

## REVELRY AND RIOT IN ARCHAIC MEGARA: DEMOCRATIC DISORDER OR RITUAL REVERSAL?\*

**Abstract:** Plutarch (probably following Aristotle's lost *Constitution of the Megarians*) associates several episodes of riotous behaviour with the existence of a radical democracy in Archaic Megara (*Moralia* 295c-d, 304e-f). Modern historians, in turn, have accepted that Megara was ruled by a democracy in the mid sixth century BC. I suggest that this conclusion is unjustified because the connection between riotous behaviour and democracy in Plutarch is based on fourth-century anti-democratic political thought. I propose instead that anecdotes describing the insolent behaviour of the poor towards the rich are better interpreted in terms of customary rituals of social inversion and transgression. Drawing on comparative examples from the ancient world and early modern Europe, I show that popular revelry involving role reversal and transgression of social norms was an important locus for the negotiation of relations between élites and masses. I argue that such rituals provided temporary release from the constraints of the social hierarchy, and served to articulate symbolically the obligation of the powerful to protect the weak. The comparative examples show that such rituals were usually non-revolutionary, but could turn violent in times of rapid social and economic change. I argue that the violent episodes reported by Plutarch reflect the escalation of ritual revelry into real protest and riot in response to the breakdown of traditional relations of reciprocity between rich and poor in Archaic Megara. I suggest that élites in Archaic Megara successfully warded off more far-reaching rebellion and political reform by enacting new measures for the economic relief of the poor (e.g. the return of interest legislation). In conclusion, I address the broader historical question of why subordinate groups use ritual forms to express discontent.

ACCORDING to Plutarch, a number of shocking events took place in sixth-century Megara. For example, the poor invaded the houses of the rich and demanded to be feasted sumptuously. If the poor did not receive the hospitality that they sought, they abused the rich physically and verbally. At the same time, Plutarch reports, some sacred ambassadors from the Peloponnesus were attacked by a group of drunken Megarians. The revellers rolled the wagons of the ambassadors, with their wives and children inside, into a lake and drowned many of them. Finally, Plutarch mentions temple robbery as a further example of the outrages that took place during this time.<sup>1</sup>

Plutarch explains these incidents as the consequence of the insolence (ὑβρις), licentiousness (ἀσέλγεια), lack of discipline (ἀκολασία) and disorder (ἀταξία) which flourished under a democracy at Megara. Modern historians, surprisingly, have accepted Plutarch's analysis and have concluded that Megara was ruled by a democratic régime in the mid sixth century BC. As Eric Robinson writes:

Scholars have accepted early democracy in Megara more readily than elsewhere in Greece, if only because the evidence is difficult to dispute. A variety of literary sources combine to portray a radical and violently lawless popular regime in which the *demos* used its supreme power to victimize the rich.<sup>2</sup>

This ready acceptance of early Megarian democracy, however, overlooks not only the ideological roots of Plutarch's description of Megarian democracy, but also the relation of the incidents of revelry and riot to rituals of social inversion. This paper aims to rectify both these

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia* 295d and 304e-f (= *Greek Questions* 18 and 59).

<sup>2</sup> Robinson (1997) 114. Oost (1973), however, is sceptical of a sixth-century Megarian democracy in the

form that we know it from the fifth and fourth centuries. Robinson dismisses this criticism on the grounds of its narrow conception of ancient democracy and argues instead that the Archaic Megarian democracy need not have had the full blown institutional apparatus of Classical Athenian democracy. While I certainly agree with this latter point, I will argue that the evidence does not even support the existence of a more moderate form of democracy. For the variety of ancient conceptions of democracy, see Robinson (1997) 35-64.

oversights by placing Plutarch and his anecdotes in their ideological and ritual contexts respectively. I demonstrate that the connection between riotous behaviour and democracy is a construction of fourth-century anti-democratic ideology and that it is extremely unlikely that there was a democracy in sixth-century Megara. More importantly, I argue that scholars have underestimated the importance of popular revelry in negotiating relations between élites and masses in Archaic (and Classical) Greece. Drawing on comparative examples from the ancient world and early modern Europe, I demonstrate that a key feature of popular revelry is the temporary inversion of social hierarchies and the licence to transgress social norms. Such rituals of reversal and transgression provided a temporary release from the constraints of everyday life and affirmed the obligation of the powerful to protect the weak. In times of rapid economic and social change, however, these rituals could turn particularly violent and serve as a vehicle for the lower classes to protest against changes to traditional or customary norms.

On the basis of the comparative evidence, I suggest that the episodes of violent revelry recounted by Plutarch represent the response of the poor to changing economic conditions. Developments such as population growth, new market opportunities and ‘a transformation of the ideology of gain’ led, by the early sixth century, to a breakdown of traditional reciprocal obligations between rich and poor.<sup>3</sup> In response, the poor became violent in their attempt to reassert the customary moral economy.<sup>4</sup> The instances of violent behaviour reported by Plutarch provoked new measures for economic relief of the poor (for example, the ‘Return of Interest’ legislation) but they did not result in an overturning of the social and political order, let alone democracy in Archaic Megara.

#### DISORDER AND DEMOCRACY: THE ANTI-DEMOCRATIC TRADITION

Modern scholars agree that Plutarch’s anecdotes about early Megarian history are probably derived from Aristotle’s lost *Constitution of the Megarians*.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, although scholars draw this conclusion partly on the basis of verbal parallels between Aristotle and Plutarch, they ignore the implications of these same verbal parallels for Plutarch’s assessment of the nature of the Megarian régime. Specifically, the language that Plutarch and Aristotle use to describe the Megarian democracy has strong resonance with fifth- and fourth-century anti-democratic ideology, a fact which suggests that both authors draw on an ideological connection between democracy and disorder in their analysis of early Megarian history. That is to say, while the narratives of shocking events in early Megara probably derive from Megarian oral traditions, the connection between disorderly behaviour and democracy is an inference drawn on the basis of anti-democratic theory.<sup>6</sup>

By the late fifth century, a standard set of terms began to emerge among critics of democracy as a way of conceptualizing the rule of the masses as opposed to that of the élite. A good starting point for appreciating this critical vocabulary is pseudo-Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Athenians*, which is conventionally dated to the mid 420s.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the phrase ‘transformation of the ideology of gain’ from Morris (2002) 36.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘moral economy’ is borrowed from Thompson (1993) and used according to his definition (188, cited below). Thompson discusses his definition further at 336-51.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson (1997) 115; Okin (1985) 14; Legon (1981) 104-5. Aristotle, in turn, probably relied on local Megarian historical traditions, known to us through frag-

ments of four authors (Praxion, Dieuchidas, Hereas and Heragoras) dating to the fourth and third centuries BC (Okin (1985) 20-1). See Jacoby, *FGrHist* nos. 484-6 and Piccirilli (1975) for the fragments.

