broke out when the Boule resisted. Caught off guard, Kleomenes and Isagoras retreated with their forces to the Acropolis stronghold to regroup. Rapidly spreading news of the occupation of the Acropolis further inflamed the Athenians and so the ranks of the rioters were continually augmented as rural residents took up arms and streamed into the city. From Kleomenes' perspective, the bad situation, which had begun with the resistance of the Boule, only got worse as time went on. Stranded on the barren hill without adequate food or water, and with the ranks of his opponents increasing hourly, Kleomenes saw that his position was hopeless and negotiated a surrender. This scenario has the virtue of incorporating all major elements of Herodotus' account and the two other classical sources for the events, explaining Kleomenes' behavior in rational terms and accommodating the means of news transmission in an oral society.

If, as I have argued, the Athenian military action that led to the liberation of Athens from Spartan control was a spontaneous riot, precipitated by the refusal of the bouleutai to obey Isagoras' or Kleomenes' direct order that the Boule dissolve itself in favor of the three hundred Isagoreans, how are we to explain the relationship between the Boule's act of defiance and the uprising itself? In the absence of direct textual evidence for either the motives of the bouleutai or their relationship to the demos, I offer, for comparative purposes, the example of another famous revolutionary refusal by a political body to dissolve when confronted with authority backed by force. Although such comparisons are supplementary, and not evidentiary in a formal sense, they are useful if they expand common assumptions about the limits of possible, in this case by showing that an act of disobedience could indeed precipitate a revolution and that a successful uprising and siege could be carried out by a crowd without formal leaders or military training.

On June 17, 1789, the Representatives of the Third Estate of the Kingdom of France, a body originally called together by the king, declared themselves to be the National Assembly of France. This act of self-redefinition was not accepted as valid by the existing, and heretofore sovereign, authority of the kingdom. Six days later, on June 23, King Louis XVI surrounded the assembly hall with some four thousand troops and read a royal proclamation to the self-proclaimed assemblymen in which he stated that the Third Estate's act in taking the name "National Assembly" was voided; all enactments of the so-called National Assembly were nullified. Louis concluded his speech with the words "I order you, gentlemen, to disperse at once." But the National Assembly refused either to disperse or to renounce its act of self-naming. According to the brilliant interpretation of these events by Sandy Petrey, the Third Estate's renaming of itself and Louis's declaration that the renaming was void set up a confrontation between speech acts – both the Third Estate and Louis made statements that were intended to have material effects in the real world of French society – both sides were attempting to enact a political reality through the speech act of naming or (in Louis's case) "unnaming." In the normal environment of prerevolutionary France, the king's statement would have been (in the terminology of J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, on which Petrey's interpretation is based) "felicitious" or efficacious – the Assembly would be dissolved because a sovereign authority had stated that it was dissolved. Yet as Petrey points out, in a revolutionary situation speech acts are not, at the moment of their enunciation, either felicitous or infelicitous ipso facto. Rather their felicity or infelicity is demonstrated only in retrospect. In this case, the National Assembly did not dissolve when so ordered. By refusing to acknowledge the power of the king's speech to create real effects in the world, the Assembly contested the legitimacy of the king's authority.

The confrontation of speech acts was not the end of the story. Louis subsequently attempted to enforce his will through the deployment of military force. This attempt was frustrated by the outbreak of riots in the streets of Paris. In the words of W. Doyle, in the weeks after the confrontation of June 23, "nobody doubted that the King was still prepared to use force to bring the Revolution to an end. The only thing that could prevent him was counter-force, and as yet the Assembly had none at its disposal. It was saved only by the people of Paris." And thus the French Revolution was launched. Because the Revolution succeeded, it came to pass that the Third Estate's act of renaming had been felicitious and Louis's proclamation of nullification infelicitous; if the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of the revolutionary speech act is in the rebellion.

Although the efficacy of its speech acts were as yet undemonstrated, the self-redefinition of the Third Estate as the National Assembly on June 17 and the refusal of the assemblymen of France to acknowledge the force of the king's proclamation of dissolution on June 23 helped to precipitate a revolution because they contested the "inevitability" or "naturalness" of the power of the king's speech to create political realities. Once the king's official proclamation was no longer regarded as an expression of sovereign authority, political discourse ceased to be a realm of orderly enactment and became a realm of contested interpretations. The success of any given interpretation was no longer based on its grounding in eternal and universally accepted truths about power and legitimacy; rather, success in interpretation was now contingent upon the subsequent actions of the French people acting en masse – in this case by rioting and besieging the Bastille.

