Social Science History, Cultural History, and the Amnesty of 403

JOSIAH OBER
Princeton University

SUMMARY: Response to a set of papers on the Athenian Amnesty of 403 B.C.

If we are to believe Thucydides, Xenophon, Plato, Aeneas the Tactician, and Aristotle (among other Greek historical and philosophical sources), stasis—violent conflict among citizens within the civic space of the polis—had emerged as one of the biggest stories of Greek history and political philosophy by the latter part of the fifth century B.C.¹ And stasis continued to dominate Greek thinking about "what threatens the polis most" throughout much of the fourth century as well. Why communities fall into a state of stasis, and how that problematic tendency might be controlled, are clearly motivating questions (perhaps the motivating questions) for Greek historians beginning with Thucydides, and for the first generation of systematic Greek political philosophers. Stasis was little short of an obsession among Greek writers (including dramatists) in the late classical period.²

As every reader of Thucydides' harrowing narrative of the civil conflict on Corcyra (3.70–85) learns, stasis could be devastating in its material and moral effects. Thucydides suggests that stasis, once begun, developed a terrible momentum of its own: killing and atrocity led to retribution-killing and counter-atrocity in a widening downward gyre. Physical violence was compounded by referential instability within evaluative language: bodies, property, and the meaning of the everyday terminology of politics and morality—

¹ All dates are B.C. unless otherwise noted.
² On stasis in Greek political philosophy and drama see Ober 2000. Loraux discusses the ways in which stasis was internalized as a negative concept, to cover a wide range of conflicts, including those arising from gender. Of course, stasis was a deep concern of many archaic poetic texts as well, notably of Solon and the Theognid corpus.
all were at risk. At the bottom of the downward spiral of stasis lay the material destruction of the polis as a public and privately held physical space, the disintegration of the citizenship as a community of persons, and the semiotic collapse of a common discourse that had once united citizens with diverse interests and backgrounds. For the Greeks of the late classical period, the experience of revolutionary stasis was as bad as it got: the mutilation of a community by civil conflict was arguably more devastating (at least in historical retrospect and philosophical prospect) than that inflicted by plague, natural disaster, or enemy invasion. Stasis eliminated the possibility of public grandeur, individual nobility, ordinary dignity, even base-line human decency. The social and psychological trauma inflicted by stasis seemed peculiarly resistant to therapeutic redress.

It is not at all peculiar, therefore, that historians of late classical Greece have been consistently interested in studying the best documented stasis of the era: the short reign of the Thirty at Athens and its aftermath. The Athenian story is all the more compelling for its apparent atypicality, for its "arrested development." Instead of vindictively turning upon their foes and thus completing a Corcyra-like downward spiral into chaos, the victorious Athenian democrats abruptly halted the cycle of retribution by declaring and enforcing an amnesty. This decision (although no doubt influenced by prudential concerns about the Spartan response to an anti-oligarchic purge) earns the frank praise of the author of the Aristotelian Ath. Pol. (40-3):

[On this occasion—the implementation of the Amnesty of 403, after the fall of the Thirty, they [the Athenian democrats] seem to have reacted to their previous misfortunes, both privately and communally (κατά ιδία καὶ κοινὴ) in a manner more noble and public-spirited than all other people (κάλλιστα δὲ καὶ πολιτικότατα ἀπάντων). Not only did they wipe out all prosecutions for past acts (αἰτίας ξένηκεσαν), but they paid back out of common funds the money that the Thirty had borrowed from Sparta . . .

If the Ath. Pol. is to be believed (and, whoever its author, we may suppose that he had access to a very considerable body of “constitutional history” now lost to us), the Athenians acted somewhat differently (“in a manner more noble and public spirited”) than “all other people” when faced with the stasis situation. Even if overstated, this claim offers historians of classical Greece an intriguing puzzle: how to explain the Athenians’ startling and distinctive (if not positively anomalous) behavior in 403?

