Begin with a quandary that is very familiar to Martin Ostwald: Classical Athens saw the invention of both democracy and political theory, yet while we have a number of examples of criticism of democracy, no systematic defense of democracy—no democratic theory—survives from an Athenian pen. I propose that the conundrum is best explained by assuming that from the late fifth through the late fourth century B.C., democratic ideology was in a sense hegemonic: It so thoroughly dominated the Athenian political landscape that formal democratic theory was otiose.

What implications does this proposition have for reading works of political criticism? Democratic hegemony surely made criticism of democracy difficult, not because such criticism was forbidden, but because the existing political terminology tended to be monopolized by democratic discourse. In Athens, legitimate government and democracy were assumed by most citizens to be more or less synonymous; to speak or even to think about politics meant to speak and think within an idiom defined by democratic discourse. Thus a formidable epistemological task faced the critic of democracy—how to construct a way of knowing about the world of political affairs that would not be colonized by the hegemonic tendencies of democratic discourse.

In his text, which I propose to read as a work of political criticism, Thucydides set out to investigate power, human nature, and their relationship to democratic Athens’ potential and to its political failure. His solution

1. On democratic hegemony see Ober 1989, 332–39. I adapt the concept of ideological hegemony from A. Gramsci without necessarily accepting the negative connotations that Gramsci, and others, have associated with the concept. For a useful discussion see Femia 1981, 1–129.
to the problem of democratic hegemony was the development of a genre—critical political history—that allowed him to take an epistemological stance that he believed provided a useful and meaningful way to understand the past and simultaneously explained why the system of democracy failed under the pressures of war.

Knowledge and Counterknowledge

Thucydides knew that Athenian democracy was based on open deliberation and voting and recognized this as a distinctive way of gaining knowledge about the world and acting upon that knowledge. Athenian democracy depended for its functioning on a socially and politically constructed "regime of truth" that we may call "democratic knowledge." The practical functioning of democratic knowledge depended not only on institutional procedures but on the willingness of the citizen-participants to accept the implicit assumptions they lived by, and the information on the basis of which they cast their votes, as political artifacts rather than as absolutes denoted by a transcendent natural order.

Democratic knowledge was grounded, in the language of J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, on understanding the world of politics as the "conventional effects of conventional procedures." Thus the conventional procedures of the democracy (deliberation and voting) led to conventional effects (decrees and judgments of the δικαστήρια to which the citizens adhered). These conventions were created and maintained through constant, collective, public practice. Moreover, democratic debate was open, and neither speakers nor decision makers needed to be acknowledged experts. The Athenians simply assumed that political truth was dialectical: Vigorous debate by patriotic citizens, judged by the mass of citizens, could provide a reasonable policy for the polis. The authority of decrees and judgments was not determined by the expert credentials of speakers or voters but by the subsequent actions of the citizenry itself. Thus the aim of key democratic

2. The term is Michel Foucault's (1980, 78-133). For Foucault, the regime of truth was not a neutral concept but (like hegemony for Gramsci) was productive of horrifying and oppressive power. Once again I adopt the term without necessarily accepting the negative connotations.

3. See J. L. Austin 1975, which is usefully extended and reworked to better explain political speech by Petrey (1988 and 1990). For the conventional effect see Petrey 1988, 77, which slightly rephrases Austin's "rule A.1." Austin's central point is that some forms of speech are actions rather than descriptions. Performative speech, which "does something," cannot accurately be called "true" or "false" by reference to an objectively verifiable external reality. Rather, performative speech is judged by its "felicity"—its success in influencing the subsequent behavior of human agents. The classic example is the statement "I pronounce you man and wife."
institutions was to pronounce statements that were efficacious or “felicitous” (Austin’s preferred term), rather than statements that were in some ontologically pure sense “true.”

Athenian political culture was based on collective opinion rather than on certain knowledge, and on the assumption that opinion could be translated into practical reality through democratic political process. The enactment formula of the Athenian Assembly, \( \text{o\omega\varepsilon \tau\omega \ δημω} \)—“it appeared right to the citizenry”—defines the relationship between democratic knowledge and political action. What the demos collectively opined was given, through the act of voting, the status of fact. This sort of approach to politics depended on a relatively stable consensus within Athenian society about the rules and protocols (the conventions) that governed the relationship between public speech and enactment. That which “seemed right to the demos” would only have the practical status of an enactment if the relevant parties were willing to behave in conformity to the enactment (e.g., when the assembly declared war, Athenian soldiers must be willing to march, rowers to row, and generals to lead).

