

## **Democracy and Imperialism: Characterizations of the Athenian Empire**

**by Sheherzad Jamal**

Given that the periods in which Athenian democracy developed (following the Athenian Revolution of 508/507 B.C.) and the empire reached its further extent overlapped in the fifth century, the extent to which the empire was a product of the democratic system or vice versa has been the subject of vigorous scholarly debate.<sup>1</sup> While certain scholars, such as Josiah Ober, considered one of, if not the foremost scholar of Ancient Greek political theory, argue that it was Athenian imperialism which supported the structure of democracy and its institutions, others, especially Kurt Raaflaub, note that imperialism would not have been possible without the increased political participation and sanction of the *demos*.<sup>2</sup> In order to understand why they come to such divergent conclusions, it is important to recognize that both Athenian democracy and imperialism were constantly evolving in response to external stimuli, both within Athens and abroad. In particular, the experiences of the Persian Wars (the events of 490 and 480–479 B.C.) and the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) directly influenced how the Athenian citizenry viewed the democratic system and its empire. Moreover, democracy and imperialism were not static categories but consisted of multiple components and manifestations. For instance, democracy could be understood both

---

<sup>1</sup> Josiah Ober, “Chapter 4: The Athenian Revolution of 508/507 B.C.: Violence, Authority, and the Origins of Democracy,” in *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Democracy and Political Theory*, 34–52 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Josiah Ober, “Golden Age of Empire, 478–404 BCE,” in *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, 191–222 (Princeton University Press, 2015), 204, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x0q7b.15>; Kurt A. Raaflaub, “Democracy, Power, and Imperialism in Fifth-Century Athens,” in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstitution of American Democracy*, edited by J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach, and Josiah Ober, 103–46 (Cornell University Press, 1994), 125, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv2n7ghj.7>.

as a set of values and the institutions which concretized and lent structure to those values. Similarly, imperialism, as a descriptive category, could also be further divided into the soft imperialism of ideology and the hard imperialism of military and economic conquest. This is further complicated by the way in which democracy and imperialism existed as parallel realities which could not be easily delineated. Therefore, when Ober, Raaflaub, and other scholars analyze the relationship between Athenian democracy and imperialism, they are not always referring to the same aspects of democracy or empire. By comparing the way in which they understand both ideas, it is possible to shed light on how the democratic and imperialist systems of the Athenians in the fifth century were interdependent on each other. The aim of this paper is to both explore how Athenians themselves approached the problems of government and imperial ambition as well as how scholars perceived these interactions. This paper is divided into two sections: the character of Athenian democracy and imperialism, which crystallizes in primary sources, and how scholars interpreted these ideas in relation to each other, particularly the extent to which their views can be understood as illuminating different features of the same systems.

In terms of how ancient texts approached the question of Athenian imperialism and its relation to democracy, it is worth examining how these writers viewed the empire as a whole. To this end, the works of Pseudo–Xenophon and Thucydides (the Melian dialogue, the Mytilenean debate, and the speeches of Pericles, particularly his Funeral Oration) are significant because they explore the consequences of empire both with regard to its economic and military benefits as well as its effect on the attitude of the Athenian state and by extension, the people. First, let us consider the economic and military facets of imperialism. Both Pseudo–Xenophon and Thucydides recognized that Athens, and its democratic institutions, were heavily dependent on the empire and that many government positions, such as magistracies, were

‘salaried and domestically profitable’ because of imperial conquest abroad:

The first major enactment...was the institution of jury-pay...the system rapidly expanded into peacetime pay for the Navy, for holding public office, for membership in the boule...Aristotle noted that payment of officials by the state is one of the essential features of a ‘radical’ democracy and that its adoption by the Athenians allowed the lower two classes to play a greater role in government.<sup>3</sup>

In his *The Constitution of Athens*, Pseudo-Xenophon also described, at length, the ways in which the Athenian system utilized its authority as a hegemonic power to force its ‘allies’, particularly within the Delian League, to ‘sail to Athens for judicial proceedings.’<sup>4</sup> He argued that this was enormously beneficial to the city because it was:

from the deposits at law [that] they receive their dicastic pay through the year. Then, sitting at home without going out in ships, they manage the affairs of the allied cities; in the courts they protect the democrats and ruin their opponents...the people at Athens profit in the following ways...first, the one per-cent tax in the Peiraeus brings in more for the city; secondly if anyone has lodgings to rent, he does better, and so does anyone who lets out on hire a team of animals or a slave; further, the heralds of the assembly do better when the allies are in town.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the various architectural projects, commissioned during the Age of Pericles (c. 461–429 B.C.), were made possible by the

