

“Cause” in History and the Amnesty at Athens: An Introduction

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

1. THE AMNESTY AT ATHENS

THE RECONCILIATION THAT OCCURRED in Athens in 404/3 B.C. between the victorious partisans of democracy, or the “men of Piraeus,” and the oligarchic “men of the city” following the battle on the hill of Mounychia and the withdrawal of the Spartans was, almost everyone agrees, a signal success. The following set of papers investigates this reconciliation and, more particularly, the causes of its success. Why, it is asked, did the Amnesty to which the democrats swore an oath after their victory actually work? Given the violence and brutality of the regime of the Thirty—evoked so vividly by Lysias in his speech against Eratosthenes—how could the democrats possibly live up to a promise to let it all go like so much water under the bridge? The papers of Quillin and Wolpert offer very different explanations for the success of the Amnesty of 403; in presenting them in tandem we hope to provoke thought about a more theoretical question as well, namely, what it means when a historian says that something causes or is caused by something else. The final paper of the set, Ober’s, approaches this question by way of a discussion of the historical methods exemplified in the two central papers, Social Science History and Cultural History.

Amnesties are never simple matters of forgiving and forgetting. In February 1991, more than seventeen years after General Augusto Pinochet’s violent overthrow of Salvador Allende’s socialist government in Chile and almost thirteen years after an amnesty law shielded from prosecution anyone involved in political repression during Pinochet’s early period of martial law, the Chilean National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation published the “Rettig Report,” a document that sought to trace how the security forces operated

and whose lives they affected. A few years ago Pinochet himself spent sixteen months under house arrest in London awaiting a decision on an extradition request issued by a Spanish judge on charges of human rights abuses. More recently, Chilean human rights lawyers have forced the military to admit that several hundred “disappeared” victims of the regime are in fact dead and not simply missing; they successfully argued that without confirmation of death the criminal acts responsible for disappearances were still ongoing and that the perpetrators were therefore not entitled to amnesty protection. Last year, Chile’s Court of Appeal even ordered Pinochet’s mug shots and fingerprints to be registered with the police like any other criminal suspect’s. Efforts to exact justice from the aging general and his henchmen have, nearly three decades after the coup, gained momentum in courts on several continents.

Events in Chile and other nations with similar experiences of transition give us a clear and immediate sense of the complexities of a reconciliation process and the lingering social tensions and anxieties. How does one explain a successful reconciliation? Should one look at the moral character of the society in question? Or the operation of its mechanisms for dispute arbitration? Or the thoughts and fears of the people involved in such situations? Or the perceived long-term political and economic ramifications of a failure to reconcile?

Any decent explanation would avoid focusing on a single cause. As E. H. Carr put it in his classic *What is History?*, “The examination candidate who in answering the question ‘Why did revolution break out in Russia in 1917?’ offered only one cause would be lucky to get a third class. The historian deals in a multiplicity of causes” (116). Yet the Amnesty that was part of the reconciliation at Athens has received curiously little attention, given its place in the grand narrative of Athenian democracy. The possibility that it might have failed—a real one, considering the violent nature of the oligarchic regime and the animosity towards its members expressed in many extant speeches—is present to a greater or lesser degree in most accounts of the period, but it does not generally occasion much concern among historians. A brief look will give a sense of how the episode has been regarded.

We begin with the eighteenth-century views of William Mitford, one of the earliest English historians of Greece. Mitford believed that the Amnesty failed miserably after only a very brief period of success (4: 70–79), an atypical view consequent on Mitford’s critical attitude towards democracy. The Amnesty was for him the brainchild of Thrasybulus, who along with a handful of colleagues succeeded in shepherding the public will, but only for a limited time. This public will belonged to the mass of democratic partisans, who were always a potential source of violence and disruption. This “democrati-

cal despotism," as he called it, could only be contained by enlightened leaders, as happened, for example, after the outbreak of democratic fury that led to the attack on the oligarchic precinct of Eleusis a couple of years later. But restraint was short-lived in 403, and Mitford (4: 78) tells us that the law's power to contain popular chaos was, in an unbalanced democracy,

a phantom, which party-leaders easily taught their favouring majority in the sovereign assembly to despise. . . . Party spirit resumed its violence, tyranny again marked the decrees of the assembly, and the judgments of the tribunals, and even the amnesty, that solemn engagement to which the whole people had sworn . . . was, not openly indeed, but under various subterfuges, violated.