For those who accept that there is a puzzle here (i.e., that the democratic Athenian action in establishing and maintaining the Amnesty was unusual and was not pre-determined by the certainty of massive Spartan punishment or some other “extraneous” factor) then at least two, rather different, approaches to explaining the democrats’ distinctive choice are possible. In the first, “type A,” approach, the historian begins by supposing that the historical situation faced by the Athenians was distinctive, and that the Athenians reacted pretty much the way other Greeks (or even other non-Greek communities) would have reacted if faced with the same distinctive circumstances. In a second, “type B,” approach, the historian supposes that the stasis situation faced by the Athenians was fairly typical, but that democratic Athenian political culture was quite unlike the political culture of most other Greek communities. In this second case, the historian’s answer depends on showing that the Athenians reacted to a “standard” stasis situation in a distinct way because of their distinctive political culture.

Of course, explanations of types A and B are not mutually exclusive and in the real world of historical explanation we would probably not expect anyone to propose a purely type A or type B explanation. But it is, I think, reasonable to suppose that we could arrange historians’ attempts at an explanation of the events of 403 (at least the attempts of those historians who accept Ath. Pol.’s claim for the distinctiveness of events in Athens after the fall of the Thirty) along a spectrum defined by the “ideal types” of distinctive circumstances/standard response or standard circumstances/distinctive response. The different assumptions made by type A versus type B approaches to understanding the events of 404/3 may clarify the debate carried out in the papers of Quillin and Wolpert over the relative worth of “Social Science History,” which favors type A, and “Cultural History,” which leans on type B explanations.

In the oral version of the paper presented here James Quillin usefully defined Social Science History as the “use of reductionist analyses and case studies in order to create generalizable models of human behavior,” and Cultural History as the attempt to “analyze in all their specificity the cultural expressions and discourse of a particular locality and moment.” Social Science History asserts that, if we can filter out local variables, we will be left with a coherent sequence of events, motivated by a systematic causal mechanism. The goal is to be able to explain precisely “why” something happened. The record of the past is treated as a fertile source of “real world” case studies. The historian sifts case studies in order to find cross-cultural regularities in causes and effects with the aim of generating (through standard forms of hypothesis building and testing) one or more generalizable models for human behavior. Once the model is in place (i.e., once it has been tested against an adequate number of well documented case studies), it can be used to explain other examples (including examples that are less well documented) of relevant
“historical behavior.” Doing Social Science History is thus a circular process, but the circularity is not vicious: the process moves from reasoning on the basis of historical cases to the construction of hypothetical models, to testing the model against other cases, to revision (if necessary) of the model. The proof of the worth of the model ultimately lies in its analytic power, in its capacity to connect a single cause (or set of causes) with historically diverse effects, to show that the same cause yields similar effects cross-culturally and trans-historically.

Cultural Historians (among others) object that the models generated by Social Science History are believed (at least by their inventors) to have greater explanatory power than can readily be accepted by those who honor all of the recalcitrant particulars of specific historical situations. Let me illustrate the problem with an admittedly extreme example from a field outside social history: Robert Wright’s *The Moral Animal*, an account of recent developments in the field of evolutionary psychology. 3 In Wright’s lively prose, various events in the private life of Charles Darwin become a case study to demonstrate the analytic power of some of the central claims made by evolutionary psychologists. This is certainly a witty idea, since evolutionary psychology claims to apply Darwinian principles (along with rational choice theory, also favored by some Social Science Historians) to explain diverse aspects of human behavior. But if Wright’s rigidly *pars pro toto* argument holds, presumably any other human life would be just as exemplary, and so each human life, in the end, tells only one story: the story of how making “rational choices” that maximize an individual’s own reproductive chances, along with maximizing the survival chances and subsequent reproductive chances of an individual’s offspring and kin, provide the motor driving every individual human (and animal) existence. That is to say, Darwin, like anyone else, instinctively micro-managed his life (although obviously not completely consciously); his choices were determined by the imperative to improve the likelihood of the reproduction over time of his own genetic material. In this vision of human motivation, apparent differences in human lives (e.g., Darwin vs. Plato) and in the organization of human societies (e.g., nineteenth-century C.E. England vs. fourth-century B.C. Athens) are due to environmental differences alone: we humans (as individual genetic utility maximizers) are faced with a wide range of contextual circumstances, so our societies look rather different. Yet underneath, all societies and all individuals are necessarily (because biologically) committed to the same mechanism of choice.

