

Risky Business: Xenophon's Picture of Thrasybulus in the Theban Embassy of 395 BCE

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THE SPEECH given by an anonymous Theban ambassador before the Athenian Assembly in 395 BCE, as reported by Xenophon in his *Hellenica* (3.5.7–16), has sparked intense debate over the years. Guido Schepens notes, “the question of how to evaluate the meaning and function of the Theban speech has long been a controversial issue in Xenophonic studies.”¹ Although the consensus is that the embassy occurred, there are lingering doubts about the content of the speech: apparently Xenophon’s scribal skills were less than precise.

It is the promise of a new *arche* for the Athenians mentioned in the speech that will be analysed in this article. Usually the invocation of the *arche* is perceived as a Xenophonic criticism or satire of the Athenians’ desire to reclaim their lost empire. A different reading will be offered here. The aim is to show that

¹ Guido Schepens, “Timocrates’ Mission to Greece – Once Again,” in C. Tuplin et al. (eds.), *Xenophon: Ethical Principles and Historical Enquiry* (Leiden 2012) 213–241, at 228. Xenophonic speeches have been a well-investigated subject, e.g. John Marincola, “The Rhetoric of History: Allusion, Intertextuality, and Exemplarity in Historiographical Speeches,” in D. Pausch (ed.), *Stimmen der Geschichte: Funktionen von Reden in der antiken Historiographie* (Berlin 2010) 259–289; Pierre Pontier, “L’utilisation de l’histoire dans les discours politiques de Xénophon de Marathon à Platées,” *Dialogues d’histoire ancienne* Suppl. 8 (2013) 165–187; Mélina Tamiolaki, “À l’ombre de Thucydide? Les discours des Helléniques et l’influence thucydéenne,” in P. Pontier (ed.), *Xenophon et la rhétorique* (Paris 2014) 121–138.

Xenophon had a keen understanding of the workings of Athenian democracy. It is within that framework that the speech and the subsequent remark by the Athenian leader Thrasybulus should be read.² We shall see that Xenophon echoed Thucydides' way of reading history more closely than has been assumed.

The Theban speech

In 395 the Thebans became aware of a pending Lacedaemonian invasion of Boeotia. In response, they sent ambassadors to Athens to argue for an alliance. The ambassador's speech, quoted at length by Xenophon, can be summarized as follows. The ambassador starts by exculpating his countrymen for the proposed eradication of Athens after the Peloponnesian War. He argues that this was only the action of one insidious man and should not impede a possible alliance given the situation in which the Athenians and the Boeotians find themselves.³ Instead he emphasises how the Boeotians had helped the Athenians by not marching against them when the Spartans attacked Piraeus during the civil unrest that followed the Peloponnesian War. This reluctance had triggered a piqued response from the Spartans, and for that favour the Boeotians should be repaid. He adds that the Boeotian reticence had angered (3.5.8 ὀργιζομένων) the Spartans to no avail,

² See also Cinzia Bearzot, *Federalismo e autonomia nelle Elleniche di Senofonte* (Milan 2004) 21–30, who treats the speech in depth and whose insights will be treated below as well.

³ While this is often portrayed as a sycophantic ploy to exculpate themselves from blame, there might be a kernel of truth in his excuse. Blaming it solely on one person is probably an exaggeration, but there had been a changing of the guard in Thebes between 404/3 and 395: *Hell.Oxy.* 20.1–2 (Behrwald) with the new reading by Adam Beresford, “Hellenica Oxyrhynchia, col. 13.1–7: Ismenias and the Athenian Democratic Exiles,” *ZPE* 188 (2014) 13–27. One can add the victory monument for Aegospotami in Delphi that mentions one Boeotian admiral, who could be the Boeotian proponent of the destruction of Athens in 404/3: Paus. 10.9.7; Plut. *Lys.* 15, 18.1; Xen. *Hell.* 2.2.19, with David Yates, *States of Memory. The Polis, Panhellenism, and the Persian War* (Oxford 2019) 128–132.

thereby endangering a friendly alliance in order to succour the Athenians.⁴

The ambassador offers an insight into the Athenian psyche by claiming (3.5.10):

Furthermore, men of Athens, although we all understand that you would like to recover the dominion which you formerly possessed, we ask in what way this is more likely to come to pass than by your aiding those who are wronged by the Lacedaemonians? (transl. Brownson)

A list of wrongs perpetrated by the Lacedaemonians follows to exemplify how their actions fostered sufficient aversion to them throughout the Greek world. The situation is therefore ripe to overthrow the Lacedaemonians. More importantly, a leading role in unseating the hegemon would occasion rewards for the Athenians. They would reclaim their empire and conquer the domains of the Persian King as well. In addition, the Boeotians would be of much greater benefit to the Athenians than they ever had been to the Lacedaemonians as their support would provide a firm basis for the overthrow of the new tyrants. The ambassador adds a finishing touch to this flattering speech by clearly asserting a cost equation: “This, then, is our proposal; but be well assured, men of Athens, that we believe we are inviting you to benefits far greater for your polis than for our own” (3.5.15).

According to Xenophon, the Athenians were buoyed by the speech. The decision to support the Boeotians was made unanimously. Thrasybulus then proposed a decree in response and in his speech indicated that the Athenians were taking a significant risk on the Boeotians’ behalf, surpassing any favour they had received in the past (3.5.16–17).

The question arises whether Xenophon is recording a genuine speech. Certain elements of the Theban ambassador’s

⁴ On this episode and angered responses as irrational behaviour in interstate decision-making by communities see Paolo Tuci, “‘*Apronoētos Orgē*’: the Role of Anger in Xenophon’s Vision of History,” in A. Kapellos (ed.), *Xenophon on Violence* (Berlin 2019) 25–44, at 34.

words betray a desire to appease their Athenian audience that is overly zealous, even in light of the importance of flattery and rhetoric in diplomatic interactions.⁵ There are other concerning features, such as the absence of a detailed plan on how to thwart the Spartan war effort.⁶ Xenophon's absence at the time of the speech further complicates the matter, as witnesses and other oral or mnemonic sources would be the basis of his account.⁷ The lack of concrete measures, the flattering language, the absence of other opinions in the debate, and the context that Xenophon portrays in the preceding and succeeding chapters—an Athenian populace craving to reclaim their lost empire—have led scholars to view the speech as an encomium of Athens.⁸ Others have dismissed the speech as a Xenophonic

⁵ Flattery was an essential tool in diplomatic relations. On rhetoric strategies, including flattery, see Domenica Paola Orsi, "Trattative internazionali nelle Elleniche senofontee. Aspetti del lessico: i verbi della comunicazione," in L. Piccirilli (ed.), *La retorica della diplomazia nella Grecia antica e a Bisanzio* (Rome 2002) 69–110.