The parallels between the early stages of the French and the Athenian revolutions are certainly not exact, but both similarities and differences may be instructive. First, it is much less clear in the Athenian case where, at any point in the story, sovereign authority lay – or indeed if we should be talking about sovereignty at all. Isagoras was archon in 508/7, and so the dissolution order issued to the Boule could be seen as carrying the weight of legitimately sanctioned authority. But the archon of Athens did not (I suppose) command the absolute sovereignty claimed by Louis XVI, and the perceived legitimacy of Isagoras' authority was probably not enhanced by his employment of foreign military support. What of the comparison
of the Athenian Boule to the National Assembly? This will depend on what body Herodotus meant by the word boulê. There are three choices (and all have had supporters among modern scholars) – the Areopagos Council, the Solonian Council of 400, or a newly established Council of 500. The parallel to the National Assembly is closest if we follow the hypothesis, recently revived by Mortimer Chambers, that the Boule in question was (perhaps a pro tem version of) the Council of 500, set up according to Kleisthenes’ proposals and the Assembly’s enactment before the arrival of the Spartans. This hypothesis would go far in explaining both Kleomenes’ interest in eliminating the Council and the brave determination of the citizens to resist. But Chambers’ argument, based in part on his rejection of the existence of a Solonian Council of 400, must remain for the time being an attractive speculation. In any event, we cannot be sure about exactly what powers the Boule claimed or its constitutional relationship to the archon.

Yet despite these caveats and uncertainties, several relevant factors in the French and Athenian cases seem quite similar. Herodotus’ revealing comment that a king was “outraged by both words and deeds” (5.74.1) fits the French Revolution as well as the Athenian. In both cases, because of a verbal act of defiance by a political body, “official” political discourse – previously regarded by all concerned as authoritative and stable, as productive of acts of establishment, as a thesme – became a battleground contested by two mutually exclusive interpretations of the source of legitimate public authority. Isagoras (or Kleomenes) said the Boule was dissolved. The bouleutai denied, by their resistance, the validity of this statement. As in the case of the French Revolution, it would be the actions of the ordinary people in the streets that would determine which of the opposed interpretations was felicitous and efficacious – rapidly evolving realities would decide whether the statement of Isagoras or that of the bouleutai conformed to reality. In both revolts, the official authority’s recourse to military force was stymied by superior unofficial force in the form of mass riots. Both revolts featured short but decisive sieges (Acropolis and Bastille) by leaderless crowds of citizens; both sieges ended in a negotiated surrender by the besieged leaders of organized military forces. Furthermore, both uprisings featured summary (and, I would add, morally reprehensible) killings of individuals identified as enemies of the revolution. The Athenian Revolution, no less than the French, was baptized in the blood of “counter-revolutionaries.” Yet the difference between Athens and France in this regard is also salient: the decade after 507 saw no equivalent to either Jacobin Terror or Thermidor reaction.

In terms of assigning credit (or blame) for the uprising and its aftermath, it is important to note that while the brave action of the bourgeois gentlemen of the Third Estate in naming themselves the National Assembly helped to foment the French Revolution, they did not take the lead in storming the Bastille, and they were not able subsequently to control the direction of the Revolution. Nor were the bouleutai in control of the Athenian Revolution. Neither Herodotus nor Athenaios Politeia assigns the Boule a leadership role in the insurrection after its refusal to disperse. According to Herodotus, after the Boule refused to obey the dissolution order, Kleomenes and Isagoras occupied the Acropolis, and the mob seize the Boule. This phrase is often taken to be a description of a straightforward event with a straightforward subject and object. A. de Selincourt’s Penguin translation is typical: “Kleisthenes . . . took the people into his party.” But we need not give the middle form προσέταιρήζεται quite such a clearly active force, nor need we imagine it as describing an event that occurred in a single moment. I would suggest as an alternative (if inelegant) translation: “Kleisthenes embarked on the process of becoming the demos’ trusted comrade.” Herodotus’ account certainly implies that Kleisthenes had developed a special relationship with the demos before his expulsion from Athens. That relationship, which I suggested earlier was characterized by proposals or enactments in the Assembly, was evidently the proximate cause of Isagoras’ calling in of Kleomenes. But there is no reason to suppose that the process described by the verb προσέταιρήζεται was completed before Kleisthenes was expelled. In short, I would suggest that Kleisthenes himself did not so much absorb
the demos into his hetaireia, as he himself was absorbed by an evolving, and no doubt somewhat inchoate, demotic vision of a new society, a society in which distinctions between social statuses would remain but in which there would be no narrow clique of rulers.