The Athenian political process worked as well as it did because popular ideology provided a stable basis for collective decision making and for subsequent action. Although relatively stable, democracy was not ossified. Athenian political practice and policy remained flexible because in frequent meetings of the assembly and the people’s courts contrasting views were publicly aired. Through the process of open debate, the democratic way of knowing, speaking, and acting evolved in response to changing external circumstances. The process was dialectical, in part because of the interaction of speakers and audiences. By responding vocally to speakers in the assembly and courtroom, the Athenian citizenry defined the sorts of language that could be employed by speakers in political deliberations. Athens’ democracy was predicated on the assumption that the ordinary citizen was an active participant in maintaining a value system that made him the political equal of his elite (richer, better educated, perhaps better informed) neighbor. 4 For much of the fifth century, the system worked well. Athens became rich and powerful. The question Thucydides poses is whether the democratic system of knowing about and acting in the world was equal to the challenges posed by a great war—a war whose origins lay in the Spartan perception of Athens’ power as dangerous.

In his history, Thucydides develops and offers his readers what we might call a counterknowledge (again borrowing from Foucault). Thucydides’ preferred way of gaining knowledge about the world can be

4. This is a summary of one of the central arguments in Ober 1989.
described as “historical knowledge,” and it is quite different epistemologically from “democratic knowledge.” Perhaps most obviously, Thucydides establishes himself, researcher and author, as sole arbiter of the truth about the Peloponnesian War. Unlike Herodotus, Thucydides seldom offers alternative versions of events; he has already done the interpretive work that Herodotus asks his reader to do for himself. It is my contention that this stance allowed Thucydides to offer a fundamental challenge to democratic knowledge.

Thucydides explicitly contrasts his own way of knowing about the past with that of others. He scorns (1.20.1) those who believe whatever they happen to hear about the past, including things about their own country, without subjecting the accounts to rigorous testing (διασκεδαστικοῖς). His case in point is the belief, held by “the majority [τὸ πλῆθος] of the Athenians,” that Hipparchus, killed by Harmodius and Aristogeiton, was the tyrant of Athens. This is no casual example: Many Athenians assumed that the assassination of Hipparchus set into motion the chain of events that led to the establishment of the democratic government.5 By showing that Hipparchus was a minor figure, Thucydides undermines a foundation myth of the democracy and so robs popular rule of part of its “usable” past. The word Thucydides uses for the ignorant Athenians—τὸ πλῆθος—refers to the mass of ordinary citizens.6 Thus, we are alerted to an important aspect of the text’s critical project: It will present facts that have been “tested” and so can be contrasted to the “carelessness among οἱ πολλοὶ in the search for truth [ἀλήθεια] and their preference for ready-made accounts” (1.20.3). Although we need not suppose that the Athenian citizen masses were the only target of Thucydides’ comments, the language and the choice of example suggest that Thucydides had the Athenians in mind when he wrote these lines.7

The weight Thucydides places on the λόγοι/έργον contrast is well known. Facts are in general privileged in Thucydides’ narrative in relation to speeches. Words and facts often collide in his text; men (e.g., Cleon) and states (e.g., Athens) who attempt to impose their own speech-dependent meanings on reality tend to come to bad ends. This is significant from the perspective of criticizing democracy. Most Athenians, as Thucydides has explained, believe silly things about their own past and the institutions of their opponents. They got these errors from listening to poets and λογογρά-φοι (1.21.1)—I take the latter term as including public orators.8 Assemblymen whose knowledge of the world and of the past is faulty cannot possibly decide rightly in regard to the future. Thus, according to Thucydides’ logic, democratic knowledge is an unsound basis for practical enactment. If sustained by the empirical evidence of an “objective” historical narrative, this chain of reasoning might yield a devastating criticism of democratic politics.

Assembly speakers spoke within the conventions of democratic knowledge, which took for granted a citizenry with a good grasp of Athens’ past history and the validity of public opinion. When Thucydides removed facts from the realm of affairs that could properly be understood by listening to competing speeches, by reference to the common understanding of events in the distant past, or by appearance and opinion generally, he also removed facts from the realm of things likely to be understood (and hence effectively dealt with) by the existing procedures of the assembly. Thucydides’ version of historical knowledge is thus not only different from, but incompatible with, democratic knowledge. As he makes clear at 1.22.4, Thucydides’ account is not “history for its own sake.” Rather, it is presented as a thoroughly tested analysis of political power in the form of a precise chronological prose narrative. This history will be judged useful (ἀφέλεια) because it will teach the reader to assess past practices accurately (τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν) so as to better understand and (perhaps) plan for what may occur in the future. This is, of course, what a good political decision maker must be able to do and what Thucydides implies the Athenian citizens are unlikely to be able to do.