---

3 The term “evolutionary psychology” has largely replaced “socio-biology.”

4 See, for example, the discussion of the controversy in Zaret.
cerned with functional explanation: how members of a society, or subgroups within a community negotiated a set of meanings that allowed them to continue to live in an existing community. Cultural Historians thus seek to understand the logic of relationships embedded in a society’s discourse (as preserved in texts) and implied by its practices. Cultural Historians tend to be particularly sensitive to the role played by ambiguous or even apparently contradictory representations of lived experience. They read ambiguities and contradictions as evidence for strategic negotiations between individuals and between diverse social groups, e.g., between elites and non-elites, men and women, insiders and outsiders. The “structure of society” is seen as a dynamic, but fairly stable context for these ongoing negotiations, which, on the political plane, will determine who wields what sort of power under what circumstances and on the basis of what sort of legitimacy claims. Although cross-cultural comparisons are certainly possible within Cultural History—indeed such comparisons are quite common—the goal is typically to elucidate what is distinctive about each society, rather than to find the “unitary underlying cause” that produced similar historical effects.

There are various explanatory problems that arise from the Cultural Historian’s focus on the specific and the local, on context and negotiation. One set of problems is familiar from critiques of positivism. While sharing the historical positivist’s love of the particular, Cultural Historians today tend to distinguish themselves from practitioners of “traditional” positivist historiography—i.e., from the attempt establish secure facts about the past “for their own sake,” to describe “what Alcibiades did and suffered.” Among the perceived problems with the positivist approach to classical Greek history is, that after the monumental work of the nineteenth-century historians of classical Greece (e.g., Grote and Busolt), Greek historians suffered a drought of significant and securely established new facts. The spate of important inscriptions discovered in the course of the excavations of the Athenian Agora allowed positivists to enjoy a second spring in the mid-twentieth century. But in recent decades the slowed pace of excavation and publication has reduced the supply to a trickle. Which left positivist historians with two main options: either revisit a well-known controversy, and attempt to end a debate by establishing a new important fact (e.g., the existence of a “Peace of Callias” in the mid-fifth century), or extend the range of what are considered significant facts.

The first approach has resulted in the publication of many books and articles, but it has not, I think, actually ended many debates (the Peace of Callias is exemplary). The second approach, the extension of the range of “relevant facts,” has had the salutary effect of widening the chronological and geographic range of Greek history, and stimulating excellent new work on Hellenistic and “epichoric” history. But among historians who study the great central and southern Greek states (especially Athens and Sparta) in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., the “extension of the fact” has sometimes led to a focus on details so fine that it threatens to reduce their readership to the disappearing point. M. I. Finley fulminated against this second approach, damning the “democracy of facts”—the tendency to suppose that everything that can conceivably be known about the past should be known, and that everything known is of equal value.

A related problem associated with the relatively paucity of “major new facts” for “mainstream” classical Greek history, and the high value attached to important new evidence about (say) Athens, is the tendency of some historians to restrict access to evidence. Those who “own” publication rights to important unpublished inscriptions, for example, occasionally delay publication for extended periods, meanwhile allowing private access to the new material to a limited circle of students and colleagues. There are reasonable enough explanations for this pattern of professional behavior, but it does lead to the suspicion that privileged access is sometimes given or withheld for extraneous reasons, thereby raising concerns about fairness, and perhaps arousing (unwarranted) disdain for practitioners of the positivist approach in general.

Of course there are some recent and laudable successes of positivist history to which Greek historians can proudly point. I think of Mogens Hansen’s splendid series of articles from the 1980s with titles beginning with “How many?” “How often?” etc. Hansen’s work established, to most scholars’ satisfaction, a number of new and important facts about how the Athenian Assembly functioned. His conclusions left historians of Athenian democracy dancing with glee, because we felt that we had learned something new after finishing each article. The experience of sheer delight in the establishment of important new facts is an experience shared (I believe) by most historians. This may be because there is after all a bit of the positivist in all of us, but it is also (and importantly) because we recognize that established facts are what

---

5 For a defense of the positivist approach, arguing that it need not fall victim to a simplistic view that it is possible to establish a completely “objective” account of the past, see Rhodes.