⁶ John Buckler, "The Incident at Mount Parnassus, 395 BC," in *Central Greece and the Politics of Power in the Fourth Century BC* (Cambridge 2008) 44–58. This raises the question whether a detailed plan was necessary. Peter Funke, *Homonoia und Arché. Athen und die griechische Staatenwelt vom Ende des peloponnesischen Krieges bis zum Königsfrieden* (Stuttgart 1980) 68–70, points out that this was only a defensive alliance, not a declaration of war on the Spartans. One may wonder whether such specifics were elaborated upon in speeches. Such technicalities as Buckler refers to have—in most cases—been systematically erased from reported speeches in classical historiography. Matters such as the number of soldiers or strategy would be decided on a different occasion. Paolo A. Tuci, "The Speeches of Theban Ambassadors in Greek Literature (404–362 B.C.)," *Ktema* 44 (2019) 33–52, at 41 n.40, has argued that the lack of a detailed plan was part of the Theban strategy to convince the Athenians.

⁷ John Buckler, "Xenophon's Speeches and the Theban Hegemony," in *Central Greece* 140–164, at 140.

⁸ Vivienne Gray, *The Character of Xenophon's Hellenica*. (Baltimore 1989) 107–112. For the moral complications of the speech see Jean-Claude Riedinger, *Étude sur les Hélieniques. Xénophon et l'histoire* (Paris 1991) 175–176; Christopher Tuplin, *The Failings of Empire. A Reading of Xenophon Hellenica 2.3.11–7.5.27* (Stuttgart 1993) 61–63.

concoction with no basis in reality, a view hampered by Andocides' reference to a Theban embassy in 395.⁹ Buckler for instance accepts that an embassy took place, but concedes no ground on his point that Xenophon created the contents of the speech almost *ex novo*:¹⁰ Xenophonic poetic license was necessary in order to free the Athenians from blame in the Corinthian War or for their willing acceptance of Persian money, by having the Thebans—of all people—assert the righteousness of Athens' claim to rule.

So how trustworthy is the speech? Xenophon, unlike Thucydides, does not pose both sides of the debate to weigh all the options available.¹¹ The Thebans' expectations from the Athenians in return for helping the Athenian exiles during the tyranny in 403/2 are excessive. That is specified by the words of Thrasybulus (3.5.16). Finally, there is a moralising tendency in Xenophon's choice to insert the speech here, almost satirising the Athenian desire for *arche*.¹² Perhaps the Theban encomium fits this pattern too.

Yet all these points could be nuanced, leading to a different

⁹ Andoc. 3.24–25. The authenticity of that speech has been doubted by Edward Harris, “The Authenticity of Andokides’ *De Pace*. A Subversive Essay,” in P. Flensted-Jensen et al. (eds.), *Polis & Politics: Studies in Ancient Greek History presented to Mogens Herman Hansen* (Copenhagen 2000) 479–506; he views it as a later fabrication. Anna Magonetto, “Ambasciatori plenipotenziari delle città greche in età classica ed ellenistica: terminologia e prerogative,” *Studi ellenistici* 27 (2013) 223–242, has shown that the speech is consistent with the diplomatic norms of the time and therefore should be viewed as genuine.

¹⁰ Buckler, in *Central Greece* 44–58.

¹¹ For the most expansive treatment of speeches and their function in Thucydides see Carlo Scardino, *Gestaltung und Funktion der Reden bei Herodot und Thukydides* (Berlin 2007) 383–701.

¹² Schepens, in *Xenophon* 213–241, for the satire; Frances Pownall, *Lessons from the Past: The Moral Use of History in Fourth-Century Prose* (Ann Arbor 2004), for moralising tendencies in Xenophon and his willingness to omit parts of history that modern scholars would find essential, e.g. the formation of the Second Athenian League.

picture of Xenophon's thinking and the function that the Theban speech fulfils. In turn, this supports the authenticity of the speech's contents; while the speech is not recorded *verbatim*—similar to Thucydides caveated recording of speeches—it probably gives the gist of the words spoken in the Assembly on the occasion.¹³

So why does Xenophon highlight the Theban speech and the wholehearted acceptance by the Athenians, but ignore the possibility of any dissident voices? He goes out of his way to mention that “many Athenians spoke in support” of the Theban ambassador.¹⁴ Obviously there must have been some Athenians in disagreement: given the invocation of painful memories—such as the vote on the destruction of Athens and the invocation of the Sicilian expedition—that attitude would be unsurprising. Such dissenters remain mute in Xenophon's work (3.5.8, 14). There are two possibilities here. There is a chance that Xenophon for the sake of brevity chose to neglect the less relevant option and invoked unanimity as a way of explaining that a significant share of the Athenian populace supported the proposition, with the opponents a minority.¹⁵ In light of recent

¹³ So Marta Sordi, “I caratteri dell'opera storiografica di Senofonte nelle Elleniche,” *Athenaeum* 28 (1950) 3–53 and 29 (1951) 273–348; Silvio Accame, *Ricerche intorno alla Guerra Corinzia* (Naples 1951) 43–44; Robin Seager, “Thrasybulus, Conon and Athenian Imperialism, 396–386 B.C.,” *JHS* 87 (1967) 85–115, at 96–98. See Joachim Dalfen, “Xenophon als Analytiker und Kritiker politischer Rede (Zu Hell. VI 3,4–17, VI 5,33–48),” *GrazBeitr* 5 (1976) 59–84, on Xenophonic speeches and their reliability. On this speech and arguments for historicity see Bernd Steinbock, *Social Memory in Athenian Public Discourse: Uses and Meanings of the Past* (Ann Arbor 2013) 252–253. John W. I. Lee, “Xenophon and his ‘Times,’” in M. Flower (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon* (Cambridge 2017) 15–37, points out that Xenophon may well have returned to Athens on visits, perhaps to see family and friends. This could have allowed him to retrieve information about the speech.

¹⁴ *Hell.* 3.5.16, τῶν δ' Ἀθηναίων πάμπολλοι μὲν συνηγόρευον.

¹⁵ I would like to thank one of the anonymous referees for this suggestion. On unanimity see Françoise Ruzé, “Plethos, aux origines de la majorité

work by Mirko Canevaro, however, it seems more likely that the Athenians *did* accept the proposition unanimously or at least by consensus. He has convincingly shown that unanimity, or more precisely, a consensus-vote for collective action, was a key feature of political decision-making of democracies, including the Athenian variety. Unanimity was therefore not a façade to hide discontent, but was the result of deliberative strategies and drawn-out discussions in the Assembly that aimed to create a consensus for collaborative action. Sometimes this was achieved via social pressure but more often through extended debate and repeated discussions.¹⁶ Arguably, Xenophon has condensed this whole process and presents us with the final result after several days of debate following the Theban ambassador's speech in the Assembly.¹⁷

A different perspective clarifies the matter further. The omission of these conflicting voices fits Xenophon's tendency to leave out references to those whose arguments that did not win the day.¹⁸ Considering the Athenian zeal for the alliance, one may doubt whether Xenophon would have inserted other Athenian voices in the debate, even if they were numerous.