---

<sup>3</sup> Pseudo-Xenophon, Book I.1–20, in *The Constitutions of the Athenians*, 477; Timothy J. Galpin, “The Democratic Roots of Athenian Imperialism in the Fifth Century B.C.,” *The Classical Journal* 79, no. 2 (1983): 107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3297244>.

<sup>4</sup> Pseudo-Xenophon, Book I.1–20, 485.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

funds of the Delian League (formed in 478 B.C.).<sup>6</sup> A dependency which most likely influenced Pericles' decision to shift its treasury from Delos to Athens. Plutarch noted that these programs were a serious insult to members of the League and demonstrated how:

...with her own enforced contributions for the war, [Athenians] are gilding and bedizening our city, which, for all the world like a wanton woman, adds to her wardrobe precious stones and costly statues and temples worth their millions.<sup>7</sup>

In this regard, imperial resources were essential for the development of Athens as a city, ensuring civic engagement and maintaining crucial democratic institutions and offices. However, it is worth noting that the empire also provided certain benefits for its subjects: “first, internal peace and unity; second, freedom from tyrannis; third, democratic government; and fourth, independence from the Persians.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the empire allowed other city–states direct access to a regulated market, despite the financial burden of having to pay a fixed tribute.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, despite the overwhelming benefits it brought to the Athenians, it was tolerated by other city–states because it fulfilled certain requirements of theirs.

Throughout his account of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides explores how Athenians dealt with the city–states which had come under their domination. In particular, the Melian dialogue and the Mytilenean debate provide useful case studies to understand how imperial conquest affected the character of Athenian democracy. On the one hand, in the Mytilenean example, the Athenian *demos* are shown to be reasonable and choose to accept

---

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Liu, “Athens: Cruel Imperial Power or Falsely Maligned?” *Discentes: Penn’s Classical Studies Publication*, March 20, 2021, <https://web.sas.upenn.edu/discentes/2021/03/20/athens-cruel-imperial-power-or-falsely-maligned/>.

<sup>7</sup> Plutarch, “Pericles,” In *Plutarch’s Lives*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Galpin, “The Democratic Roots of Athenian Imperialism in the Fifth Century B.C.,” 103.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 104–105.

Diodotos' proposal of a proportionate response, rejecting Cleon's more violent demands for the execution of all adult Mytilenean males and the enslavement of their women and children. Diodotos notes that this would establish a dangerous precedent, whereby loyal citizens in other city states which revolt would hesitate to come forward, "you having foreshown them by the example that both the guilty and not guilty must undergo the same punishment."<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, in the case of the Melian dialogue, the Athenians are less willing to compromise and allow the continuation of a neutral Melian state. Here, the notion of justice is given less priority and the Athenian negotiators favor a more ruthless policy. They argue that "the powerful exact what they can, while the weak yield what they must."<sup>11</sup> Additionally, "those who preserve their freedom owe it to their power."<sup>12</sup> The primary similarity in both cases is that imperial policy is shown to be guided by a practical approach to politics. In the Melian case, the Athenians argue that "your hostility does not injure us so much as your friendship; for in the eyes of our subjects that would be proof of our weakness, whereas your hatred is proof of our power."<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Thucydides depicts the Athenian state as having a pragmatic, if ruthless, approach to imperial policy. However, it is interesting that, despite this, in the Mytilenean case, the Athenians grapple with the idea of justice. In this sense, while they act in accordance with practical considerations, they seem to be concerned with what the empire represents as an outward projection of the Athenian *demos*, and consequently, its values.

Thucydides explored this concept of the empire, not just as a physical conquest, but as a projection of Athens in the realm of the imagination. In his last speeches, particularly the Funeral Oration,

---

<sup>10</sup> Thucydides, "Book III. 36–50," in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Thomas Hobbes, 47,

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=thuc.+3.36.1>.