The interplay between narrative and speeches is Thucydides’ method of teaching his useful counterknowledge and of contrasting it with democratic knowledge. Illustrating in detail how Thucydides’ critical epistemology functions within the text is outside the purpose of this chapter. But an assessment of the first debate presented to the reader by Thucydides and of

5. The Athenian ignorance of the facts regarding the tyrants has tragic political consequences during the affair of the Hermis (6.60.1); see Rawlings 1981, 256–59; cf. Euben 1986, 361: The tyrannicide story “reveals human beings as creators of meaning in the context of political struggle.”
7. This criticism has (at least) two targets: Herodotus, whose Histories contain two errors pointed out by Thucydides, and the Athenian masses, who are implied by the term οἱ πολλοὶ. For Herodotus and the errors on Spartan kings and Pitane see Gomme, Andrewes, and Dover 1945–81, ad loc. For οἱ πολλοὶ as a term for citizen masses see Ober 1989, 11. Hornblower (1987, 155–90), points out Thucydides’ authorial self-certainty and the rarity of this stance in ancient historiography.
8. Λογογράφοι is not used again in Thucydides’ text, but I see no reason to suppose that it meant something radically different to Thucydides than to fourth-century philosophers and orators. Plato (Phdr. 257c) claims that the orator Lysias was accused by an Athenian politician of being a λογογράφος; here the term clearly means speechwriter. It had the same meaning when used by the Attic orators (Lavency 1964). Connor (1984, 28) translates λογογράφοι as “speechwriters” in the Thucydides passage and points out Thucydides’ concern with rhetoric. As Aristotle points out (Rhet. 1416a21–29) speeches presented in the assembly dealt with the affairs of the future, and speeches were the basis of decision making in the democracy.
the Funeral Oration of Pericles, the passage in which the political functioning of democratic knowledge is most fully explained, will sketch out the general direction of the argument.

**The Corcyra/Corinth Debate**

Thucydides tells us that as a result of having a large navy, the island-polis of Corcyra was wealthy and “not unpowerful” (1.25.4). A naval victory over Corinth led the Corcyreans to deploy (and ultimately to overextend) their power by attacking states friendly to Corinth (1.30.2). The Corinthians responded by putting together an alliance of minor sea powers and preparing a punitive expedition. At this juncture, the Corcyreans realized they were in trouble and requested an alliance with Athens. The Corinthians opposed formation of a Corcyra-Athens alliance, on the grounds that it would breach a treaty between Athens and the Peloponnesian League. Each side sent ambassadors to Athens, and consequently “an assembly was called, and the parties to the dispute came forward” (καταστάσεις δε έκκλησιας είς ἀντιλογίαν ήλθου. 1.31.4). Thucydides presents their respective speeches.

The orations of the Corcyreans and Corinthians are not only the first of the three Athenian Assembly debates offered by Thucydides but the first speeches of any sort in his text. As such, they may be taken as representing an ideal type. The word used by Thucydides for the dispute, ἀντιλογία, reveals that the speakers will take diametrically opposed positions. By implication, there is no possibility of a genuine compromise in this dispute; either the Athenians make an alliance with Corcyra or they do not. Moreover, only the Corinthians and Corcyreans are mentioned as speakers, and the self-interest (self here being the states of Corinth or Corcyra) of the speakers is evident: Each speaker deploys various rhetorical tricks in an attempt to persuade the Athenian audience. In this case, there can be no question of reading public debate as a valid form of dialectical reasoning. This is not a case in which public-minded citizen-speakers who share a concern for Athens’ best interests are engaged in vigorous discussion, thus offering an intelligent audience the chance to enact policy on the basis of a tolerably accurate version of the relevant circumstances. Since Thucydides presents only the speeches of the disputants, the reader is led to suppose that it is on the basis of speeches delivered by foreigners looking to their own states’ interest that the Athenians will have to make this extremely important decision. The question Thucydides implicitly poses is this: Can the mass of the Athenians derive right policy (that is, a correct assessment of the relationship between present action and future advantage) from the rhetoric they hear? It will certainly not be an easy task. Thucydides has already pointed out that he himself found that it required a great deal of work to extract a true account from informants whose λόγοι were twisted by the influence of εἰνοι (1.22.3).

The first word in the Corcyreans’ speech is the abstraction δίκαιον, “just,” but their appeal is explicitly aimed at Athenian self-interest. The Corcyreans state (1.32.1) that they know they will fail in their goal if they do not clearly establish (σαφείς καταστήσουντοι) that the alliance will be advantageous (ξύμφορα) for Athens and that the gratitude (γάρ) of the Corcyreans will be secure (διότι διόμενοι). The key to the Corcyrean argument is that the addition of Corcyra’s δύναμις (specifically her naval force) to that of Athens will make Athens more powerful and better able to resist enemies (esp. 1.33.2, 1.35.5). Thus the Corcyrean argument is explicitly based on precisely those factors that Thucydides’ history attempts to elucidate—power and human nature as motivated by self-interest.