<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I highlight only a few key concepts which are relevant to the present discussion. For fuller treatment of the anti-democratic tradition, see Ober (1998).

The best sort is opposed to democracy in every land. For there is the least lack of restraint (ἀκολασία) and injustice (ἀδικία) in the best men, and the most trustworthiness in relation to useful affairs. Among the masses, however, there is the most ignorance (ἀμαθία), disorder (ἀταξία) and wickedness (πονηρία).<sup>7</sup> (1.5)

Here pseudo-Xenophon reduces the anti-democratic tradition to five key terms: lack of restraint (ἀκολασία), injustice (ἀδικία), ignorance (ἀμαθία), disorder (ἀταξία) and wickedness (πονηρία). Pseudo-Xenophon serves as a sort of intermediary between fifth-century critics of democracy who stress the lack of intelligence (ἄσυνεσία) and irrationality (ἄνευ νόου) of the masses, and fourth-century authors, who highlight the people's lack of restraint (ἀκολασία) and propensity towards disorder (ἀταξία).<sup>8</sup> It is worth stressing, however, that these latter concepts are already present in Herodotus since he uses the adjective ἀκόλαστος to describe the people, and his use of the imagery of a river in flood to describe the masses evokes the idea of violent disorder.<sup>9</sup>

The key text for the concept of democratic lack of restraint (ἀκολασία) in fourth-century anti-democratic thought, however, is Book 8 of Plato's *Republic*. Here Plato explains how oligarchies turn into democracies and argues that this happens when the rulers are more concerned with making money than with restraining indiscipline (cf. ἀκολασταίνειν, 555d; ἀκόλαστοι, 555c). For Plato, the problem with democracy is that there is too much freedom, and – like Herodotus' tyrant (3.80.3) – everyone can do whatever they like (557b). Under these circumstances, men give way to their desires. They banish shame, self-control, moderation and frugality from their souls, and welcome in turn insolence, anarchy, profligacy and shamelessness (560e). Following an ironic allusion to Thucydides' account of the reversal of the evaluative content of words during times of civil war (3.82), and an equally ironic play on the democratic concept of equality – each desire is equal, and no desire is deprived of its rights! – Plato concludes that democracy is a pleasant (ἡδεῖα), anarchic (ἄναρχος) and variegated (ποικίλη) kind of political system (558c), in which there is neither order (τάξις) nor compulsion (ἀνάγκη) (561d).

It is no coincidence that it is precisely from this passage that Plutarch draws his description of the Megarian democracy: 'Then, as Plato says (562c-d), the demagogues, serving as wine stewards, poured out too much unmixed freedom (ἄκρατος ἐλευθερία) and the Megarians were corrupted (διαφθαρέντες) and behaved outrageously (ἀσελγῶς) towards the rich.'<sup>10</sup> Yet Plutarch was not the first to discern the connection between social disorder and Megarian democracy. Aristotle had already perceived this association, as is evident from two passages in his *Politics*. The association must have been developed more fully in his now lost *Constitution of the Megarians*. It is noteworthy, however, that these passages come from Aristotle's discussion of the causes of changes in constitutions, and thus confirm that Aristotle was influenced in his analysis by Plato's similar discussion in Book 8 of the *Republic*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. ps.-Xen. *Ath. Pol.* 1.9 for the idea that in an oligarchy the valuable citizens (οἱ χρηστοί) keep the lower classes (τοὺς πονηρούς) in check (κολάσουσιν); see 1.10 for the lack of restraint (ἀκολασία) of slaves and resident foreigners (μέτοικοι) at Athens. Note also that at 1.9 the masses are conceived of as mad (μαινόμενος)!

<sup>8</sup> For fifth-century critics' stress on the masses' lack of intelligence and irrationality, see e.g. Hdt. 3.81.1-2 and Thuc. 2.65; 3.36-49; 6.1, 8-26, 54-61.

<sup>9</sup> Hdt. 3.81.1. Compare also Euripides' description of the behaviour of the Greek army in his *Hecuba* of c. 424 BC: 'The unrestrained mob (ἀκόλαστος ὄχλος) and the anarchy of the sailors (ναυτική ἀναρχία) is stronger than fire ...' The critique of democracy as 'unrestrained' (ἀκόλαστος) is the ideological counterpart to the concept of 'holding the masses in check' (κατέχειν τὸ πλῆθος, Thuc. 2.65.8) which was characteristic of the oppressive rule of the tyrant in Athenian fifth-century democratic ideology (see Forsdyke (2001) 332-41).

<sup>10</sup> *Mor.* 295d (= *Greek Questions* 18).