Nevertheless, the acceptance of the alliance constitutes a remarkable turnaround in the Athenian attitude. In the Demaenetus affair a year before, the Athenians—Thrasybulus

politique,” in *Aux origines de l'hellénisme: la Crète et la Grèce: hommage à Henri van Effenterre* (Paris 1984) 247–263.

¹⁶ Mirko Canevaro, “Majority Rule vs. Consensus: The Practice of Democratic Deliberation in the Greek Poleis,” *Ancient Greek History and Contemporary Social Science* (Edinburgh 2018) 101–156, and “La délibération démocratique à l'Assemblée athénienne: Procédures et stratégies de légitimation,” *Annales (HSS)* 74 (2020) 339–381. Canevaro provides an overview of attested cases for unanimity from across the Greek world.

¹⁷ A good comparison here is the debate preceding the decision to mount the Sicilian expedition (Thuc. 6.14–25). Canevaro, *Annales (HSS)* 74 (2020) 339–381, uses this as an example to demonstrate the extended process of deliberation.

¹⁸ Buckler, in *Central Greece* 44–58.

included—were still uneasy about irritating the Spartans.¹⁹ What could have caused this volte-face, besides a populace hungry for war? A convincing argument has been brought forward by Bernd Steinbock. He argues that the Thebans' praise of Athenian virtue and willingness to help the weak or wronged fits into the pattern of using Athenian social memory to their advantage by picking the right examples to bring to their attention.²⁰ This sort of information may have come from the Athenian exiles, who still maintained friendly ties with many of the Thebans who had harboured them a decade before.²¹

These insights explain the Theban claims that their initial help for the Athenian exiles now deserved a reward. Many former exiles would have been in attendance. Perhaps these are the many who supported the Theban ambassador's proposal. With the memory of those years still fresh, his recourse to this event would have resonated well—maybe none more so than with Thrasybulus, himself a beneficiary of that Theban help. According to Pausanias, that memory was immortalised at the Herakleion of Thebes in the form of two statues.²² This

¹⁹ *Hell.Oxy.* 9.1–3, 11.1–2 (Chambers). It was Thrasybulus who reportedly warned the Spartans about Athenian elements conspiring against them: Funke, *Homonoia und Arche* 71–73. Barry Strauss, *Athens after the Peloponnesian War: Class, Faction and Policy, 403–388 B.C.* (Ithaca 1987) 107–109, adds that it was Thrasybulus' hatred of his rival Conon that prompted this. Kathryn Simonsen, “Demaenetus and the Trireme,” *Mouseion* 9 (2009) 283–302, underlines Xenophon's desire to blame the Thebans for starting the war by omitting this episode from the *Hellenica*. Unfortunately, the part where the Oxyrhynchus historian would have inserted his version of the Theban speech has been lost, making a comparison impossible.

²⁰ Steinbock, *Social Memory* 245–253.

²¹ Xenophon may have been aware of the Theban insight into the Athenian psyche, despite his anti-Theban attitude. He was acquainted with the Theban Proxenus (*Anab.* 1.1.11, 2.1.10, 2.6.16–20). Possibly Xenophon was a prisoner in Boeotia during the Peloponnesian War as claimed by the third-century CE author Philostratus (*VS* 1.12).

²² Paus. 9.11.6. Albert Schachter, *Cults of Boiotia* I (London 1981) 133, mentions that the text is corrupt, but this does not undermine the value of

recollection may have prompted the Athenians' enthusiasm for protecting the Thebans against Spartan aggression.²³

The Theban arguments were undoubtedly carefully chosen. Despite their boorish reputation, the Thebans were well versed in the matter of picking the right ambassadors for the job, fluent in diplomatic language.²⁴ Flattery was part of that language,²⁵ and there is no need to assume Xenophonic fabrication. The Thebans' use of the *plupast* hints at a future panhellenic expedition to Asia, as it is lodged within the narrative surrounding Agesilaus' exploits, further evoking Athenian glories of the past.²⁶

A final question is whether Xenophon's voice really emerges from the Theban speech. Xenophon's moralising tendencies and his habit of inserting his voice into speeches is well known, but as Schepens observes, would Xenophon, with his notorious anti-Theban bias, really desire and elect to have precisely those whom he holds in low esteem to act as the proxy of his own view?²⁷

the reference. On Pausanias' reliability as a witness for monuments: Christian Habicht, *Pausanias' Guide to Ancient Greece* (Berkeley 1985) 28–63, 149. That this statue either survived the city's destruction or was re-erected, like many other monuments, makes the case for the connection and memory of the collaboration stronger.

²³ As Funke has observed, *Homonoia und Arche* 68–70, the Athenians agreed only to a defensive pact. Although it resulted in a war with the Spartans, as they had already breached Boeotian territory, it was not an open declaration of war on Sparta by the Athenians. Instead, it resembles a collaborative pact to ensure that the Spartans could not compel the weaker poleis one by one.

²⁴ Tuci, *Ktēma* 44 (2019) 33–52.

²⁵ Orsi, in *La retorica della diplomazia* 69–110.

²⁶ Tim Rood, "The *Plupast* in Xenophon's *Hellenica*," in J. Grethlein et al. (eds.), *Time and Narrative in Ancient Historiography. The 'Plupast' from Herodotus to Appian* (Cambridge 2012) 76–94, at 82–83.

²⁷ Schepens, in *Xenophon* 213–241. Cf. Nicholas Sterling, "Xenophon's *Hellenica* and the Theban Hegemony," in C. Tuplin (ed.), *Xenophon and his World* (Stuttgart 2004) 453–462, a somewhat dissenting voice on the anti-

Could Xenophon not be abusing the Theban embassy for other purposes besides recording or paraphrasing what they said? I would, hesitatingly, say yes. This finds support in the Thucydidean echoes in Xenophon's speeches. Normally, Xenophon likes to characterise the peoples and groups in his speeches—more akin to Herodotus—but strikingly the Theban embassy seems exempt from this treatment.²⁸

Further proof is found in an inscribed treaty.²⁹ The terms of the treaty itself are fairly unremarkable; the original decree for concluding the alliance—perhaps that of Thrasybulus—is lost. The most striking feature is the other party involved: it is the *Boiotoi*, not just the Thebans. In Xenophon's work the Thebans are more often synonymous with the Boeotian koinon. The same cannot be said for Athenian epigraphic habits, however. Whereas this decree mentions the *Boiotoi*, the charter of the Second Athenian League is clear in specifying that the Thebans were members of the *symmachia*, not the *Boiotoi*.³⁰

This exceeds mere semantics. The evocation of the *Boiotoi* in the alliance of 395 signifies that the Athenians accepted the territorial status quo. This meant Boeotian control over territories lost in the Peloponnesian War, such as Oropos and Plataea. As the Boeotians were in a dire situation, with Spartan forces

Theban bias. He mostly nuances Xenophon's dislike of the Thebans, instead viewing them as unfit for hegemony. Nevertheless, that in my opinion would not override any animosity.