In order to make their interest- and power-based argument, the Corcyreans must instruct the audience on several general principles that determine advantage in interstate conduct: It is always better to take the initiative (1.33.4); the fewer concessions one makes, the greater one’s own safety (1.34.3); and allying with a state whose enemies are the same as one’s own will bring great advantage (1.35.5)—this last is described as the σαφεστάτα πίστις. The Corcyreans also discuss the effects making or not making the alliance will have on the probable course of the future. They confidently predict that there will be a war—those Athenians who do not think so “err in their reasoning” (γρομής ἀμαρτάνεις), since they fail to realize that the Spartans “are being impelled to war by fear of you” (φόβος τῷ ἰμέτέρῳ πολέμου) and that the Corinthians, “who hate you,” are a powerful influence on Sparta (1.33.3). If the Athenians do ally with Corcyra, this show of strength “will cause your enemies to be more fearful” (τοὺς ἐναντίους μᾶλλον φοβήσωσι) and correspondingly less eager to launch an attack. You Athenians “will not be showing much forethought” (οὐ τοῦ κράτος αὐτίκα προνοοῦν) if, “while on the lookout for a war that is surely coming, indeed is virtually upon you” (ἐς τῷ μάλλοντα καὶ ὄντος οὐ παρόντα πόλεμον τῷ αὐτίκα περιποιήσεσθαι), you give up Corcyra with its key location (1.36.1).

So the Corcyreans claim to be able to instruct the Athenians through speech, but will they be good teachers? We can hope to answer this question by looking at the evidence of the speech itself, the conformity of the Corcyrean prescription to the general principles previously established by Thucydides, and “the facts themselves” as revealed in Thucydides’ narrative of the war. The Corcyreans’ discussion of their own history raises immediate doubts about their qualifications as instructors in the proper conduct of
international affairs. They admit that a policy of nonalliance, which formerly had appeared to them to be sober and moderate, now appears foolish and unsafe (ἡ δοκοῦσα ἡμᾶς πρῶτον σωφροσύνη...νῦν ἁβουλία καὶ ἀσθενεία φανομένη, 1.32.4). Thus they intend to change their policy, since it seems that their stance of neutrality was in error (δόξης δὲ μᾶλλον ἀμαρτία τῇ πρῶτον ἀπραγμοσύνη, 1.32.5). The Corcyreans were caught in this tangle of error, appearance, and false assumption because they failed to see that their δύναμις, which seemed so great when they went against the Corinthians one-on-one, was only relatively great, and that they would become relatively powerless (ἀδύνατοι, 1.32.5) when faced with a Corinthian alliance. This is a rather elementary blunder for would-be instructors in the art of diplomacy.9

The Corcyreans are not complete fools. They correctly predict the coming war. And they correctly (from a Thucydidean point of view) identify the prime cause of the war as Spartan fear (φόβος) of Athenian power. But were they correct in telling the Athenians that the war was, for all intents and purposes, already upon them? This brings up the much debated issue of the αἴτια of the war, and the relationship between what Thucydides says were the “truest but least apparent” cause (growth of Athenian power leading to Spartan fear, 1.23.6) and the “apparent” causes, among which the Corcyrean alliance is the most important (1.146). Without entering into the debate, it seems fair to say that the Corcyreans have seriously overstated the war’s proximity (the Spartans will require a good deal of persuading before they declare war, 1.66–88), and one might go so far as to suggest that Athens’ making of the alliance (evidently because they were persuaded by the Corcyreans, 1.44) was the act that fulfilled the Corcyrean prophecy. Furthermore, Thucydides’ narrative will make it very clear that the Corcyreans have overstated the security advantages that will accrue to both Athens and Corcyra as a result of the alliance. The confident prediction that the alliance will add substantially to Athenian strength “without risk or expense” (ἀκατάστατα, 1.146) is falsified by the narrative. The Corcyrean navy plays no significant role in a war that the narrative seems that their stance of neutrality was in error (δόξης δὲ μᾶλλον ἀμαρτία τῇ πρῶτον ἀπραγμοσύνη, 1.32.5). The Corcyreans were caught in this tangle of error, appearance, and false assumption because they failed to see that their δύναμις, which seemed so great when they went against the Corinthians one-on-one, was only relatively great, and that they would become relatively powerless (ἀδύνατοι, 1.32.5) when faced with a Corinthian alliance. This is a rather elementary blunder for would-be instructors in the art of diplomacy.9