Democracies are overthrown when the wealthy feel contempt for the disorder (ἀταξία) and anarchy (ἀναρχία). For example ... the democracy of the Megarians [was overthrown], when [the Megarians] had been defeated on account of their disorder (ἀταξία) and anarchy (ἀναρχία). (1302b 28-32)

Democracies are overthrown most often through the licentiousness (ἀσέλγεια) of the leaders of the people. (1304b 20-3)

Aristotle's use of the terms ἀταξία and ἀναρχία and ἀσέλγεια (a synonym in this context for ὕβρις) confirms that he drew on anti-democratic ideology in his analysis of political change in early Megara. Yet it is equally clear that Aristotle had a strong belief in the existence of an early Megarian democracy, and it is likely that this belief was not simply based on anecdotes of social disorder. We must ask, therefore, what was the basis of Aristotle's belief? In other words, what in the Megarian historical tradition, besides anecdotes of shocking behaviour, gave proof of a democratic régime? Since Aristotle's comments on Megara in the *Politics* scarcely run beyond the two quotations above, and since we no longer have the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Megarians*, we must turn to Plutarch's borrowings from Aristotle for the answer.

The only item in Plutarch's comments about the Megarian democracy that goes beyond anecdotes of social disorder is a piece of legislation, the 'Return of Interest', or *Palintokia* (παλιντοκία). It is in fact thanks to the obscurity of this latter term that we have Plutarch's first disquisition on Megara in his *Greek Questions* (18 = *Mor.* 295d). Plutarch begins his discussion with the question 'What was the *Palintokia*?' According to Plutarch, the *Palintokia* was a decree passed under the democracy by which the poor received back the interest they had given to their creditors. Plutarch views this legislation as the culmination of the outrageous behaviour of the poor towards the rich during the time of the democracy. Consideration of fourth-century conceptions of the origins of Athenian democracy, however, suggests that this piece of legislation was the starting point for Aristotle's belief in an Archaic Megarian democracy, and that the other incidents of shocking behaviour were simply taken as further evidence of this fact.

The most obvious basis for Aristotle's association between the *Palintokia* and democracy is the fourth-century conception of the sixth-century Athenian legislator Solon. In the fourth century, Solon was credited not only with legislation similar to *Palintokia* – namely the 'Shaking off of Burdens' or *Seisachtheia* (σεισάχθεια) – but also with the foundation of the Athenian democracy itself. Indeed, as Mogens Hansen has argued, although fifth-century Athenians believed that their democracy was founded by Cleisthenes, in the fourth century 'the accepted view was that [C]leisthenes, after the expulsion of the tyrants, had only restored the democracy instituted by Solon'.<sup>11</sup> The cause of this shift from Cleisthenes to Solon as founder of the democracy was the late fifth-century conflict between oligarchs and democrats over the ancestral constitution (πάτριος πολιτεία).<sup>12</sup> The important point for our purposes is that in fourth-century Athens, Solon's measures for the relief of the poor were part and parcel of the conception of Solon as founder of the democracy.

Aristotle himself is prominent among the sources for this understanding of the origins of Athenian democracy (*Pol.* 1273b 36-9). Indeed, Aristotle highlights Solon's measures for the relief of the poor in his account of the Athenian constitution, and also credits Solon with far-reaching democratic reforms (*Ath. Pol.* 5-11). For Aristotle, Solon's first actions on being appointed as archon were the ban on debt-slavery and the cancellation of debts (*Ath. Pol.* 6.1). These measures became known as the 'Shaking off of Burdens' (*Seisachtheia*). Like the term *Palintokia*, the term *Seisachtheia* seems to preserve a genuine piece of Archaic legislation. Yet Aristotle (and other fourth-century sources) credit Solon with many other more historically

<sup>11</sup> Hansen (1990) 78.

<sup>12</sup> For this debate, see Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 29.3 and 34.3 with Rhodes (1981) 115, 376-7, 416, 420, 427-34, 440-1.

questionable reforms. These reforms reflect the fourth-century view of Solon as founder of the democracy and include the introduction of the Council of Four Hundred (*Ath. Pol.* 8.4), the selection of magistrates by lot from candidates elected from the tribes (*Ath. Pol.* 8.1) and the establishment of popular courts (*Ath. Pol.* 9.1-2; *Pol.* 1274a 1-6).<sup>13</sup> Solon is even credited by Aristotle with the introduction of the provision for appeals to the Areopagus Council (εἰσαγγελία) against those who attempt *to overthrow the democracy* (*Ath. Pol.* 8.4)!

Given this evidence for Aristotle's view of the association between Solon's legislation for debt relief and his alleged democratic reforms, it is easy to see how he might have inferred the existence of democracy in Archaic Megara from evidence for similar measures for debt relief in Megara.<sup>14</sup> However, whereas Aristotle based his account of Solon's democratic reforms on both the *Seisachtheia* and traditions regarding specific constitutional reforms, his case for Archaic Megarian democracy seems to have been based solely on the *Palintokia* and accounts of social disorder.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, however, the historical basis for the re-imagining of these Archaic *poleis* as democracies was legislation providing debt relief for the poor. Oddly, modern historians have agreed with the equation between debt relief and democracy in Megara, whereas they make no such equation in the case of Athens.<sup>16</sup> This contradiction is doubly odd because Solon's debt relief was much more dramatic than that which took place in Megara. According to Aristotle, Solon cancelled debts altogether, whereas in Megara only the interest was cancelled. Comparative examples from the early modern period, moreover, suggest that there is no necessary relation between democracy and economic measures for the relief of the poor. Indeed, as I shall discuss in the final part of this paper, élites often propose such measures in order to prevent further social unrest that might lead to political reform.

If early economic legislation was the historical kernel upon which traditions of Archaic democracy were based, the association between democracy and disorder in anti-democratic ideology enabled its further elaboration in the case of Megara.<sup>17</sup> As we have seen, Plato

<sup>13</sup> See Hansen (1990) 78-9 for a list of all of the constitutional reforms ascribed to Solon by fourth-century sources. Among the reforms, the Council of Four Hundred has the best claim for historicity (Raaflaub (1996) 1065).