²⁸ Tamiolaki, in *Xenophon et la rhétorique* 128. The excuse offered by the Theban ambassador for the proposed eradication of Athens in 404 echoes the Thucydidean language of the Plataean debate, where the Thebans exculpate themselves by pointing to a small clique as responsible (Thuc. 3.62); see Bearzot, *Federalismo* 30. This could be, therefore, a snippet of negative characterisation without necessarily creating a disparaging impression of the Thebans.

²⁹ Rhodes/Osborne, *GHI* 6; cf. Angelos P. Matthaiou, “Παρατηρήσεις εις εκδεδομένα Αττικά ψηφίσματα,” *Grammateion* 1 (2012) 13–16.

³⁰ Rhodes/Osborne, *GHI* 22.iii.79, cf. 24. Similarly, *IG* II² 40 concerning the alliance made just before the formation of the League specifies Theban ambassadors.

encroaching on their territory, it is worth wondering why the Athenians did not push for more concessions in this matter. During the Peloponnesian War, territorial desiderata doomed peace talks between the Athenians and Boeotians.³¹ Conversely, while a direct comparison is unwarranted, the Boeotian *koinon* pushed for concessions from the Athenians to abandon their ally and change sides when Philip II of Macedon approached Central Greece in 339/8.³²

The Athenians accepted the status quo, despite taking a big risk, as Thrasylbulus underlines. The question is why: were the Athenians so altruistic? Or did they assume that these territories would be theirs if the Boeotians joined the empire in the wake of a Spartan defeat, as the ambassador suggested? In that case, these Theban promises of a new *arche*—Boeotia included—were less of a rhetorical ploy and more in line with a slight possibility that after the war, that promise would be upheld.

That could explain why the Theban ambassador paints the benefits of the alliance in such a grand manner and why the Athenians were willing to take a risk which they had not been willing to take a year before: the benefits this time outweighed the risk. Rather than tackle the Spartans by themselves, they

³¹ Thuc. 4.118.2, 5.16.1, 5.42. One should bear in mind the Athenian perspective on these matters so present in Thucydides, despite his mostly neutral stance towards the Boeotians: Simon Hornblower, “Thucydides on Boiotia and the Boiotians,” in *Thucydidean Themes* (Oxford 2010) 116–138. Mark Munn, “Thucydides on Plataea, the Beginning of the Peloponnesian War, and the Attic Question,” in V. Gorman et al. (eds.), *Oikistes. Studies in Constitution, Colonies, and Military Power in the Ancient World offered in honour of A. J. Graham* (Leiden 2002) 245–270, points out that in Thucydides’ view, essentially a band of Thebans caused the war, dragging the Athenians and Spartans in with them. Others tended to disagree: Ar. *Ach.* 528, *Pax* 990; Andoc. 3.8.

³² The terms of the Athenian-Boeotian alliance in 339/8 are derided by Aeschin. 3.142–143. Earlier scholarship assumed the Demosthenic version of events, where an alliance materialised immediately after the embassy to Thebes. This view has been corrected thanks in large part to the new fragments of Hyperides: Dina Guth, “Rhetoric and Historical Narrative: The Theban-Athenian Alliance of 339 BCE,” *Historia* 63 (2014) 151–165.

now found support in Boeotia and could envision recapturing their empire. Dangers were still present: the Athenians were without their safety blanket, the Long Walls, which were under construction at the time.³³ The Athenians were therefore taking a significant risk on the (slight) hope of regaining their former empire in an enlarged form. Yet, it is not the Thebans who state the risk involved, they rather underplay it.³⁴ It is left to Thrasylbulus, the Athenian leader, to bluntly state the daunting situation ahead for the Athenians.³⁵ And it is here that Prospect Theory comes into play.

The insights of that theory, stemming from behavioural economics and psychology, predict risk-aversion in certain circumstances and risk-loving behaviour in others: all of us, regardless of preferences, will tend to be risk-averse when considering losses that are unlikely but risk-loving in the face of truly bad choices.³⁶ Bad choices here are choices that yield outcomes far inferior to the status quo or reference point. The interpretation of choices depends on how they are perceived by the deciding body. In the case of Xenophon's Theban embassy, that means the Athenian Assembly.

³³ David H. Conwell, *Connecting a City to the Sea. The History of the Athenian Long Walls* (Leiden 2008) 116, for the date of construction. Boeotian help: Rhodes/Osborne, *GHI* 9b.

³⁴ *Hell.* 3.5.15: "And this also is to be well understood, that the selfishly acquired dominion of the Lacedaemonians is far easier to destroy than the empire which was once yours," καὶ τοῦτο μέντοι χρὴ εὖ εἰδέναι, ὅτι ἡ Λακεδαιμονίων πλεονεξία πολὺν εὐκαταλυτωτέρα ἐστὶ τῆς ὑμετέρας γενομένης ἀρχῆς.

³⁵ *Hell.* 3.5.15: "This, then, is our proposal; but be well assured, men of Athens, that we believe we are inviting you to benefits far greater for your state than for our own," ταῦτ' οὖν λέγομεν ἡμεῖς· εὖ γε μέντοι ἐπίστασθε, ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, ὅτι νομίζομεν ἐπὶ πολὺν μείζω ἀγαθὰ παρακαλεῖν ὑμᾶς τῆ ὑμετέρα πόλει ἢ τῆ ἡμετέρα.

³⁶ J. Ober and T. J. Perry, "Thucydides as a Prospect Theorist," *Polis* 31 (2014) 206–232, at 211. Originally, the theory was devised by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47 (1979) 263–291, and popularised in Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York 2011).