The Corcyreans warn the Athenians not to fall into the clever verbal traps that the Corinthians will set for them (1.34.3); but is the speech of the Corinthians any worse (or better) as an example of “instruction by speech”? The first word spoken by the Corinthians is the abstraction ἀμαρτάω, “necessity” (1.37.1), but they use the term only to introduce the centrality of the issue of justice. Their argument is concerned with interest and power, but they see interest and power as grounded less on necessity than on abstract notions of justice. The Corinthians employ the terminology of appearance, error, prediction, and word/fact, which is familiar to Thucydides’ readers from his methodological introduction, but here the meanings of these terms tend to take on a moral connotation.11 A good example is the Corinthian response to the Corcyrean claim that the latter had offered to arbitrate the dispute. The Corinthians claim that arbitration is impossible if one side, having already grabbed an unfair advantage, seeks to negotiate from a position of safety. Arbitration is only possible if, before embarking on the contest of arms, there exists an equality in fact as well as in words (τὸν ἐς ἱσον τὰ τέ ἐργα ὁμοίως καὶ τοὺς λόγους πρὶν διαγωνιζεθαι καταστάτα, 1.39.1). The Corinthians are making the familiar contrast between ἐργα and λόγοι, but the “fact” they allude to is not so much equality of power but an equal standing in relation to justice.

Although starting from rather different premises, the Corinthians, like the Corcyreans, claim to instruct their Athenian audience in general principles of international relations: an overmastering desire for victory makes people forget their true interests (1.41.2–3); it is most beneficial to do wrong as seldom as possible (1.42.2); and the power that deals fairly with equals finds truer security than one that snatches temporary advantage (1.42.4). Like the Corcyreans, the Corinthians claim to be able to predict the future course of events: If the Athenians establish the principle that it is all right for allies to revolt, Athens will face revolts among its own subjects (1.40.6). If the Athenians look at the matter clearly (σωφρονοῦσαι), they will see that the alliance with Corcyra will bring war, not peace (1.40.2). The Corcyreans are just trying to scare the Athenians about the coming war, and it is unclear (ἀφανεί) when or whether there will be a war (1.42.2).

Put to the test of Thucydides’ own stated principles and narrative, the Corinthians end up with a mixed scorecard as instructors. They are certainly right that when war comes, Athens’ “allies” will revolt, and that this will be a terrible problem for the Athenians. But what of their prediction about the inevitability of war? It is certainly the case that, Athens having made an alliance, there was a war. But did the alliance cause the war? The Corinthians imply that there is a causal relationship, and that if no alliance

9. Cf. Thucydides’ own assessment of Corcyra (1.25.4) in which, although they are called “not unpoweful” (οῖς ἀδύνατοι), the implication is that they think rather too much of their own wealth and strength.

10. On the irrelevance of the Corcyrean navy in the rest of the narrative see Gomme, Andrewes, and Dover 1945–81, 1:168.

11. E.g., 1.38.5, where the verb ἀμαρτάω means something like “to act unjustly” rather than (as it is usually used by both Thucydides and the Corcyreans) “to err.”
is struck, it will at least remain “unclear” whether there will be a war. But this assessment is apparently contradicted by Thucydides’ own statement that it was the growth of Athenian power and concomitant Spartan fear that led to (ἀναγκάσατο) the outbreak of the war (1.23.6). One might try to reconcile Thucydides’ and the Corinthians’ statements by arguing that the Corcyrean alliance was the key “power augmentation”—the event that proved to the Spartans that Athens was a real danger. But as we have seen, the alliance did not in fact make Athens stronger. Furthermore, if this one event catapulted the Greek world into war, Thucydides’ claim that power and fear were the “least apparent” causes is inexplicable, his contrast of hidden and overt causes (which include the Corcyrean affair) becomes incoherent, and his long discursus (1.89-117) on the Pentecontaetia is mere anti-quarianism. Thus, it appears that, assuming Thucydides is a good teacher, the Corinthians are poor instructors when it comes to the key issue of the probability of war.

Before turning to the outcome of the debate, we need to take stock. Both the Corcyrean and the Corinthian speeches share some of Thucydides’ implicit assumptions about the importance of power and self-interest. Like Thucydides, both sides propose general rules for interstate relations, and both sides claim to be able to assess future probabilities. Furthermore, much of the terminology of knowledge, inference, appearance, establishment, error, power, interest, security, and prediction employed by Thucydides in this “methodological introduction” (1.1-24) is mirrored in one or both of the two speeches. The speakers thus claim to do just what Thucydides claims his history will do—teach about interest and power and offer an understanding of past events and the probable course of the future.