<sup>14</sup> For Aristotle and other ancient critics of democracy, a basic injustice of democratic rule was its plunder of the wealth of the élites and its redistribution among the masses (*cf.* *Arist. Pol.* 1305a 4-5; 1309a 14-20; 1320b 2-4; 1321a 31-5). For democrats, the system of redistributing wealth (or liturgy system) was a legitimate device for ensuring that élites used their wealth for the common good. Critics of democracy viewed this system as a clever ruse for unfairly depriving the rich of their rightful possessions. As ps.-Xenophon writes: 'The demos thinks it right to receive pay for singing, running, dancing and sailing in the ships in order that they may have money and the rich become poorer' (1.13). On this reasoning, legislation that forced the wealthy to return interest on their loans could only be the product of the extreme kind of democracy of which Athens was the principal example.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Robinson points out to me that it is possible – even likely – that Aristotle had more information on early Megara than Plutarch preserves for us in his *Greek Questions*. In response to this point, I make the following observations: Aristotle relied on local Megarian historians of the later Classical period (n.5 above), who in turn presumably relied on Megarian oral traditions. Oral tradition tends to preserve the remarkable and the shock-

ing, not the mundane details of early constitutions. It is striking, in this regard, that – granted that the extant fragments of the local Megarian historians are extremely few – they tend to contain information on myth and cult, not Archaic or Classical political development. For comparison, it is noteworthy that Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens* – the only surviving example of the 158 constitutional histories written by his school – has little reliable constitutional detail for the Archaic period. Solon's *Seisachtheia* and some of his laws are striking exceptions. The details of the *Seisachtheia* were probably preserved because of the festival established to commemorate it (see below). Solon's laws were remembered because they were inscribed on wooden tablets which survived until Aristotle's time and beyond (see Rhodes (1981) 131-4).

<sup>16</sup> *Cf.* Robinson (1997) 116-17: 'The *palintokia* sounds like far too drastic a measure to impose unless the people who benefited had played a powerful role in its enactment.' For modern views on Solonian Athens, see n.89 below.

<sup>17</sup> There is one more piece of ancient testimony which could be seen as indirect evidence of a democracy in Megara, namely, Aristotle's claim that the settlement of Heraclea Pontica was briefly ruled by a democracy shortly after its foundation by Megarians and Boeotians c. 560 (*Pol.* 1304b 31-4). Yet there are several reasons for rejecting the idea that this testimony supports the existence of democracy in sixth-century Megara. First,

theorized that democracies are brought about by lack of restraint (ἀκολασία). Similarly, Plato reasons that democracies are overthrown when insolence (ὑβρις) and anarchy (ἀναρχία) are not checked. Aristotle applies this causal sequence to his analysis of political change in Archaic Megara since he attributes the overthrow of the Archaic Megarian democracy to licentiousness (ἀσελγεία) and disorder (ἀταξία). We must still ask why Aristotle applied the democracy/disorder schema to Megara in particular. The answer, once again, can be found in Plutarch, who recounts anecdotes of the outrageous, undisciplined behaviour of the Megarians. Presumably these anecdotes are derived, via Aristotle, from genuine Megarian oral traditions, where they were preserved at least partly because of their shocking content. We may assume that Aristotle connected the evidence for the *Palintokia* with the accounts of revelry and riot in Archaic Megara to produce his analysis of early Megarian political development.

But if the *Palintokia* and social disorder in Archaic Megara are not related to democracy, what was the context in which they occurred? In the second half of the paper, I suggest that part of the answer may be found by analysing the relationship between festival revelry and riot in times of rapid social and economic change.

### FESTIVAL REVELRY IN ANCIENT AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Social anthropologists and cultural historians have long recognized that festival revelry frequently involves the temporary breakdown or even inversion of social hierarchies and norms.<sup>18</sup> The Saturnalia in Rome and Carnival in early modern Europe are the best-known examples, but there were a whole array of more minor festivals both in the ancient world and in pre-modern Europe which involved similar inversions.<sup>19</sup> In this section, I argue that Plutarch's anecdotes about Megara relate to three forms of such festival revelry: (1) the feasting of social inferiors by social superiors, sometimes involving the licence to abuse the latter verbally or physically; (2) the licence to break customary norms of behaviour (cross-dressing, public drunkenness, openly sexual/ribald behaviour, reversal of roles between genders or 'women on top'); (3) the licence to break the law with impunity (e.g. robbery, assault and other crimes normally regulated by law). It should be emphasized that these categories are neither comprehensive nor mutually exclusive, and represent a simplification of a very complex nexus of rituals. Historical examples of festival revelry, as we shall see, often combine these and other forms of social inversion. In what follows, I pick out the features of festival revelry that correspond to the anecdotes about Megara.

Plutarch's account of how the Megarian poor invaded the houses of the rich and demanded to be feasted lavishly relates to similar social rituals known most fully from the Saturnalia in ancient Rome and Christmas or New Year festivals in early modern Europe. The Saturnalia was held on December 17 and involved public feasts, revelry and the breakdown of social hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> The most prominent features of the private celebration of the Saturnalia were the opening up of private homes to all-comers, and the feasting of slaves by their masters.<sup>21</sup> As H.S. Versnel has

given that Heraclea Pontica was founded not only by Megarians but by a 'substantial' number of Boeotians (Graham (1982) 123), there is no reason to assume that the political system of the new settlement reflected that of Megara. Secondly, it is highly likely that Aristotle understood the various episodes of civil war in Archaic Heraclea Pontica (*Pol.* 1305b 2-10, 33-9; 1306a 31-b2) in anachronistic fourth-century terms of struggles between democrats and oligarchs. I argue in Forsdyke (in press) that most episodes of civil war in Archaic Greece can be viewed as instances of intra-élite competition for power.

<sup>18</sup> Important anthropological studies include: Gluckman (1956) and (1963) and Turner (1969). For historical scholarship, see next note.

<sup>19</sup> For the Saturnalia, see Versnel (1993) 136-227. The bibliography on Carnival is enormous. For orientation, see Abrahams and Bauman (1972); Davis (1975) 97-123; Burke (1978) 178-204; Le Goff and Schmitt (1981); Stallybrass and White (1986).

<sup>20</sup> Livy 5.13.5-8, 22.1.20.