Athenian democracy and its relationship to empire

The Athenian Assembly is essential for our understanding of the situation. Recent research demonstrates that some modern societies are more prone to risk-seeking behaviour than others.³⁷ This assessment appears consistent with the observations made by the Corinthians in Thucydides' work (1.68–71): in an effort to convince the Spartans to go to war, the Corinthians note that the Athenians and Spartans differ in their attitudes towards risk. Whereas the Spartans are risk-averse and prefer to over-insure by accepting unfavourable settlements, the Athenians are risk-lovers willing to gamble on slight chances to obtain big gains. That willingness to take risks laid the foundations of the empire.³⁸ Ober and Perry add that it is not a simple matter of preference or national character. That would contradict the notion of Prospect Theory, which views decisions vis-à-vis risk as being taken with regard to a specific reference point. It is in the reference points that the Spartans and Athenians differ: their political structures, their decision-making processes, and their related political culture cultivate different frames for the decision-making patterns.³⁹

That attitude is on display in Pericles' Funeral Oration. The Athenian leader declares that the Lacedaemonians are brave because of their arduous training, whereas the Athenians are equally brave without it. He adds that the Athenian system

³⁷ One case compared Chinese with 'westerners', however problematic that term may be. For the results: Alan L. Brumagin and Wu Xianhua, "An Examination of Cross-cultural Differences in Attitudes towards Risk: Testing Prospect Theory in the People's Republic of China," *Multinational Business Review* 13.3 (2005) 67–86.

³⁸ As Ober and Perry, *Polis* 31 (2014) 206–232, observe, deviating from the risk-averse choices in the long run normally results in heavy losses and an unstable situation. According to their interpretation of Thucydides, it is thanks to the leadership of Pericles and his ability to balance out *human* (irrational) and *econ* (rational) behaviour in appropriate measures, viz. by applying *econ*-like reasoning in times of need, that the Athenians' empire lasted as long as it did.

³⁹ Ober and Perry, *Polis* 31 (2014) 225.

produces men who

have a peculiar power of thinking before we act and of acting too, whereas other men are courageous from ignorance but hesitate upon reflection. And they are surely esteemed to be the bravest spirits who, having the clearest sense of both the pains and pleasures of life, do not on that account shrink from danger. (Thuc. 2.39–40, transl. R. Hooker)

Pericles justifies the Athenians as being less warmongering than the Spartans. If the term is applicable, it is the result of their thorough consideration before acting. Their bravery is not on display constantly, but only in the right circumstances. When called upon, they demonstrate their valour and inherent quality by taking calculated risks to strengthen their hold over Greece. Pericles' view of Athens is permeated by his 'rational input' on the deliberations in the Assembly, in Thucydides' view. After his death in 429, incapable leaders emerged who swayed the populace into both overly cautious and overly perilous courses of action when considering proposals.⁴⁰

That was a prized quality. As Ober and Perry indicate, democratic Athens allowed the participation of the masses in deliberation before decision-making. The increased range of options fostered the possibility of more unusual and unexpected ideas to be debated: exactly the kind with lower probabilities of success but higher potential gains.⁴¹

Increasing the likelihood of such appeals reaching the Assembly was the introduction of the *graphe paranomon* after 415; those

⁴⁰ Ober and Perry, *Polis* 31 (2014) 230: "All of this points to a leader who makes policy based on expectations (and thus proper weighting of probabilities) and who understands the tendency of the citizenry to fall into prospective errors. Thucydides' Pericles, we may say, employed his rhetorical skills to keep Athens within a tighter band of formal rationality than they had resources to keep themselves: he encouraged them to judge prospects more as if they were expectations, in light of relevant information and statistical probability."

⁴¹ Ober and Perry, *Polis* 31 (2014) 225. If we consider that 80% of a populace consists of *Humans*, rather than *Econs*, it makes the likelihood of outlandish proposals being accepted greater.

proposing legislation viewed as unconstitutional or inexpedient became liable to prosecution. Unconstitutionality took various forms: proposals were deemed as violating an existing law, damaging the interest of the people, or procedurally flawed. In a sense the *graphe paranomon* became the Athenians' most prominent weapon against their political leaders in the fourth century, occupying the place ostracism once held. The limit for prosecution was one year. After that, a *graphe paranomon* could only accomplish the annulment of the decree, but left its proposer unharmed.⁴² Nevertheless, the onus lay initially on the proposer; any politician therefore assumed a heightened risk when proposing a decree in the Assembly.

This novel legislation is pertinent to the case of the Theban embassy. The ambassador clamoured for an alliance with the Athenians, but for that alliance to materialise, an Athenian had to propose a decree first. The date of the embassy, 395, means that the initiator would take responsibility for this action. In this case, that was Thrasybulus, who moved the decree for the alliance.⁴³ His proposal therefore made him liable for prosecution within a year should it prove disadvantageous to the Athenians, even if it was accepted unanimously.⁴⁴ This increased risk meant that a consensus had been reached regarding the collective action to be taken *prior* to the decree's proposal in the Assembly, to prevent the insertion of a *graphe paranomon* before the vote.⁴⁵

⁴² M. H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Norman 1999) 205–218.

⁴³ *Hell.* 3.5.16, Θρασύβουλος δὲ ἀποκρινάμενος τὸ ψήφισμα καὶ τοῦτο ἐνεδείκνυτο.

⁴⁴ *Hell.* 3.5.16, πάντες δ' ἐνηφίσαντο βοηθεῖν αὐτοῖς. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy* 207, points to Dem. 59.5 as one example where a proposer is punished, despite the proposal being accepted (nearly) unanimously: "One may feel surprised at the severity of the penalty when one reflects that a *graphe paranomon* against a decree was often brought after the Assembly passed it: there seems something absurd about punishing a political leader for a proposal that the people had accepted, possibly unanimously."

⁴⁵ Canevaro, *Annales (HSS)* 74 (2020) 351.

Thrasylbulus' willingness to risk his reputation for the decree to ally with the Thebans takes on added importance in light of recent findings that a decision-maker becomes more risk-seeking when bearing responsibility for both his own outcome and that of others. This applies for instance in foreign policy decision-making, especially when these decisions have to be justified before a group or audience.⁴⁶ Under conditions of responsibility—whether for only one other person involved or, as in this case, an entire polis—these modern experiments predict an increase in risk-seeking behaviour by those responsible. This becomes accentuated when the probabilities are small, since responsibility amplifies the probability weighting of decisions. Indeed, Athenian history provides ample examples of leaders who were brought down by the populace on account of their responsibility for decisions in interstate relations, such as Themistocles, Alcibiades, Nicias, and even Pericles.⁴⁷ The legal implications of his proposals in the Assembly could thus have weighed on Thrasylbulus' mind.

He was responsible for moving the decree and his fate was ultimately tied up with the Boeotian alliance.⁴⁸ I believe that

⁴⁶ Julius Pahlke, Sebastian Strasser, and Ferdinand Vieder, "Responsibility Effects in Decision Making under Risk," *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 51 (2015) 125–146. As Barbara Vis and Dieuwerje Kuijpers, "Prospect Theory and Foreign Policy: Underexposed Issues, Advancements, and Ways Forward," *Contemporary Security Policy* 39 (2018) 575–589, at 581, point out, it is consistent with other studies that find that accountability reduces loss-aversion.