Popular venom against the oligarchs took over the courts, and, before long, "needy and profligate men caught at the opportunity, and sycophancy revived, with all its public evils and all its private horrors" (4: 79).

Not long after Mitford, George Grote argued exactly the opposite, claiming that the Amnesty was faithfully observed and that the former enemies were reconciled "into one harmonious and equal democracy" (8: 300). For Grote few events in history were more "astonishing" than the reaction of the Athenians after the democratic victory. And he is very precise about the cause: it was the "moderation and gentle bearing" of the Athenian character. He writes: "Thucydides remarks [8.97] that the moderation of political antipathy which prevailed at Athens after the victory of the people over the Four Hundred was the main cause which revived Athens from her great public depression and danger." This remark applies a fortiori to the restoration after the Thirty, when, he says (8: 303–4), the

public condition of Athens was at the lowest depth of abasement, from which nothing could have rescued her except such exemplary wisdom and patriotism on the part of her victorious Demos. Nothing short of this could have enabled her to accomplish that partial resurrection—into an independent and powerful single state, though shorn of her imperial power—which will furnish material for the subsequent portion of our History.

Although the assessments of Mitford and Grote differ, they follow a similar logic. Each draws attention to character traits of the Athenian *dêmos* without which the failure or success of the reconciliation cannot be understood: passions and uncontrollable self-interest in the case of Mitford, moderation in that of Grote.

Most accounts of the reconciliation's effectiveness have likewise implicitly or explicitly understood its causes in terms of dispositional properties. In the 1927 edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, for example, W. S. Ferguson cited the intelligence and patriotism of the Athenian people and the prudence

of reconciliation leaders like Archinus, who took careful measures to repress democratic vindictiveness (375). More recently, Martin Ostwald has provided a richer account, highlighting the tensions and difficulties involved in the reconciliation and weaving them into a broader conceptual narrative in which the sovereignty of law comes to replace popular sovereignty (ch. 10). But he, too, attributes success to the Athenian character: “The reconciliation between the two factions worked and proved durable thanks largely to the self-restraint of the Athenian *dēmos*” (497). The rule of law that proved capable of inhibiting popular rancor was made possible by a general and voluntary Athenian acceptance of that rule.

If modern commentators have had difficulty identifying causes apart from the innate virtue(s) of the Athenian *dēmos*, this is in part due to the sources: their testimony unanimously praises the Athenians for the success of the reconciliation.¹ Analyses of the reconciliation that privilege the superior moral character of the Athenian people, in other words, are largely beholden to the ways the historical actors themselves perceived and understood the complexity of events that were unfolding around them. Some will no doubt think that this is a perfectly good thing, but one need not be a Marxist to believe that those who make history do not necessarily know the history they are making.

2. “CAUSE” IN HISTORY

There have been many attempts, across all sorts of disciplines, to come to a better understanding of what it means to say that something causes something else. A history of the notion of cause in history could be written dozens of different ways.² Early positivists took the search for causes among natural phenomena in the nineteenth century as a paradigm for historical inquiry. English historian H. T. Buckle, for example, sought to demonstrate with statistics “the reign of iron laws of causality.”³ Others, working under the assumption that the purpose of history is to explain unique events and not generalities, relegated the search for causal laws to the natural sciences. This kind of thinking is associated with the continental idealists in the late nineteenth century, but it was influential well into the twentieth, too. Michael Oakeshott skeptically observed in the 1930s, for example, that “explanation of change in terms of these causes implies that a single historical event may be abstracted from the world of history, made free of all its relations and connexions, and then spoken of as the cause of all that followed it or of certain selected events which followed it” (196). Then again there were neo-positivists, the most fa-

¹ The sources on the Amnesty are listed and discussed at length by Quillin and Wolpert.