<sup>21</sup> Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.24.22-3, trans. Beard, North and Price (1998) 124; see also Accius, *Ann.* 2-7 (cited below). As Versnel (1993) 149 notes, the sources differ as to whether masters and slaves dined together or

demonstrated, similar rituals existed in Greece. At the festival of Kronos in Attica and elsewhere, for example, slaves were feasted by their masters. According to the second-century BC Roman poet Accius (*Ann.* 2-7, Warmington):

Most of the Greeks, and the Athenians above all, hold rites in honour of Saturn. They call these rites the Kronia, and they celebrate the day by holding feasts (*epulis*) through the towns and the countryside. And with great revelry (*laeti*) they serve their own slaves. This same custom has been passed on to us from there, so that here also slaves feast with their masters.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Athenaeus mentions a number of Saturnalia-like festivals throughout Greece (14.639):

At a festival of Hermes on Crete, the slaves feast (εὐωχομένων τῶν οἰκετῶν) while their masters act as servants (οἱ δεσπότες ὑπηρετοῦσιν). At Troezen, the slaves play knucklebones with the citizens and the masters host their slaves (οἱ κύριοι τοὺς δούλους ἐστιῶσιν).<sup>23</sup>

Despite the similarity of these rituals to the events in Megara, it is important to observe that Plutarch suggests that the Megarian events involved not simply the breakdown of social hierarchy and the feasting of the poor by the rich, but also the use of force if the demands of the poor for lavish fare were not met. Plutarch claims that the rich were abused both physically (πρὸς βίον) and verbally (μεθ' ὑβρεως) by the poor. The best parallel for the verbal and physical abuse of the rich by the poor can be found in a related set of rituals in which groups of young men visit the houses of the rich and demand hospitality. In Greece, these rituals are known through the fortunate survival of songs that young men sang as they approached the doors of the rich.<sup>24</sup> The most famous example of this ritual song bears a striking resemblance to Plutarch's anecdote about Megara, and similarly attests to the possibility of violence if the demands of the poor were not met. The song is known as the Swallow Song (χελιδονισμός), since it took place in the spring when the swallow appeared.<sup>25</sup>

Bring fruit and cake from your rich house and offer it to us, and a cup of wine and a basket of cheese. The swallow does not disdain even wheaten bread or pulse bread. Shall we go, or are we to get something? If you give us something, we will go, but if you do not we shall not let you be; we shall carry away your door or lintel, or your wife sitting inside. She is small; we shall carry her easily. But if you give us something, let it be something big. Open, open the door to the swallow; for we are not old men but children.

(Theognis, *FGrHist* 526 F1 = *PMG* 848 = Athenaeus 8.360; trans. Trypanis)<sup>26</sup>

whether slaves dined before their masters (a reversal of usual custom), and whether masters actually served their slaves. These distinctions are unimportant for my purposes since all cases illustrate the breakdown or reversal of the social hierarchy.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Philochorus, *FGrHist* 328 F97 = Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.10.22; Plut. *Mor.* 1098b.

<sup>23</sup> Versnel (1993) 103 suggests that this occurred during a festival of Poseidon. For more examples, see Athenaeus 3.110b and 4.139d (= Polykrates, *FGrHist* 588 F1), 14.639-40 (= Baton, *FGrHist* 268 F5).

<sup>24</sup> For these rituals, see Burkert (1985) 101-2; Parke (1977) 76-7; Smyth (1906) 493-5, 507-8.

<sup>25</sup> Smyth (1906) 507 suggests that the boys also carried the image of a swallow around with them. Another

song, the *Eiresione* (see the ps.-Herodotean *Life of Homer* 2.33; Plut. *Theseus* 22 and *Suda* s.v. διακόνιον) was named after the bough of olive wreathed with wool that the children of Samos carried around as they made their calls at the doors of the rich. The bough is attested in several plays of Aristophanes (*Knights* 729, *Women in the Assembly* 1053). See also the Crow Song (κορώνισμα), named after the crow that the revellers carried (Athen. 8.359-60).

<sup>26</sup> For modern parallels to the Swallow Song, see Passow (1860) nos. 306-8 and Smyth (1906) 507-8. For an illustration, see the vase mentioned by Smyth (1906) 508. The festival of St Basil in modern Greece preserves some elements of this ritual (Smyth (1906) 494). I thank Artemis Leontis for pointing out this modern parallel.

Evidence of similar rituals from early modern Europe not only confirms the customary right of the poor to demand hospitality from the rich, but also the violence that could ensue if the demands of the poor for food and drink were not met. One of the more amusing examples of this ritual is ‘Molly dancing’, which was still performed in East Anglia, England, during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> This winter-time street performance involved agricultural workers, dressed up in women’s clothing and with blackened faces, performing parodies of social dances in exchange for largesse. According to Elaine Bradtke, the revellers ‘could be destructive, drunk and disreputable in appearance’.<sup>28</sup> Although there were set times of year for the rite (often Boxing Day and Plough Monday), Molly dancers went out more frequently in periods of poor weather or famine in response to need.<sup>29</sup>

In his study of Christmas-time revels in seventeenth-century New England, Steven Nissenbaum gives a further example of how the failure of the wealthy to provide hospitality during this season might result in violence. When a band of four young men from Salem village invaded the house of John Rowden on Christmas night in 1679, they were refused a drink in return for their song. As a consequence,

they threw stones, bones and other things ... against the house. They beat down much of the daubing in several places and continued to throw stones for an hour and a half with little intermission. They also broke down about a pole and a half of fence, being stone wall, and a cellar ... was broken open through the door, and five or six pecks of apples were stolen.<sup>30</sup>