The sea change in Athenian political practice implied by Kleisthenes' new relationship with the demos was not signaled by an act of noblesse oblige — opening the doors of the exclusive, aristocratic hetaireia to the masses. Rather it was a revolution in the demos' perception of itself and of an aristocrat's perception regarding his own relationship, and that of all men of his class, to the demos. Kleisthenes acknowledged the citizens of Athens as equal sharers in regard to the nomoi and under the banner of isonomía the men of the demos became, in effect if not in contemporary nomenclature, Kleisthenes' hetairoi.9 We must remember that Herodotus' terminology is that of the mid-fifth rather than the late sixth century. But in the fifth century, when Herodotus was writing his Histories, Athenian hetairoi were expected to help one another and to seek to harm their common enemies. The demos looked out for Kleisthenes' interests by attacking the Spartans and by recalling him immediately upon their departure. Political friendship was a two-way street, and Kleisthenes in turn looked after the interests of the demos by devising and working to implement (through enactments of the Assembly) an institutional framework that would consolidate and stabilize the new demotic vision of politics. That vision had grown among the Athenian citizen masses in the course of the sixth century and had found an active, physical manifestation in the riot that occurred during Kleisthenes' enforced absence from the scene. The "constitution of Kleisthenes" channeled the energy of the demos' self-defining riot into a stable and workable form of government.

In sum, Kleisthenes was not so much the authoritative leader of the revolution as he was a highly skilled interpreter of statements made in a revolutionary context and of revolutionary action itself. This is not to deny any of his brilliance or even his genius. But it is to see his genius not in an ability to formulate a prescient vision of a future democratic utopia, nor in an ability to hide a selfish dynastic scheme behind a constitutional facade, but rather in his ability to "read" — in a sensitive and perceptive way — the text of Athenian discourse in a revolutionary age and to understand that Athenian mass action had created new political facts. Kleisthenes saw that the revolutionary action of the Athenian demos had permanently changed the environment of politics and political discourse. After the revolution there could be no secure recourse to extrademotic authority. If Athens were to survive as a polis, some new basis for politically authoritative speech, but that basis must find its ground in the will of the demos itself. Having read and understood his complex text, Kleisthenes knew that there could be no turning back to rule by aristocratic faction — or at least he saw that any attempt to turn back the clock would bring on a bloodbath and make effective resistance to Sparta impossible. And so, acting as a good hetairos, well deserving the pístis placed in him (Ath. Pol. 21.1) by his mass hetaireia, Kleisthenes came up with a constitutional order that both framed and built upon the revolution that had started without him.

NOTES

This essay was revised in the summer of 1991, when I had the honor of being Visiting Fellow at the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales. I owe thanks to many colleagues there, and especially to G. R. Stanton, whose detailed and insightful comments much improved a paper with whose fundamental tenets he still disagrees.


2. This is a traditional breaking point: Burn 1960: 234, e.g., ends his narrative of archaic Athenian history with the expulsion of Hipias. M. H. Hansen 1986 argues that dēmokratia was the name Kleisthenes used from the beginning. The relevant ancient sources are conveniently collected, translated, and annotated in Stanton 1990: 130–67.

3. For representative statements of the centrality of Kleisthenes' role, see Zimmern 1961: 143–4: "Kleisthenes the Alkmeonid, the leader of the popular party [...], made a bid for power [after the Spartan intervention and the occupation of the Acropolis], Kleisthenes and the councillors [my emphasis] called the people to arms and blockaded the rock [...][upon the surrender of the Spartans] Kleisthenes was now master of the situation." O. Murray 1980: 254: "Kleisthenes 'took the people into his party' [...], proposed major reforms, expelled Isagoras [my emphasis], and in the next few years held off the attempts of the Spartans and their allies to intervene." Forrest 1966: 194: "Finally, with the demos' firm support, he was able to rout Isagoras [my emphasis] together with a Spartan force." Other textbooks do point out that Kleisthenes was in exile, e.g., Sealey 1976: 147; Bury and Meiggs 1975: 36; esp. M. Ostwald in CAH' (1988) 4.305–7. The modern account of the revolution closest in spirit to the one I offer here is perhaps Meier 1990: 64–6.