⁴⁷ Themistocles: Thuc. 1.135–39, esp. 1.139 "the ablest judge of the course to be pursued in a sudden emergency, and could best divine what was likely to happen in the remotest future." Pericles: Thuc. 2.60.4. Nicias: Thuc. 8.1.1, Plut. *Nic.* 22. Alcibiades: Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.17.

⁴⁸ He knew the procedure, having been charged under a *graphe paranomon* after the return of the democracy: Archinus had Thrasylbulus' decree to grant citizenship to all metics who helped restore the democracy annulled (Aeschin. 3.195; *Ath. Pol.* 40.2; [Plut.] *X Orat.* 835F–836A), not on the grounds of its content but on the legal technicality that Thrasylbulus' motion had not come to the Assembly as a *proboulema* of the Council ([Plut.]; *P.Oxy.*

this also explains his exclamation after the Theban speech:

Thrasybulus, responding to the decree, also pointed out that although the Piraeus was without walls, they would nevertheless take the risk (*παρακινδυνεύοιεν*) to repay a favour to them greater than the one they received. “For you,” he said, “did not join the expedition against us, while we fight on your side against them, if they march against.”⁴⁹

Particularly interesting in this case is Xenophon’s use of *παρακινδυνεύοιεν*. In the Loeb version it is translated “brave the danger.” Xenophon uses this verb only twice in the *Hellenica*, which suggests its importance here. While these translations seem similar, they do not convey the same message.⁵⁰ Braving a danger is part of a different cognitive sphere than taking a risk. The former can be perceived as more heroic, aimed at accepting the danger and nevertheless pushing forward with it. The other implies a calculated response after weighing the options available, in keeping with the Periclean description of Athenian decision-making.⁵¹

In this case the choice was between staying out of the looming Spartan-Boeotian conflict, or accepting the risk of waging a war without the Long Walls protecting the city.⁵² Moreover,

XV 1800 fr.6+7). Cf. Martin Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law* (Berkeley 1986) 504.

⁴⁹ *Hell.* 3.5.16: Θρασύβουλος δὲ ἀποκρινάμενος τὸ ψήφισμα καὶ τοῦτο ἐνεδείκνυτο, ὅτι ἀτειχίστου τοῦ Πειραιῶς ὄντος ὅμως παρακινδυνεύοιεν χάριτα αὐτοῖς ἀποδοῦναι μείζονα ἢ ἔλαβον. ὑμεῖς μὲν γάρ, ἔφη, οὐ συνεστρατεύσατε ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς, ἡμεῖς δὲ γε μεθ’ ὑμῶν μαχοῦμεθα ἐκείνοις, ἂν ἴωσιν ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς (transl. B. Steinbock, modified).

⁵⁰ In the other instance (7.3.5) it means “take the risk.” Jean Hatzfeld, *Xenophon. Helleniques I* (Paris 1954), translates 3.5.16 “Thrasybule, qui fut chargé de leur transmettre ce vote en manière de réponse, leur fit en outre remarquer que c’était à un moment où le Pirée était sans murailles qu’ils acceptaient quand même de leur rendre un service plus grand que celui qu’ils avaient reçu d’eux.” It seems that this translation is vague.

⁵¹ Interestingly, in the Funeral Oration Pericles speaks of meeting dangers (Thuc. 2.39): *τρόπων ἀνδρείας ἐθέλομεν κινδυνεύειν*.

⁵² Conwell, *Connecting a City* 116.

the Theban ambassador implies that the choice was of a different nature: either they would reclaim the empire with the help of the Thebans, or they would have to stand idly by to see the Spartans inflict their *hubris* on the Greeks and then on the Athenians, just as they had done after the Peloponnesian War.⁵³ In a world of honour, as Richard Ned Lebow has detailed, risk-taking was more common, especially in matters of honour and standing.⁵⁴ The Theban message to the Athenians conveys that sense, and the choice therefore leaned towards taking the risk to restore Athenian honour.

This was thus an exceptional situation, even if it was part of a sarcastic remark by Thrasybulus meant to contradict the Thebans' claim that foresaw the Athenians profiting more from the alliance than they would.⁵⁵

I would argue differently. By inserting this remark, Xenophon essentially transforms the entire debate into a cost-benefit equation.⁵⁶ He obliquely refers to the insights of Prospect Theory: this is not to say he was a Prospect theorist *avant la lettre*, but it shows that Xenophon, like Thucydides, had a keen insight into the decision-making process of the Athenian democracy, which hitherto has perhaps not attracted the attention it deserves.

⁵³ Xen. *Hell.* 3.5.9: "For the Lacedaemonians, after establishing you as an oligarchy and making you objects of hatred to the commons, came with a great force, ostensibly as your allies, and delivered you over to the democrats. Consequently, in so far as it depended upon them, you would certainly have perished, but the commons here saved you." I think this is a subtle reminder of Lacedaemonian *hubris* and their actions during their *arche*, just as much as it is to remind the Athenians of the Theban aid against the Spartans. More importantly, this evocation also serves to paint the picture of an Athenian future without the Thebans helping to shield the Athenian democracy from Spartan vices.

⁵⁴ Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge 2008) 165–221, 505–570.

⁵⁵ Schepens, in *Xenophon* 30.

⁵⁶ The Theban reminder of benefits would resonate all the stronger as it was the last argument, as Dalfen, *GrazBeitr* 5 (1976) 59–84, has shown.

The *Hellenica* could therefore be more in line with Thucydidean thinking about politics and foreign policy or interstate relations than is often assumed.⁵⁷ That seems to be confirmed by the echoes of Thucydidean speeches that Xenophon has incorporated in this debate, as Tamiolaki has shown. He thereby demonstrates that, like Thucydides, he was aware of the ways in which the Athenian populace voted in these matters.⁵⁸ And just as the populace could err but be corrected by Pericles and his insights, so Thrasybulus could act as a equilibrating actor in this debate.

A mirror-image? Thrasybulus and Periclean echoes in the Hellenica

Xenophon's insertion of Thrasybulus' remark, rather than an authorial attempt to mock the Athenian desire for *arche*, shows the author's awareness of the Assembly's procedures and the

⁵⁷ Contra Jon E. Lendon, "Xenophon and the Alternative to Realist Foreign Policy: *Cyropaedia* 3.1.14–31," *JHS* 126 (2006) 82–98, who maintains that Thucydides was a Realist in contrast to Xenophon and his views on foreign policy. Roberto Nicolai, "Senofonte e Tucidide: una ricezione in negative," in V. Fromentin et al. (eds.), *Ombres de Thucydide. La réception de l'historien depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'au début du XX^e siècle* (Bordeaux 2007) 279–289, argues that Xenophon has "una ricezione in negativo" of Thucydides throughout his *oeuvre*. I certainly do not dispute that, but as Nicolai adds, this mostly concerns "in particolare, rispetto al suo progetto paideutico (la τέχνη politica insegnata attraverso la storia) e ai paradigmi da lui (ri)costruiti (le vicende della guerra del Peloponneso." If we follow Luciano Canfora, "Biographical Obscurities and Problems of Composition," in A. Rengakos et al. (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Thucydides* (Leiden 2006) 3–31, the intimate relationship between both writers' thinking would be all the stronger. It is also interesting that, as Canfora, "Storica antica del testo di Tucidide," *QS SER.* III 6 (1977) 3–39, has shown, there is a conflation between the two writers in the manuscript tradition: Ξενοφώντος Θουκυδίδου Παραλειπόμενα. A. Kapellos, *Xenophon's Peloponnesian War* (Berlin 2019) 255–261, argues similarly, that Xenophon viewed the downfall of Athens in the Peloponnesian War akin to Thucydides: Athenian leaders' lack of moral virtues and strategic thinking.