Two points emerge from these examples. First, we can see that a common feature of festival revelry in pre-modern societies is the symbolic inversion of the relation between social superiors and inferiors. As Nissenbaum writes: ‘At other times of the year it was the poor who owed goods, labor, and deference to the rich. But on this occasion the tables were turned – literally. The poor – most often bands of boys and young men – claimed the right to march into the houses of the well-to-do, enter their halls, and receive gifts of food, drink and sometimes money as well. And the rich had to let them in – essentially to hold “open house”.’<sup>31</sup> Anthropologists and historians have commonly viewed the function of these inversions as a ‘safety valve’ whereby the poor let off steam and released tensions created by the hierarchical social order.<sup>32</sup> These symbolic inversions reminded élites of their obligation to ensure the well-being of the poor while they simultaneously extracted labour and goods from them. As Nissenbaum writes, ‘[this] kind of misrule ... did not really challenge the authority of the gentry ... The gentry were in fact widely tolerant of these episodes of misrule, viewing them as an opportunity to make up for a year of exploitation by giving a generous handout at Christmas.’<sup>33</sup> This attitude of tolerance is well reflected in Pliny’s comments about his withdrawal to remote rooms in his house while his slaves celebrated the Saturnalia: ‘When I retreat to these rooms, I feel that I am really quite away from my own house; and I take great pleasure in this – particularly at the Saturnalia, when the rest of the place resounds with merry shouts in the free spirit of the holiday. For in this way I do not interrupt my household’s amusements, nor they my work.’<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup> I thank Ruth Scodel for making me aware of this ritual.

<sup>28</sup> Bradtke (2000) 7.

<sup>29</sup> Bradtke (2000) 16, 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Essex Quarterly Courts* VII, 331-2, cited by Nissenbaum (1996) 17.

<sup>31</sup> Nissenbaum (1996) 8.

<sup>32</sup> For anthropological interpretations of rituals of reversal as safety valves, see Gluckman (1956) 109-36; (1963) 110-36; Turner (1969) 166-203. For this approach in historical studies, see Darnton (1984) 75-104. Davis

(1975) 97-151 and Burke (1978) 201-2 both accept the validity of this principle but also modify it in important ways (see below).

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the term used by authorities to characterize the revelry of Christmas was ‘disorder’ (Nissenbaum (1996) 14-15; cf. Burke’s characterization of the authorities’ attitude to Carnival as ‘chaos, disorder and misrule’ (1978) 189).

<sup>34</sup> Pliny, *Letters* 2.17.23-4, trans. Beard, North and Price (1998) 126.



Yet a second point also emerges from the examples of ritual hospitality cited above, and that is the potential of such ritual revelry to result in violence. As we shall see in the final section of this paper, the frequency throughout history with which festival revelry has escalated into real riot and protest has led historians to recognize that the licence and reversals of festivals not only serve as a safety valve but can also be used by the lower orders to express discontent. Before I address the revolutionary potential of revelry, I want to point to two further features of festival ritual that seem to be reflected in the anecdotes about Megara.

So far I have established that festival revelry from ancient to early modern times included the right of the poor to be feasted by the rich and the licence to abuse the rich both physically and verbally. A second characteristic of festival revelry has already been implied, though its relation to the anecdotes about Megara is worth spelling out. Here I am referring to the licence to transgress norms of behaviour, for example by cross-dressing, openly sexual/ribald behaviour, reversal of roles between genders ('women on top') or excessive public drunkenness. These features of festival revelry have been eloquently discussed by Natalie Zemon Davis and others in relation to early modern Europe, as I shall discuss in more detail below. At this point, it is simply worth noting that these reversals and transgressions are well-known features of a number of Greek festivals, and may have been part of the festivities in Megara at which the events recalled by Plutarch took place.

For example, at the Thesmophoria and other festivals of Demeter, women took control by conducting the rite themselves and by excluding men. As Jack Winkler has observed, the site for the Thesmophoria in Athens on the Pnyx adjacent to the male assembly, as well as the imitation of the official (male) institutions for the election of magistrates, inverts the normal hierarchy of male domination.<sup>35</sup> The women further broke the customary norms of female behaviour by using vulgar language and by making obscene jokes as they handled and ate male genitals made of dough. At the Adonia, women gathered on rooftops at night for drinking, feasting, dancing and ribald laughter. According to Winkler's ingenious interpretation of the symbolism of the wilted shoots which the women carried to the rooftop gardens, part of the women's laughter is based on a sexual joke about the brevity of male sexual powers in contrast to the enduring role of women in human and agricultural production.<sup>36</sup> Most prominent of all ancient festivals of inversion are of course the Dionysiac festivals, where parades with huge phalluses, obscenity, sexuality, cross-dressing, excessive drinking and feasting accompanied the performance of tragedy and comedy.<sup>37</sup> Tragedy, of course, put the most transgressive behaviour of all on stage for the community to witness: sons killing fathers, incest, matricide, fathers/uncles killing daughters, brothers dying by each other's hands.<sup>38</sup> Comedy, in turn, not only ridiculed those in authority (both particular politicians and the masses themselves), but featured role reversals, obscenity and ribald sexuality.<sup>39</sup>

In this regard, it is significant that Aristotle mentions in his *Poetics* that the Megarians claimed to have invented comedy long before the Athenians 'during the time of their democracy' (1448a 29-b4). Whatever the truth of the matter, it is striking that the Megarians could plausibly make this claim. At a minimum, we may infer that the Megarians had festivals involving some form of comic performances (and hence traditions of comic ritual reversals) in Aristotle's time. It is likely that these comic traditions went quite far back, possibly as far back as the early sixth

<sup>35</sup> Winkler (1990) 194; Foley (1994) 72.

<sup>36</sup> Winkler (1990) 198-206. A more obscure and perhaps even more striking example of gender role reversal is an Argive festival known as the 'Festival of Insolence' (τὰ Ὑβριστικά). At this festival, men and women exchanged clothes and fought one another (Plut. *Mor.* 245e-f; Paus. 2.20.7-8).

<sup>37</sup> On obscenity at the Dionysia, see Cole (1993).

<sup>38</sup> On tragedy and reversal, see, for example, Zeitlin (1996) 341-74.