² See, for example, Carr (ch. 4), Ritter, Simon, Walsh.

³ Cited at Ritter 32.

mous of whom was perhaps C. G. Hempel, best known for his contribution to what is called the "covering-law" theory of historical explanation, according to which a historical phenomenon can be genuinely explained only by deducing conclusions from an initial premise anchored in some kind of universal law that, like scientific laws, is subject to empirical testing. In the 1940s and 1950s there were a number of scholars who sought to find some sort of acceptable medium between the two extremes,⁴ acknowledging on the one hand that causal analysis in history would never measure up to its idealized counterpart in the natural sciences with its standards of verifiability, and yet affirming on the other that the identification of causes was an indispensable component of historical scholarship.

Until very recently, discussions of causation over the past half-century have tended to lack the focus, urgency, and intensity of debate that marked these responses to the idealist anxiety over the fragility of historical unity. Talk of causation mostly fell out of fashion after the mid-1950s. Many historians tip-toed around the issue, using the words like "factor" instead of the more scientific-sounding "cause" or adopting a pluralist perspective that saw different assessments of cause as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.⁵ Perhaps more important than the overall lack of interest, however, was that discussion moved in many different directions, with participants no longer speaking directly to one another. Postmodern approaches to history tend to dismiss the importance of cause, sometimes even claiming that sequential time itself is an intellectual construct like any other (and thus not entitled to any ontological privilege),⁶ while the cultural history that has become popular in History departments since the late 1970s leaves little room for causal analysis.

The most extended and engaged debates about cause have instead been carried out with more formal methods in the social and computational sciences: in game-theory analyses and rational-choice arguments in Political Science departments, for instance, or in the formal language of philosophers and artificial-intelligence researchers.⁷ It is no accident that one of the most popular books of recent years to tackle issues of causation head-on—Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*—was written by an evolutionary biologist.

Diamond's study of why Eurasian peoples have successfully monopolized power and wealth in the modern world has, among some historians, sparked a renewed interest in the serious investigation of causation, an interest of which

⁴ See, for example, the work of Maurice Mandelbaum, Morris Cohen, and Sidney Hook surveyed in Ritter 33–35.

⁵ Ritter 35–36.

⁶ For example, Ankersmit 33–34. Cf. the critique of his work and that of other postmodern historians by Evans, esp. ch. 5.

⁷ For example, Sosa and Tooley, and Pearl.

other books, such as Niall Ferguson's *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, are perhaps also indicative. It was with this renewed interest in mind that the following studies of the Athenian Amnesty were brought together into a single panel.

The papers of Quillin and Wolpert present different explanations for the success of the Amnesty. Central to both papers, however, is the fact, stressed by Mitford, that the Amnesty of 403 did not prevent all attacks on the oligarchs, the former "men of the city." Quillin uses an approach based in social science methodology. Interpreting the success of the reconciliation as a preference for long-term social goods (political calm and the rehabilitation of the oligarchs) over short-term individual goods (primarily revenge), he constructs a model of dikastic decision-making that explains why a (presumably) mostly democratic jury would have decided to acquit oligarchic sympathizers. Wolpert, in contrast, argues that, given what he calls the elasticity of Athenian law, i.e., the ability of litigants to pursue disputes through a wide range of procedures, the democrats were able to vent their rancor in court without violating the terms of the Amnesty. Reconciliation was effected not because there were no disputes, in his view, but because the institutions managing those disputes provided a forum for social dialogue, a place where Athenians could reflect on the collective trauma of recent years and together envision and construct a better future. These two approaches, Social Science History and Cultural History, are then discussed in more general terms by Ober.

Interpretations of the Athenian Amnesty's success have long been cast in the same terms with which late fifth-century Athenians themselves understood the process of reconciliation. The proximity of these historical actors to the events in question as well as the unanimity of their perceptions of those events does not mean that their interpretations are necessarily the only ones, or even the best ones. This set of papers will, we hope, stimulate a more nuanced and detailed debate about a central and complex episode in the history of Athenian democracy.

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