⁵⁸ Tamiolaki, in *Xenophon et la rhétorique* 121–138. Interestingly, part of the Theban speech echoes that of the Mytileneans, in which the Boeotians are also assigned an instigative role.

role that capable leaders could play in it. The decision-making process and the ‘irrationalities’ this process entailed required confirmation that the plan to reclaim the empire was a massive risk with a small chance of success.⁵⁹ That this confirmation comes from the contemporary Athenian ambitious leader *par excellence*, Thrasybulus, is unremarkable.⁶⁰ Xenophon, an ardent but sympathetic critic of democracy,⁶¹ shows with this insertion that the chances of reclaiming the empire were smaller than the Theban embassy suggests. Yet these odds did not abate Athenian ambitions because the characteristic of the democracy was precisely their love of taking big risks for big gains. Hence the speech ends with the possible benefits for the Athenians. It allows Xenophon to portray the Thebans as insincere, as in their defence of Medism during the Plataean trial in Thucydides’ account.⁶² At the same time, this allows Thrasybulus to emerge as the insightful politician with an understanding of democracy, in a mirror reflection of Pericles, who was aware of the pitfalls of human nature in the realm of decision-making.⁶³ This interpretation allows Xenophon to pursue his

⁵⁹ An example of this ‘irrational’ behaviour swaying the Assembly with the promise of success, despite the risks, is Aristogoras’ appeal to the Athenians in 490: Hdt. 5.97.

⁶⁰ For Thrasybulus as a champion for a new Athenian empire: George Cawkwell, “The Imperialism of Thrasybulus,” *CQ* 26 (1976) 270–277; Robert J. Buck, *Thrasybulus and the Athenian Democracy. The Life of an Athenian Statesman* (Stuttgart 1998) 97.

⁶¹ See R. Kroeker, “Xenophon as a Critic of the Athenian Democracy,” *HPT* 30 (2009) 197–228. Yet see the recent remarks by M. Christ, *Xenophon and the Athenian Democracy: The Education of an Elite Citizenry* (Cambridge 2020), who argues differently.

⁶² See Bearzot, *Federalismo* 30.

⁶³ The echoes of the Funeral Oration (Thuc. 2.43.4) in Thrasybulus’ speech in 404/3 (*Hell.* 2.4.17) are indicative of that parallelisation. Cf. Tamiolaki, in *Xénophon et la rhétorique* 133: “Xénophon semble investir les héros de la restauration de la démocratie de la gloire des héros de la guerre du Péloponnèse”; Jeannine Boeldieu-Trevet, “De Thucydide à Xénophon: s’opposer aux quatre cents et aux trente,” in *Ombres de Thucydide* 291–305, at 295.

moralising tendencies, without a need to assume that he fabricated these speeches or the arguments they contain.⁶⁴

That does not lessen the possibility of Xenophon's voice pervading Thrasybulus' words.⁶⁵ Xenophon moralises more than Thucydides did, but I would not equate this with a dislike of the Thebans or an ironic encomium of Athenian values and desire for *arche*.⁶⁶ In the *Hellenica* Xenophon more often furnishes opportunities to observe the Athenian democracy in action, and in several cases he displays, like Thucydides, the view that the *demos* lacks the rational insight for making the right decision.⁶⁷ Rather than a criticism or rejection of democracy, this constitutes a fundamental desire to improve it.⁶⁸

That clarifies two other components of the speech as well. First, it explains why Thrasybulus' remark is inserted here. The remark acts as a corrective of the commons' opinion vis-à-vis

⁶⁴ This point echoes Kappellos, *Xenophon's Peloponnesian War* 2, who writes that ultimately Thucydides and Xenophon viewed the moral virtues and military skills of Athens as a decisive factor in their defeat.

⁶⁵ Buck, *Thrasybulus* 97, finds Thrasybulus' blunt remark *mal à propos* the Thebans who had treated him so well before. He finds that it is more likely to be Xenophon speaking here than Thrasybulus. After all, as Buck himself says, Thucydides could be equally blunt in the speeches he recorded, which were of course not *verbatim*. But I would add that Thrasybulus' remark is not out of order towards the Thebans. While candid, such language among friends would be less remarkable than it would be between enemies.

⁶⁶ For Xenophon as a more 'moralist' writer than Thucydides see Pownall, *Lessons from the Past*.

⁶⁷ See for instance *Hell.* 1.7.12; cf. Sara Forsdyke, "The Uses and Abuses of Tyranny," in R. Balot (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Oxford 2009) 231–246. Canevaro, *Annales (HSS)* 74 (2020) 379, uses the debate preceding the Sicilian expedition as an example of Thucydidean disdain for democratic assemblies as being irrational and emotional: Canevaro demonstrates that the debate was in fact taken after profound deliberation and rational argumentation that took each perspective into consideration.

⁶⁸ Vivienne Gray, "Le Socrate de Xénophon et la démocratie," *Les études philosophiques* 2 (2004) 141–176, at 169–171; cf. Kroeker, *HPT* 30 (2009) 197–228.

the proposal by demonstrating that—unlike the majority in the Assembly—Thrasylbulus can (pretend to) vacillate between *Econ* and *Human* reasoning in a Pericles-like manner. Thus he corrects the *demos*' view of the prospects that the Theban alliance promises them. Thrasylbulus thereby guides the audience to make the rational decisions necessary to bring Athens to a flourishing future.⁶⁹ Yet Pericles and his successors—which includes Thrasylbulus—remained under the impression that imperialism was to the benefit of the democracy and the *demos* and therefore catered to the crowd whenever the occasion arose (a common trope in critics of the Athenian democracy).⁷⁰ Part of Xenophon's ambition is for rational leaders to steer the city away from the imperialist ambitions that characterised the democracy in its fifth-century form and ultimately caused its downfall.⁷¹

Second, it illuminates why the Thebans would evoke the Sicilian expedition in the Athenian Assembly, which could easily be perceived as a diplomatic *faux pas*. This reference fulfils a two-fold function. On the one hand, Xenophon, by having his Theban ambassador refer to memories of Sicily and the debacle, underlines the futility of imperial ambitions: in a sense, that expedition was the start of Athens' downward spiral. On the other hand, recollecting the Sicilian expedition was not only a painful wound intentionally reopened, but also served as an insight into the Athenian *eros* for *extending* their empire beyond reason and investing too much in a distant cause. Hence the Theban ambassador focuses on a possible panhellenic ex-

⁶⁹ For Pericles as the rationalist leader in Thucydides see Ober and Perry, *Polis* 31 (2014) 228–231. The rosy view of Pericles as the perfect leader in Thucydides has come under scrutiny recently: Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism* (Cambridge 2010); Martha C. Taylor, *Thucydides, Pericles, and the Idea of Athens in the Peloponnesian War* (Cambridge 2010).