In the introduction, Thucydides explicitly contrasts his own project with that of the poets and λογογράφου, and he has cast doubt on competing λόγοι as reliable conduits to reality. Thus, it seems a reasonable inference to posit that in these, the first speeches in the text, the historian is intentionally contrasting his own historical approach to accurately understanding past and future with the approach to understanding employed in the Athenian Assembly. The implied contrast is not black and white. Individual points in each speech are confirmed by Thucydides’ historical narrative. Thus, Thucydides is not claiming that “makers of speeches always lie” or that “they are consistently wrong in their understanding of present realities and future possibilities.” Rather, Thucydides shows us that a given speech will probably be a mishmash of truths, half-truths, and outright errors or lies. Why must this be the case? And what are the implications of this position?

First, it must be the case (according to Thucydides’ logic) because establishing the truth is not easy. Thucydides has emphasized how much labor his historical investigations entailed. Second, Thucydides claims that reality is to be equated with objective facts and that objectivity is incompatible with the context of a contest for the applause of an audience (1.21.1). Speakers of public orations were inevitably involved in a contest for their audience’s favor. They could not afford to make the issue seem too difficult for an audience to comprehend within the chronological constraints imposed by an oral presentation. Third, speakers were interested parties, and thus looked at the world from a predetermined perspective. Even if a given speaker were able to see and understand “the facts themselves,” he was unlikely to present these facts impartially, because he was trying to influence the audience to vote in his favor.

The audience, for its part, is presented with a mix of fact and falsehood in each speech. Because the members of the audience (in this example) are Athenian assemblymen, they judge (that is, assess the effect of past and current realities on future possibilities), vote, and by voting determine state policy, on the basis of competing views of reality represented by the speeches they have heard. How are the assemblymen to separate truth from falsehood? How are they to determine whether their collective interest (either their factional interest as οἱ πολίτες or their public interest as οἱ πολίται) and the speaker’s individual interests are congruent, or where and how those interests diverge? Thucydides’ answer is “Left to their own devices, they cannot.” The citizen masses are unable to determine truth accurately or to determine congruity of interest by listening to speeches because they have no way of testing for either quality. Thucydides’ position seems to be that democratic knowledge does not provide an adequate grounding for assessing speeches of this kind. Thus, badly instructed by speech, the Athenian Assembly was likely to fall eventually into error and make bad policy. By contrasting his own approach to epistemology and decision making with the rhetoric of ideal-type public speakers, Thucydides has established for his readers the existence of a fatal structural flaw in the edifice of democratic ways of knowing and doing; and this flaw is a key to his criticism of Athenian popular rule.

The outcome of the Corcyrean/Corinthian debate was initially ambiguous. At the first of the two assemblies held to discuss the possible alliance, the tendency was for the assemblymen not to underrate the force of the Corinthian λόγοι. But at a second meeting, the assemblymen’s mood

12. E.g., σωφρ. σκοπ. δοκ. φαιν. σώφρων τεκήρ. σημει. άμαρτ. κατάστασ. and its verbal forms), λόγος vs. ἔχον δόξας. ξύμφωνο, μέλλοντα, βέβαιον.
By pointing out that his λόγος is not an ἐργον, Pericles alerts his audience to the element of idealization in his portrait of Athens. The λόγος/ἐργον contrast is reiterated throughout the oration, but two passages are particularly noteworthy:

Furthermore, the power [δύναμις] of the polis itself, [a power] established by those [Athens'] very qualities, demonstrates [πηγαινεῖ] that this [Pericles' statement regarding Athenian excellence] is the truth [ἀλήθεια]—and not a product of words [λόγοι] produced for the present occasion rather than [a product] of fact [ἐργα]. (2.41.2)

Here, Pericles calls his own speech into question. He admits that since his speech was (by definition) merely a construct of words, and since it was prepared for an honorific occasion, it might not be true. But, he claims, the self-evident power of the city, a "fact" rather than a product of words, will establish the truth of Athens' greatness. A similar sentiment is expressed a few lines later:

Our power [δύναμις] is not without the witness of great proofs [μεγάλων σημείων], and we will be the source of wonder for those yet to come, as we are for our contemporaries. Furthermore, we have no need of a Homer to sing our praises, or of any such whose fine words please only for the moment, since the truth [ἀλήθεια] will show that in comparison with the facts [ἐργα], [the verbal depiction] is an underestimation. (2.41.4)