<sup>39</sup> On comedy, ridicule and reversal, see Edwards (1993); Zeitlin (1996) 375-416; Halliwell (2000).

century. An observation made by Antony Edwards is relevant to this question. Edwards noted the similarity of several lines in the corpus of the Megarian poet Theognis to rituals of comic reversal.<sup>40</sup>

Cyrnus, the city is still the city, but the people are different.  
 Those who before knew neither justice or law  
 But wore goatskins on their backs  
 And grazed like deer outside the city  
 These are now respected, and those who before were respected,  
 Are now base. Who can bear to look upon this?  
 And they deceive one another and laugh at each other  
 Not knowing how to distinguish between the opinions of the respectable and the base. (53-60)

Conventionally these lines have been seen as the exaggerated reaction of the traditional ruling élite to social and economic changes which were bringing new groups to power.<sup>41</sup> Yet one might wonder, instead, whether these lines reflect the disgust of the élite at the reversals, insult and obscenities typical of certain festivals. Could this be a comic festival?

The last feature of the transgressive behaviour of festival revelry mentioned above, namely excessive public drunkenness, is amply attested in the Megarian anecdotes. Plutarch writes that the Megarians who rolled the wagons of the sacred ambassadors into the lake were drunk (μεθυσθέντες). Less directly, Plutarch's use of the analogy of the corrupting effects of the drinking of unmixed wine to describe the unruly behaviour of the poor may be inspired by a detail in the original Megarian oral tradition – not mentioned by Plutarch and hence lost to us – that the poor were actually drunk when they invaded the houses of the rich. In other words, while Plutarch (and Plato before him) suggests that the masses, when given too much freedom, are as unruly as drunkards, drunkenness may have been an actual feature of the ritual behaviour of the Megarians in the events described by Plutarch.

If we turn now from transgressions against informal social norms of behaviour to transgressions of formal laws, we may examine the third feature of festival revelry attested in Plutarch's anecdotes about Megara: temple robbery (ιεροσυλία).<sup>42</sup> While Plutarch takes such sacrilege as yet another example of the crimes that took place during the time of the unbridled democracy (ἀκόλαστος δημοκρατία), it is possible that this too was a feature of festival revelry. At a festival of Hermes Charidotes ('Giver of Joy') on Samos, it was permitted to steal (κλέπτειν) and rob (λωποδυτεῖν) (Plut. *Mor.* 303d).<sup>43</sup> In early modern Europe, moreover, food rioters made use of ritual forms of hospitality when they plundered not only the homes of the wealthy, but also a public and private granaries, local mills, wagons on their way to market and, in one case, a Franciscan monastery.<sup>44</sup> In the mediaeval period, finally, assaults committed during Carnival were not subject to prosecution.<sup>45</sup> In each of these cases, actions normally subject to sanction under the law were permissible during festival times. It is possible, therefore, that plunder of sacred property (ιεροσυλία) was an aspect of the licence of festival revelry.

So far I have argued that invasion of the houses of the rich, drunken and disorderly behaviour and temple robbery can all be explained as features of festival revelry. But what about the drowning of sacred ambassadors? Surely such a sacrilegious and murderous act was not an accepted part of festival revelry? Indeed, Plutarch tells us that, when the Megarians failed to

<sup>40</sup> Edwards (1993) 99. On the question of the nature of the poetry preserved under the name of Theognis, see n.72 below.

<sup>41</sup> E.g. Robinson (1997) 116.

<sup>42</sup> *Mor.* 304e = *Greek Questions* 59.

<sup>43</sup> The verb λωποδυτεῖν specifically refers to clothes-stealing, but can refer more generally to robbery of any kind (LSJ s.v. II).

<sup>44</sup> Thompson (1993) 227-9; Davis (1975) 27-8.

<sup>45</sup> Coulton (1925) 27 cited by Thomas (1964).

punish the offenders, the league of states responsible for maintaining the cult at Delphi (the Amphictiony) took the matter into their own hands and punished some of the offenders with death and others with exile. Certainly for the Greeks represented by the Amphictionic League, festival licence was *not* an excuse for the drowning of sacred ambassadors.<sup>46</sup> We might conclude, therefore, that this incident was an extraordinary act of brutality, and for that reason, presumably, was remembered in Megarian historical traditions. Like the *Palintokia*, this outrage was memorialized through a specialized term ‘the Wagon Rollers’ (οἱ ἀμαξοκλισταί) – a term whose obscurity in later ages was the impetus for Plutarch’s brief exposition of the incident.

Plutarch’s explanation of this term, however, is deeply influenced by the anti-democratic tradition. As we have seen already, Plutarch associates the event with the insolence (ὑβρις) and savagery (ὀμότης) that flourished under the unbridled democracy (ἀκόλαστος δημοκρατία).<sup>47</sup> Similarly, he attributes the failure to punish the crime to the disorder (ἀταξία) of the Megarian government. The failure to check lawlessness, as we have seen, is a key feature of Plato’s analysis of the flaws of democracy in Book 8 of the *Republic*.<sup>48</sup> In one of the most pointed formulations of this claim, Plato writes with his customary irony:

Is not the ease (πραότης) of some convicted criminals a fine thing? Or have you never seen how in such a political system [democracy], those who have been sentenced to death or exile remain [in the city] none the less, and go around in public, as if they were heroized spirits of the dead, without anyone paying attention or seeing them? (558a)

Plato’s claim that democracy is lenient towards criminals represents a skilful negation of one of the qualities of democracy championed by its proponents. While democrats used the term ‘mildness/gentleness’ (πραότης) to refer to their moderation towards their political opponents in contrast to non-democratic régimes, the oligarchs spun this term much more negatively as part of the lack of discipline (ἀκολασία) which they viewed as characteristic of democratic rule.<sup>49</sup> With this ideological context in mind, it is possible to see how Plutarch, or fourth-century writers such as Aristotle, might have made the connection between the criminal act against the sacred ambassadors and democracy in Archaic Megara. If we remove this anti-democratic inference from the anecdote, how else can we explain the incident?