⁷⁰ See for instance Thuc. 2.65.7–11.

⁷¹ This 'anti-imperialism' comes to the fore even stronger in Xenophon's *Poroi*, see John Dillery, "Xenophon's *Poroi* and Athenian Imperialism," *Historia* 42 (1993) 1–11, with Kroeker, *HPT* 30 (2009) 224–225.

pedition against the Persian King and recapturing the islands, Boeotia, and Asia Minor, as this would be effort better spent for maintaining the empire. The Sicilian expedition was the case *par excellence* where the *demos*' foolishness in Thucydides' and Xenophon's eyes—in accordance with the parameters set out by Prospect Theory—came to the fore in calling Nicias' bluff and over-insuring against failure by investing absurd amounts of money and manpower in the campaign.⁷²

In combination with Thrasybulus' remark, the Theban speech emphasises the inextricable entwinement between empire and democracy as perceived by Xenophon. It reveals that Xenophon's thinking, especially in matters of foreign relations and Athenian decision-making, may have been closer to Thucydides' than normally assumed. I would argue that Xenophon was not mocking the Thebans, but rather was conflating parts of the debate or preventing the Thebans from making a correct risk assessment, which would contrast with their devious character. Either he did this out of spite in his editorial work, or he simply wanted Thrasybulus to resonate more like a proper democratic leader, with hints of Pericles in him.⁷³ Notwithstanding his motives, it emerges that Thrasybulus' assertion was meant to highlight the risks Athens took on, with only a slight chance of success.

Given the choices they had, their decision is less surprising. The status quo was an ever-expanding Spartan empire, with

⁷² Ober and Perry, *Polis* 31 (2014) 206–231. Subsequently, Nicias provides also a prime example of failing to cut his losses when the time comes. He therefore fits the mould of Periclean successors unable to master the subtleties and art of reasoning in dealing with the Athenian Assembly.

⁷³ Xenophon was certainly not impartial towards Thrasybulus, especially with regard to his attitude *vis-à-vis* Persian help in the war and his panhellenist tendencies: Cawkwell, *CQ* 26 (1976) 277; Buck, *Thrasybulus* 13. See n.63 above on parallels between Xenophon's Thrasybulus and Pericles. Xenophon's obituary of Thrasybulus: *μάλα δοκῶν ἀνὴρ ἀγαθός* (*Hell.* 4.8.30). His view on the Athenian leader remains debated but I agree with Tuci, in *Xenophon on Violence* 32 n.19 (with an overview of previous scholarship), that a negative interpretation of Xenophon's description is unwarranted.

the Athenians playing second fiddle as a Spartan *ally*. Either they had to accept Spartan demands and remain a subservient polis, or worse, be called upon to fight Sparta's enemies in Greece, such as Thebes. In that case the Athenians would be waging war on behalf of Sparta, whereas by choosing war against the Spartans, they would at least venture to recapture their empire and sail an independent course. That is the picture that the Thebans paint for them. Presented with two equally unappealing options, the Athenians choose the riskier one with the slight chance of regaining their empire, rather than play it safe. This aligns with the Corinthian description of Athenian behaviour: they are risk-seekers, willing to gamble on long shots in the hope of large gains, and are therefore overwilling to take risks (Thuc. 1.68–71). It is a sentiment that could well apply to the unanimous Athenian decision to ally with the Thebans and face war against the Spartans. That the endeavour after initial successes quickly turned into disillusion as the war dragged on seems to confirm the slight chance that war against Sparta had. It seems that the noose around Thrasybulus' neck was tightening in subsequent years, especially with his rival Conon more successful. Perhaps this dire situation forced Thrasybulus to propose ever riskier endeavours, apparently earning him the reputation of a reckless counsellor (Arist. *Rh.* 1400b20). The man whose name, ironically, means 'Bold Counsel' might indeed have embodied the dangers of the irrationality of the people according to Xenophon, with his understanding of the *Human* reasoning so prevalent in the Assembly. Nowhere was this more in evidence than in their willingness to take on the risk of fighting Sparta in hopes of reclaiming their lost empire on the advice and proposal of Thrasybulus.

Conclusion

I have argued that Xenophon's account of the Theban embassy in 395 should not be rejected as an ahistorical concoction. Instead of viewing the speech as an encomiastic orchestration by Xenophon, it should be viewed as reflecting the actual speech, while allowing for some editorial insertions.

The clearest indication of Xenophon's moralising tendencies are in Thrasybulus' remark after the Theban speech. He corrects the rosy picture painted by the Thebans, an easy war against Sparta with all Greece behind them, and instead points out the significant risks the Athenians are taking. Xenophon's insertion of Thrasybulus' remark was not aimed at mocking the Thebans, as is commonly thought. Rather, it demonstrates Xenophon's insights into the pitfalls of Athenian democracy, which he continued to admire from afar, despite its continuous hunger for empire. At the same time, his adjustments of the speech allowed him to present the Thebans as devious characters—wholly in line with his moralising tendencies and his notorious bias against them—who make a faulty assessment of the situation, only for Thrasybulus to step in and act as a pseudo-Pericles fully aware of the risky business the Athenians are getting themselves involved in. Thrasybulus' remark, in that context, should be seen as an indication of the weighing of probabilities about the endeavour the Athenians are about to embark on: namely, a highly risky venture with a small probability of success, despite the Theban claims. The speech thus fits in with Xenophon's moral writings, while at the same time demonstrating that his understanding of the Athenian democracy and the role of its leaders was more in line with Thucydides' thinking and reasoning than normally assumed.⁷⁴

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⁷⁴ I owe my gratitude to Salvatore Tufano for his insightful comments that greatly improved this article, as well as the anonymous reviewers whose suggestions prevented grave errors. I have also profited from discussions at a workshop organised at the University of Zurich on 'Populist vs Rational Democracy in Greek Thought and Practice'.