Once again, the contrast is between false, flowery praise in words (i.e., what Pericles is doing) and the trustworthy evidence of facts. But in this passage, the subversion may go even deeper. It is through the witness of great proofs (μεγάλων σημείων) that future generations will be amazed at Athens. But what are these σημεία? The σημεία will survive to convince "those yet to come." In light of the attack on Homer, the σημεία can hardly be in the form of words; we must imagine permanent monuments of some sort. Although Pericles does not say so explicitly, the audience is, I would suggest, being put in mind of (inter alia) the city's new public buildings, some of which were clearly visible from the public cemetery. These monuments were an obvious, lasting, physical manifestation of Athens' power.
As modern readers now know, Pericles is right to suggest that future generations will be amazed at these monuments to Athenian power. But does our amazement reflect a correct assessment of Athens’ actual power? Not if we are to judge by Thucydides’ earlier comment (1.10.1–2), in which he specifically states that to criticize Homer’s ὁδός on the Trojan War on the basis of the σημείων of the small size of the existing town of Mycenae would be improper method. In this same passage, Thucydides points out that if future generations were to judge by the physical magnificence of the city alone, the δύναμις of Athens would appear twice as great as it was in fact. Read in light of this earlier passage, Pericles’ rejection of Athens’ need for a Homer because the μεγάλα σημεία will impress future generations with the truth about Athenian δύναμις seems a painfully empty boast. Once again we are being implicitly reminded that only Thucydides’ accurate account of the historical facts will allow us to know about either the real past or the probable future.

The self-subversive quality of the Funeral Oration is not limited to the issue of word and fact. In the course of Pericles’ speech, each praiseworthy ideal eventually points to its opposite. Freedom is proclaimed as the prime good of the polis, but there is a strong hint that the δύναμις of Athens deprives the πόλεις within the empire of their freedom.18 Public service defines the value of the citizen, but Pericles’ language lets on that not all Athenians are public spirited.19 Even the bravery and self-sacrifice of the dead will inspire not only desire for emulation but jealousy and disbelief.20 Thus Pericles’ discussion of Athens’ πολιτεία as an ideal type is compromised by its location in a tremendously complex speech. His evocation of Athenian democracy is far from univocally positive.

Early in the oration, Pericles defines democracy:

It [our πολιτεία] is called by the name [όνομα] δημοκρατία because government [τὸ οἰκεῖον] is not in the interest of the few [ἐς ἀλίγους] but of the majority [ἐς πλείους]. However, in regard to access to the law for resolving disputes, all are equal. Yet again in regard to acknowledged worth, it is a matter of individual reputation; the nature of a man’s public contribution is not decided in advance on the basis of class [οὐκ ἀπό ἁμερῶς], but rather on the basis of excellence. And if someone is worthy and can do something worthwhile for the polis, he is not excluded by poverty, nor because of his obscurity [οὗτος]. (2.37.1)

In the first clause of this passage, we learn that δημοκρατία is the name (or signifier) used for the reality (or referent) “the πολιτεία of Athens” because the government (τὸ οἰκεῖον) favors the interests of the majority (ἐς πλείους) rather than of the few (ἐς ἀλίγους). This is a somewhat ambiguous statement when viewed from the perspective of power and self-interest. Pericles does not go so far as to say that δημοκρατία is the rule of the many over the few, but neither does he say that it is the collective rule of all citizens in the common interest of all.21 Pericles’ Athens is divided into two interest groups—the few and the many—and the πολιτεία is called a democracy because it favors one group rather than the other.

The next two clauses of the passage, which should explain and clarify the referent πολιτεία, are spectacularly antithetical. The clause “However, in regard to access to the law for resolving disputes, all are equal” does not explain the signifier δημοκρατία but is in contrast to it (ὁδόμα μὲν...μέτεστι δὲ). Thus, the equality in regard to the law is grammatically opposed to the government favorable to the majority. Therefore terms for “many” cannot stand for “all citizens” (as they did in Athenian democratic ideology). The third clause, “but in regard to acknowledged worth, it is a matter of individual reputation,” contrasts the individual citizen to the grouping of the citizenry into “few” and “majority” in the first clause, as well as contrasting the citizen’s individual worth to the generalized equality of “all” in the second clause. In Athens, the individual who is worthy but poor and obscure is not excluded from public service (as he would be if the few were to control the administration), but neither is he forced into a sort of equality that would deny his individual merit. This meritocratic ideal denies the priority of preestablished classes or orders (οὐκ ἀπό μέρους) and gives priority to individual good reputation (ἐνδοκικεῖ).

This sounds good in principle. The list—group-interest oriented administration, equality before the law for all, and individual merit in public service—has a nice “mixed constitution” ring. One might extrapolate a model of a πολιτεία in which legislation is enacted by interested groups, justice is carried out impartially by and for all citizens, and offices are executed...
by competent individuals. But the passage does not clarify what happens if there is a conflict between the perceived interests of the groups or between the equality of all and the merit of individuals. Can a political balance based on such a complex set of contrasts hold up under the stressful circumstances of a long, hard war? We must not forget that this is an oration over war dead.