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, "Book V. LXXXIV–CXVI," In *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 159.

<sup>12</sup> Thucydides, "Book V. LXXXIV–CXVI," 163.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

Pericles notes that the Athenian empire is in and of itself an indication of Athenian exceptionalism among other Greek states:

Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves...the Lacedaemonians do not invade our country alone, but bring with them all their confederates; while we Athenians advance unsupported into the territory of a neighbor, and fighting upon a foreign soil usually vanquish with ease men who are defending their homes...in our enterprises we present the singular spectacle of daring and deliberation, each carried to its highest point.<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, Pericles views the empire as having ideological as well as economic or military components and acknowledges its significance as a historiographical project. He asserts that:

...the admiration of the present and succeeding ages will be ours, since we have not left our power without witness, but have shown it by mighty proofs; and far from needing a Homer for our panegyrist, or other of his craft whose verses might charm for the moment only for the impression which they gave to melt at the touch of fact, we have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere, whether for evil or for good, have left imperishable monuments behind us.<sup>15</sup>

Through the character of Pericles, it becomes clear that the Athenians view their imperial policies not merely in terms of the tangible benefits they bring but as simultaneously an outward extension *and* an affirmation of the unique character of the *demos*. Its tyrannical aspects, enumerated by Cleon, are justified, in Thucydides, by allusion to political pragmatism as is evident when

---

<sup>14</sup> Thucydides, “Thucydides (c.460/455–c.399 BCE): Pericles' Funeral Oration from the Peloponnesian War (Book 2.34–46),” in *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, Fordham University, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/pericles-funeralspeech.asp>.

<sup>15</sup> Thucydides, “Thucydides (c.460/455–c.399 BCE): Pericles' Funeral Oration from the Peloponnesian War (Book 2.34–46).”

Pericles argues that Athens must preserve its imperial domination, or it will suffer at the hands of those it dominated:

Do not think that you are contesting over one thing only, slavery or freedom, but also over the loss of empire and the danger from the hatred incurred in it. We cannot step away from our empire, even if out of fear in the present circumstance some grandstander with apolitical naïveté made a display of doing so. You have held it for a long time as a tyranny. To have taken it was, it seems, unjust; to let it go perilous.<sup>16</sup>

In these texts, it becomes clear that the Athenians themselves did not have a homogenous approach to their empire but had a complex relationship with it. While they recognized the practical benefits the empire rendered by enabling the apparatus of democracy and the development of the city, they were also aware of its tyrannical elements, despite the economic advantages and protections it offered to its subjects. However, the Athenians also took pride in their imperial conquest as a legitimation of the Athenian *demos* as an exceptional and powerful political entity, capable of extending its influence over vast tracts of territory. Consequently, they grappled with how to balance power and justice because both were crucial to the image of the Athenian state they sought to project outward. As such, the Athenians continuously evaluated and reevaluated their conception of empire in light of their evolving political circumstances.

Scholars like Ober, Raaflaub, and their contemporaries acknowledge the contradictions and multifaceted nature of Athenian democracy but give weight to different features of the system. In his essay, “The Golden Age of Empire, 478–404 BCE,” Ober delves into the democratic system’s dependency on empire. A considerable portion of his argument is concerned with the empire as a kind of

---

<sup>16</sup> Thucydides, “Book III. 36–50,” 37; Thucydides quoted in Stephen V. Tracy, “Thucydides’ Portrait of Pericles III: Plague, Last Speech, and Final Tribute,” In *Pericles: A Sourcebook and Reader*, 79–95 (University of California Press, 2009), 85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp19x.12>.

political contract between Athens and other Greek city states. He argues that the Delian League's activities against the Persians were a '*nonexcludable public good*' even as they facilitated Athenian hegemonic impulses, including towards those states who were not its members.<sup>17</sup> As such, "residents of weak states were relatively better off, all things considered when they paid a reasonable and predictable level of protection money to a stable hegemon with relatively long time horizons."<sup>18</sup> To the Athenians, the League, as an extension of their political interests, also provided them with increased military experience in 'naval operations, siegecraft, and logistics' making conquest possible in a practical sense.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, these military operations meant that ordinary citizens became more and more involved in the politics of imperialism because they were directly affected by them. Ober enumerates the benefits of empire and how these influenced the *demos* itself:

The Athenians themselves, of course, benefited most of all. Athenians benefited directly, as rentiers. Elite Athenians reaped rewards from military leadership positions, especially when, as was often the case, military operations resulted in booty. Non-elite Athenians had the chance to raise their socioeconomic status by sharing rents from distribution of goods, notably when agricultural land was confiscated from a subject state that had failed fully to grasp the rationality of acquiescence. Confiscated lands were divided among Athenian "cleruchs"...Other Athenians benefited from the imperial revenues that were plowed back into the Athenian economy: Athenian rowers, marines, and infantrymen were relatively well compensated for military service on the annual naval patrols in the Aegean and for garrison duty among potentially restive subjects. Yet other Athenians, of all classes, benefited from pay for government and legal service and from a surge in public building.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ober, "Golden Age of Empire, 478–404 BCE," 196.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 201–202.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

Therefore, major aspects of the democratic system were connected to the empire. In most cases, it was either a source of revenue or an avenue for gaining prestige. Pericles notes this in his last speech, “emphasiz[ing] how each Athenian’s private interests were inextricably conjoined to the collective fate of the Athenian state.”<sup>21</sup> However, Ober does not really delve into the extent to which democracy, as an ideology, influenced how citizens conceived of their imperial ambitions. His view of the psychology of empire is limited to its profit as a rational economic enterprise that was essential for the maintenance of the institutions of the state. Robin Osborne, takes a similar approach, noting that Athenian democracy was contingent on certain economic provisions for the less wealthy members of the *demos* which made “it possible for them to maintain that they all were equal, and all equally had an active role to play in sustaining democracy.”<sup>22</sup> However, Ober does allude to the general importance of ideology with regard to empire. Comparing the Athenian empire to the Persian empire, he notes that the similarities between Hellenic city–states allowed the Athenians to control and govern, in relative terms, a more homogenous territory. While he concedes that a weakness of the Athenian empire was that it did not have “a legitimating ideology that could stand in for the Great King’s claim to have a special relationship to a great god,” he does not consider democracy as capable of fulfilling this purpose.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, Raaflaub, in his chapter “Democracy, Power, and Imperialism in Fifth–Century Athens,” locates the growth of empire as dependent on the democratic system and the kind of citizen it produced in the fifth century. To him, there was “a close connection between an interventionist and imperialist foreign policy on the one hand and, on the other, a politically active and involved citizen body” precisely because Athenian democracy was “not

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>22</sup> Robin Osborne, “Chapter 2: The Economics and Politics of Slavery at Athens,” in *The Greek World*, edited by Anton Powell, 27–43 (London: Routledge, 1995), 37.

<sup>23</sup> Ober, “Golden Age of Empire, 478–404 BCE,” 199.

merely a ‘constitution’ in the sense of a set of norms or laws but an integrated social and political system, a specific way of life...[which] required a specific type of citizen who typically promoted a specific type of foreign policy.”<sup>24</sup> He notes that Athenian expansion and increased democratization meant that the political and social tendencies of the demos were constantly evolving. “Thus, politics pervaded all aspects of private and communal life...an exceptionally large share of Athenian politics dealt with power and empire.”<sup>25</sup> Raaflaub focuses specifically on the idea of power and the way it came to be interpreted by the Athenians themselves:

Just as the polis was capable of maintaining its liberty only by being powerful and, preferably, ruling over others, so within the community the demos could be free only by controlling power and participating in government. Democracy as institutionalized rule by the people thus guaranteed the liberty of all citizens. In Athens the two aspects of this concept eventually were conflated: the two-sided rule of the demos in the polis and over the empire was linked with its two-sided freedom to form a new and superior type of “liberty through power” – a privileged status that was available only to the members of the imperial democracy at the height of its domination.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, the notion of liberty became increasingly connected to the idea of power because the level of minimally acceptable liberty expanded as the empire expanded. “The empire made democracy possible by initiating the indispensable social changes and mental adaptations and by providing the necessary impulses and the financial resources, without which such an unprecedented system could not have been realized.”<sup>27</sup> This approach to power and empire is also evident in the conduct of the Athenians in the Melian and