6 Finley. I write as one who spent years laboring happily to produce new, if minute, facts (e.g., precise measurements of windows) about classical Greek fortifications. There is no doubt that such work can be fun; the question is whether the facts it produces will be regarded as useful by one’s professional colleagues.
allow us to test our models and theories: if my approach easily accounts for a new fact, I expect that to count when my fellow historians evaluate my work. But, for classical Greek historians, encounters with really important new facts remain rare and Cultural History offers one way to extend the scope and broaden the significance of what we may hope to accomplish. Those Greek historians still fascinated by the “mainstream” poleis in the classical period, who are unimpressed by the claims of Social Science History, who despair of ever solving old riddles, who are uninterested by the study of minutiae, and who may be disenchanted by limited access to new material, have consequently sought to develop a fresh approach to local and specific history, one that focuses more on the social and cultural meaning of discourse and practice than on the establishment of new institutional or chronological facts.

But there remains a problem, the Social Science Historian contends, in that Cultural History fails to offer an adequate explanation for change. The question of “why” new things happened, why historical actors make the (sometimes very unexpected) choices they do, can get lost in the pleasures of thickly describing “how” people negotiate identities and existences within and against pre-existing protocols. In extreme cases, the Cultural Historian’s assumption that negotiation within established protocols is what really matters approaches the ontological claim that cultural rules are “always and already” in place. At this point, the historical enterprise itself seems to be in doubt: if social rules, substantial enough to ensure that action is coextensive with negotiations within the frame they define, are “always and already” pre-existing, then the space left for meaningful social change shrinks to zero. Ontologically-based and historically-based explanations for social and cultural phenomena are not necessarily incompatible. But I think they occupy interpretive spheres that remain distinct enough that Cultural Historians must acknowledge that at some point (one might dispute just where) an argument ceases to be historical if it has lost the capacity to address even the possibility of change.

The Cultural Historian must also be ready to make some hierarchical choices among the universe of “significant meanings.” Presumably anyone impressed by Finley’s attack on the “democracy of facts” should be equally critical of an approach based (explicitly or tacitly) on a “democracy of meanings.” The attachment of the Cultural Historian to the local and specific makes it easier to fall into the “democracy of meanings” trap. After all, if each society (or sub-community) is distinct, negotiating meanings in response to an infinitely variable environment, then there are equally an infinite variety of meanings that can be generated and negotiated by participants—and then described by the astute historian. But which of these had any measurable affect on the course of (say) classical Athenian history understood as an inte-
common to societies embracing very diverse values) provides an analogy for the debate between Social Science History and Cultural History. There are, as the essays presented here demonstrate, substantive differences among Social Science Historians and Cultural Historians in terms of what they suppose are the most historically relevant phenomena, in their understanding of human motivations, and in their judgment about whether change or continuity is of greater interpretive moment. Yet there is also, or so I imagine, a substantial common ground between Social Science Historians and Cultural Historians: they are not historical positivists (despite a delight in and a respect for facts) and they are committed to avoiding strongly ontological explanations in order to leave space for social and cultural change (whether or not they are primarily interested in explaining change). Moreover, I suppose that both sides in the debate (along with positivist historians) share a basic faith in the procedural means by which Greek historians test one another’s arguments.8

I discussed the problem of historical models and paradigms (although not in the specific context of Social Science or Cultural History) in a short essay first published in 1989.9 I argued that the employment of models is necessary and inevitable if history is to make any advance, and that we test one another’s model-based explanations by reference to the specifics of the historical situation, by paying attention to what established facts the model does and does not explain. Any model that requires a great deal of analytic machinery and yet explains rather little about the evidence we care to explain will not be judged very useful. By contrast, a model that explains a great deal in comparison to the machinery it needs to muster is likely to be judged both elegant and useful. It comes down to a matter of how good the “payoff” is: how much we feel we have learned about the society in question, how much of the recalcitrant mass of “evidence” gets organized, and how efficiently it is organized. Rethinking this series of methodological claims in terms of Hampshire’s substantive conflict/procedural agreement distinction, I would suggest that there is actually quite a high degree of agreement about evaluative procedure among historians who continue to disagree sharply on matters of interpretive substance. This is why historians who have mastered a common body of “facts” (e.g., historians of classical Athens), and yet employ very different approaches for explaining those facts, feel that they can fairly evaluate one another’s work. It is why a fair-minded positivist can acknowledg

8 Hampshire 45 suggests that those who “share certain professional attitudes and customs, and a common professional morality” constitute the “true communities” of modernity.
9 Reprinted in Ober 1996 ch. 3.

---

WORKS CITED

---

I take this opportunity to express my pleasure in my long dialogue over “how to do Athenian history;” with a model “fair-minded positivist;” Peter Rhodes.