5. The government would not have been called oligarchy because the word had not yet been invented; for the history of the term, see Raaflaub 1983.


7. Isagoras as archon: Ath. Pol. 21.1. The attempt by McCargar 1974 to separate Isagoras, opponent of Kleisthenes, from the archon of 508/7 on the grounds that some archons in this period were evidently relatively young (perhaps not much over thirty) and Isagoras may have been relatively immature seems to me chimerial, especially in light of the extreme rarity of the name. Ath. Pol. 22.5 claims that after the institution of the tyranny, and until 487/6, all archons were elected (aipeto). The tyrants had manipulated the elections to ensure that their own supporters were in office (see P. J. Rhodes 1981: 272–3): exactly how the elections would have been carried out in 509/8 (and thus what Isagoras' support consisted of) is unclear. We need not, anyway, suppose that Isagoras' election was indicative of a broad base of popular support; most likely his support was centered in the (non-Alkmeonid) nobility. On the power of the archaic archon, see Ath. Pol. 3.3, 13.2 with comments of P. J. Rhodes 1981.


10. Kleisthenes' connection with the demos is underlined by Hdt. 5.69.2: ὧς γὰρ ὄν ἀνθρώπου
The Athenian Revolution of 508/7 B.C.E.

10. The Athenian people, previously despised, he thus got entirely on his own side, and by Ath. Pol. 20.1: ὁ Κλεισθένης προστάγαγε τὸν δήμον, ἀπόδοσις τοῦ πλῆθου τῆς πολείτες (Kleisthenes brought the people over to himself by giving over political authority to the masses). Since Wade-Gery’s seminal article (1933: 19–25), it has been widely accepted that the Assembly was the arena in which Kleisthenes won the favor of the people; cf. discussion by Ostwald 1969: 149–60.

11. The implied subject of the verb ἐπεράστη is either Kleomenes or Isagoras. The grammar seems to require Kleomenes, although presumably it was Isagoras (as archon) who gave the official order to the Boule. The point is in any case merely procedural: Herodotus’ narrative demonstrates that Kleomenes and Isagoras were working hand in glove throughout.

12. Hdt. 5.66.2 implies that at least some of the reforms were put into place before Kleomenes’ arrival; Ath. Pol. 20–1, discusses the reforms after giving the history of the revolution proper. It is most likely that some reforms were proposed and perhaps actually enacted by the Assembly before Kleomenes’ arrival, but presumably there would not have been time for all the details of the new constitution to have been put into place. See later for the question of when the Council of 500 was established. For a review of the chronological issue, see Hignett 1952: 331–6; P. J. Rhodes 1981: 244–5, 249; Chambers 1990: 221–2.


14. Ehrenberg 1973: 89–103: in 510 Kleisthenes was “a man of new and radical ideas” (89); in 508 he gained support “by revealing plans of a new democratic order” (90); “his reforms were . . . the first examples of democratic methods” (91). Kleisthenes was not primarily interested in personal power, rather “power was to him a means of creating the constitutional framework for a society on the verge of becoming democratic” (91). For Ehrenberg, then, Kleisthenes is both selfless and a strong leader whose place is “at the helm” (102). Cf. Ehrenberg 1950.

15. For a detailed discussion of the role of oral traditions (of family and polis) in Herodotus’ construction of his account of the revolution and a vigorous attack on the hypothesis that Herodotus was an Alkmeonid apologist, see R. Thomas 1989: 144–54, 232–82.


17. I am assuming throughout that Kleomenes was an experienced and sane military commander and that his decisions were made accordingly. On the dubious tradition of the madness of Kleomenes, see Griffiths 1989. It is interesting to note how the demos’ action simply disappears in some respectable scholarly accounts, e.g., Ehrenberg 1973: 90: “Kleomenes and Isagoras met, however, with the resistance of the council . . . which they had tried to disband and which was most likely the Areopagos . . . The Spartans withdrew, Isagoras was powerless, and many of his followers were executed.”