---

<sup>24</sup> Raaflaub, “Democracy, Power, and Imperialism in Fifth-Century Athens,” 104.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

Mytilenean dialogues. In both cases, they were motivated by changing conceptions of how they viewed their empire. Moreover, given their familiarity with and involvement in matters of the state and empire, their attitude toward imperialism crystallized in an environment where they simultaneously recognized the economic necessity of empire but also had an idealized conception of it as symbolic representation of the power of the *demos*. To some extent, the power and uniqueness of democracy provided a mechanism for the Athenians to justify their conquests. As Galpin notes:

The pride of the Athenian *demos* must be kept in mind; equality among its citizens Athens carefully distinguished from equality among all men. That there was opposition to imperialism seems clear, but this opposition was also clearly a minority. Indeed, the expansionistic sentiment of democratic Athens may be considered analogous to America's perception of its 'Manifest Destiny' in the 1850s, with its emphasis on extending the sway of democracy.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, the success of democracy, and its rhetoric of justice, provided Athenians with a legitimating ideology for continuing their internal policies. To Raaflaub, "economic motives played an important but probably not primary role."<sup>29</sup> Throughout his article, he emphasizes that the spread of democratic values served as an ostensible justification for empire and continued to influence how the Athenians reconciled domination with ideals of justice. This preoccupation with the idea of justice in the Melian and Mytilenean debates highlights that the Athenians were deeply concerned with the kinds of values they wanted the empire to represent. Efraim Podoksik recognizes this preoccupation with the empire and its relation to democratic values, noting that Thucydides locates the decline of the Athenian state in its attitude toward empire:

---

<sup>28</sup> Galpin, "The Democratic Roots of Athenian Imperialism in the Fifth Century B.C.," 108.

<sup>29</sup> Raaflaub, "Democracy, Power, and Imperialism in Fifth-Century Athens," 134–135.

For Thucydides, as for Pericles, the Athenian way of life meant not the rule of majority over the rest but a true adherence to the civic ideal by all citizens. But when democratic revolutions were instigated in other cities, what came out of them was merely more discord and violence. Oligarchic revolutions produced a similar result...The democratic rhetoric, then, lost its connection with the ideal driving it, becoming merely an empty justification for anything.<sup>30</sup>

According to this framework, Thucydides considered the ideals of democracy to have direct consequences on the empire.

In conclusion, having considered the approaches of recent scholarship, typified by Ober and Raaflaub, it becomes clear that when they use terms like ‘democracy’ or ‘imperialism,’ they are referring to very different ideas. In Ober’s case, his argument is focused on democracy as the structures and institutions of the Athenian state. To him, imperialism is largely physical conquest, enabled by increased Athenian military expertise, which provided Athens with tangible economic benefits. As such, his view that democracy was dependent on empire is informed by the extent to which the empire constituted an economic necessity for the functioning of certain democratic offices and so on. In contrast, Raaflaub defines democracy largely as the embodiment of the values and impulses of the *demos*. His writing considers whether imperialism could be understood as an ideological, as well as military, project directly influenced by how the *demos* viewed itself as a uniquely powerful political entity. He notes that there is a circularity to this view because this image of the self was encouraged by the social and material changes brought about by imperialism. This interdependency between democracy and imperialism is also evident in primary sources, particularly

---

<sup>30</sup> Efraim Podoksik, “Justice, Power, and Athenian Imperialism: An Ideological Moment in Thucydides’ ‘History,’” *History of Political Thought* 26, no. 1 (2005): 36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26221725>.

Thucydides, Pseudo–Xenophon and Plutarch. There are contradictions in the approach figures like Pericles, and by extension, the Athenian state adopt toward their empire, ranging from a pragmatic assessment of its value to more abstract discussions about the role of justice. The Athenians themselves grappled with the tension which emerges between democracy’s dependence on empire and democratic values as a legitimization of the imperial project. As such, it becomes clear that it is difficult to delineate the two systems because of the extent to which they justify and support each other. In the case of scholarly approaches, we can see that their divergence in where they locate dependency is influenced to a great detail by the aspects of democracy and imperialism they prioritize. Therefore, their approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive but stem from the different vantage points from which they approach the Athenian political system and the concerns of the *demos*.