The next passage in the Funeral Oration that deals explicitly with how the Athenians run their polis helps to clarify the contrast between group-interest oriented government and individual merit:

We ourselves can [collectively] judge rightly regarding affairs, even if [each of us] does not [individually] originate the arguments; we do not consider words [logous] to be an impediment to actions [erous], but rather [regard it] essential to be previously instructed [prooiskhentai] by speech [logos] before embarking on necessary actions [erous]. We are peculiar also in that we hold that we are simultaneously persons who are daring and who debate what they will put their hands to. Among other men ignorance [amathia] leads to rashness, while reasoned debate [logismos] just bogs them down. (2.40.2–3)

This passage is virtually a definition of democratic knowledge and its relation to enactment and action. The Athenians recognize that not everyone is equally capable of coming up with plans (this will be the job of the individual political leader), but the many can participate in making the decision (as assemblymen). So far so good, but in the next clause it becomes clear that the Athenians are proud of making policy on the basis of logos and that they reject the existence of a hierarchy of value between logos and erous. As we have seen, Thucydides considers untested and competing logos to be a very dubious basis for understanding reality, and he elevates erous above logos in his hierarchy of explanatory values. Moreover, as we have seen, Pericles himself has emphasized the logos/erous contrast.

So is Pericles’ Athens an exception to the general rules that Thucydides has established in his preface? The Funeral Oration certainly suggests that its ideal Athenians believe themselves to be exceptional: Pericles points out that other people are unable to blend speech and action in the Athenian fashion. But even while claiming to base its praise of Athenian exceptionalism on the clearest proofs (cf. 2.42.1), the Funeral Oration calls that very exceptionality into question by revealing deep tensions within the ideal of a politics based, first, on seamlessly blending the interests of the few, the many, and the individual and, second, on employing public speeches to plan deeds and create social realities. The oration shows that these problematic ideals are the basis of Athens’ power, and thus reveals to the reader the potential instability of Athenian power. The great and stable Athens established by the speech can exist only in and through the idealizing discourse of the speaker and through a suspension of the disbelief encouraged by the speech’s own antithetical structure.

The Funeral Oration must, I think, be read in the context established by the Corcyra/Corinth debate. In that debate the reader was exposed to the sorts of speeches that the Athenians must assess correctly if they are to enact the best policy for their state. The narrative account of the aftermath of the debate has already demonstrated that complex, self-interested speeches on important issues could result in (at least initial) indecision. Although the assembly’s eventual decision to do the active thing by making the alliance with Corcyra may be seen as confirming Pericles’ emphasis on Athenian daring, the Funeral Oration ideal becomes more problematic when viewed in the context of later speeches and their outcomes—especially the Mytilenean and Sicilian Debates.

Thucydides’ summary analysis of Pericles’ career and Athens’ final failure (2.65) suggests that the tenuous political balance revealed by the Funeral Oration could be maintained only as long as Athens remained a demokratia merely in logos and was in erous the arxh of a single man (2.65.9). Pericles’ arxh limited the confusion and error inherent in basing policy decisions on competing logos—the language of 2.65.9 invites us to see a Periclean verdict behind the final vote to accept the Corcyrean alliance. Thucydides’ Pericles gives speeches, but his speeches are authoritative rather than dialectical; none of his three speeches is answered (at least by an Athenian interlocutor). Pericles’ role as a statesman mimics that of Thucydides as historian—the hard work of fact-sifting and interpretation is done in advance by the expert, rather than being left to the assemblyman or reader.

After Pericles’ death, the democracy existed in fact, and the flaws inherent in the democratic practice of deliberation and decision making contributed to the collapse of Athenian dynamis. The relationship in Thucydides’ text between narrative and speeches frequently questions whether the Athenians, after having been “instructed by speech(es)” of self-interested speakers, are truly able to “judge rightly regarding affairs” or to translate those judgments into appropriate action. Hence, the text, taken as

22. This incorporation of interest-group politics into a democratic matrix might approach the ideal of “polyarchy” advocated by Dahl (1989).

23. See esp. 2.36.4: Athenian politeia and trope were what made the city great.
a whole, offers a real challenge to the workability of what I have designated “democratic knowledge.” Not all readers will, in the end, agree that Thucydides’ criticism is valid (for the record, I do not). But the challenge offered by Thucydides’ “counterknowledge” must be taken seriously—not only by ancient historians, but by democratic theorists and those interested in issues of discourse, criticism, and the possibility of resistance against hegemonic systems of knowledge.

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