18. On how information was disseminated in Athens see Hunter 1990.

19. Herodotus’ statement that Kleomenes seized the Acropolis and was subsequently thrown out along with the Lakedaimonians (ἐπέχερησε τε καὶ τοῦ πάλαι εξεπέπτη μετὰ τῶν Λακεδαιμονίων: 5.72.4) makes it appear likely that the whole force had gone up to the Acropolis together, had been besieged together, and had surrendered together. It is unlikely that a significant part of Kleomenes’ forces joined him on the hill after the commencement of the siege, and Herodotus says nothing about any of his men being captured in the lower city before the surrender. It is worth noting that Kylon (Hdt. 5.71; Thuc. 1.126.5–11) and Peisistratos (twice: Hdt. 1.59.6, 60.5) had earlier seized the Acropolis, each time as the first stage in an attempt to establish a tyranny. Kleomenes’ case is different in that his move came after he had established control of the city.

20. Stanton 1990: 143, 144 n. 6, translates συναφροθυετούς to πλήθος as “the common people had been assembled” on the grounds that “the verb ‘had been assembled’ is definitely passive.” But I take the (morphologically) passive participle συναφροθυετός as having a reflexive rather than a passive meaning; on the distinction see Rijksbaron 1984: 126–48. Reflexive meaning for the passive participle of συναφροθυέω: Xen. An. 6.5.30; of ἅρμασον Thuc. 1.50.4, 6.70.4; esp. Arist. Pol. 130a33.


27. For the siege of the Bastille see Godechot 1970: 218–46. The Bastille was a formidable, if dilapidated fortress, guarded by a small force of eighty-four pensioners and thirty-two Swiss mercenaries. For the week before the assault of July 14, its commander, Governor de Launey, had refurbished the defenses to withstand an assault. Yet “he had only one day’s supply of meat and two days’ supply of bread, and moreover there was no drinking water inside the fortress . . . de Launey may . . . have thought that if he were attacked by an unarmed or ill-armed crowd the assault would not last longer that one day and that at nightfall the rioters would disperse” (219). It is tempting to suppose that Kleomenes thought along similar lines.

28. On the killing of Governor de Launey and seven other defenders of the Bastille on July 14, and of other agents of the Old Regime in the days thereafter, see Godechot 1970: 243–6. The Athenian killings have been questioned on the grounds of the wording of Ath. Pol. 20.3 (Κλεισθένης μὲν καὶ τοῦ πάλαι ἔφη τῶν ἁρμασθέντων – they [the Athenians] released Kleomenes and all those with him under treaty), but as Ostwald 1969: 144 with n. 6 points out, this need only refer to the Lakedaimonian troops; cf. P. J. Rhodes 1981: 246–7.

29. For the composition of the crowd (mostly artisans from Paris) that stormed the Bastille and the absence of assemblymen or any other formal leaders, see Godechot 1970: 211, 221–6, 230, 237–9.

30. Cf., e.g., Hammond 1959: 185–6: “The Council resisted. It raised the people against Kleomenes and Isagoras, who seized the Acropolis and found themselves besieged”; Ostwald 1969: 144: “The Council refused to be intimidated and, with the support of the common people, besieged the acropolis”; Stanton 1990: 144 n. 6: the council in question must have been the Areopagos, since unlike the councils of 400 or 500 it “would have been sufficiently permanent and would have contained a sufficient accumulation of politically experienced men to organize resistance to a military force. A major threat was the assembling of the common people . . . and this could have been achieved by the influence which ex-arkhon clan leaders in the Areopagos held over their retainers.” The Areopagos leadership theory would need to explain how Kleomenes’ force could be strong and decisive enough to “drive out” 700 families dispersed through
Attika (cf. Stanton 1990: 141 n. 14, who questions the number 700), but too weak to stop at most 100 to 200 men, who were presumably gathered in one place to hear the dissolution order, from organizing a resistance (number of Areopagites: R. W. Wallace 1989: 97 with n. 23; M. H. Hansen 1990, from which we must deduct those expelled with the 700).


32. It is important to keep in mind that the terminology is in any event Herodotus', not Kleisthenes'. It was probably not in use in Kleisthenes' day and reflects rather the political vocabulary of the mid-fifth century; Chambers 1990: 221.