In answering this question, we are both hindered and helped by the nature of the oral traditions in which it was remembered. We are hindered by the fact that these oral traditions were not interested in recalling the historical context of the event, which may relate to quarrels between

<sup>46</sup> One might note, nevertheless, that wagons (ἄμαξαι) are associated with one form of ritual revelry, namely the ‘ritual abuse from wagons’ (τὰ ἐκ τῶν ἀμαξῶν σκώμματα) which took place during the Dionysia and involved revellers processing on wagons and abusing anyone whom they encountered. See Fluck (1931) 34-51 for the sources.

<sup>47</sup> For savagery as characteristic of the behaviour of the masses, compare Thucydides’ description of the behaviour of the Athenian people in response to the affair of the Herms (6.55-61).

<sup>48</sup> I thank Ryan Balot for pointing out to me Plato’s condemnation of the laxity of democracy in punishing criminals.

<sup>49</sup> In Forsdyke (in press) I demonstrate that ‘mildness/gentleness/toleration’ (πραότης) became an important term of positive self-evaluation for the democracy following the repressive rule of the oligarchs of 403. Representative passages include Isoc. 7.67 and Arist. *Ath.*

*Pol.* 22.4. The claim that criminals roam free in democratic Athens, moreover, is contradicted by the frequent representation of the Athenians as litigious in the extreme. This feature of the Athenian democracy is ridiculed most famously in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, but it is evident in many other sources. For example, ps.-Xenophon observes that the Athenians handle more public and private lawsuits and judicial inquiries than all the rest of mankind (3.2). In 3.4-5, the author lists some of the many disputes dealt with by the courts, including crimes of insolence (ὑβρις). Nevertheless, the author admits that even if the courts sat year round, they could not deal with all the crimes because of the large population of Athens. This last comment is presumably the basis of the élite critique of democracy as ‘soft on crime’, though the idea of deliberate negligence in the pursuit of injustice is an inflammatory misrepresentation, just as the same charge is in American politics today.

Peloponnesian states (the ambassadors were ‘from the Peloponnesus’) or may have been retribution for some sacred offence. We are helped, however, by the fact that the incident was remembered in part because it was associated with a particular descent group (γένος) which became known by the moniker ‘Wagon Rollers’ (οἱ ἀμαξοκυλισταί). This detail is important because it demonstrates that the incident was not a product of mob violence, as Plutarch suggests, but was a more limited act of aggression perpetrated by a particular family. The fact that Plutarch refers to this family as a γένος suggests that it may have been an élite family, not unlike the Alcmeonidae of Athens, who became similarly polluted (ἐναγείς) after an act of sacrilege relating to the Cylonian affair (Hdt 5.70; 1.61).<sup>50</sup> In sum, there is much we do not know about the events that led to the drowning of sacred ambassadors in Archaic Megara. What we can say, however, is that the incident bears no necessary connection to a democratic régime.

#### FROM REVEL TO RIOT

So far I have suggested that many of the features of unruly behaviour attributed by Plutarch to the Megarian democracy can be explained as examples of typical forms of festival revelry. Yet, as I have just noted with regard to the drowning of the sacred ambassadors, this explanation is insufficient since it does not explain why these incidents were so memorable that they were preserved in Megarian oral traditions. If these incidents were simply typical instances of the reversals and transgressions of festival revelry, why did the Megarians bother to remember them? Clearly there was something in these incidents that went beyond the norm. I argue in the final section of this paper that the events recorded by Plutarch reflect the escalation of the symbolic inversions and licence of festival revelry into real riot and protest. The cause of this escalation of violence was the worsening condition of the poor as a result of the breakdown of the traditional reciprocal obligations between rich and poor.<sup>51</sup>

Historians of early modern Europe have long noted that festivals were frequently occasions for expression of discontent with the ruling classes. They argue that festivals function not only to reinforce the social order by temporarily reversing it, but also serve as a mechanism for criticizing and even rebelling against the social order. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, for example, observed that the peasant insurrection of 1580 in Languedoc was instigated by the youth societies in charge of popular festivals. According to Le Roy Ladurie, the revellers/rebels threatened the nobility ‘with dirty and wicked words “to turn their houses upside down” ... and there was not a yokel who did not behave as if he were as great a lord as his lord’. In this case, the rich perceived the threat posed by the peasants as so grave that they responded by massacring the peasants over the course of three days.<sup>52</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis has similarly observed the tendency of festivals to serve as a mechanism for expressing discontent.<sup>53</sup> Davis argues that the reversal of the social hierarchy and the licence to criticize authority afforded by festivals provided occasions and models for rebellious behaviour for the lower classes and women who otherwise had no official institutional means to express discontent. Peter Burke likewise notes that the authorities in seventeenth-century Sicily and Naples recognized the potential of Carnival festivities to escalate into rebellion. As Burke puts it, the officials were aware that if they did not take preventative action by, for instance, banning the carrying of arms during Carnival, ‘there

<sup>50</sup> I owe the observation of the possible élite connotations of the term γένος to Adam Rabinowitz. On the privileged status of members of γένη in Athens, see Parker (1996) 56-66.

<sup>51</sup> Van Wees (1999) 34-5 similarly relates Plutarch’s anecdote to the breakdown of patronage relations between rich and poor in Archaic Megara and even briefly notes the

parallel with riots in later European history. Van Wees does not, however, observe the relation of this anecdote to festival rituals, and therefore does not discuss the full cultural context and socio-political implications of the action of the poor.

<sup>52</sup> Le Roy Ladurie (1974) 192-7.

<sup>53</sup> Davis (1975) 118-19, 147-50.

might be a “switching” of codes, from the language of ritual to the language of rebellion’.<sup>54</sup> Finally, Robert Darnton has brilliantly demonstrated how a group of printer’s apprentices in a Paris printing shop in the 1730s made use of the cultural forms of popular revelry to ridicule and threaten their master.<sup>55</sup>

These early modern examples of the relation between revelry and riot, symbolic inversion and real rebellion are useful for interpreting events in sixth-century Megara. First of all, they demonstrate how ritual forms could serve as the basis for protest or rebellion. More important, however, are the implications of the early modern examples for understanding the causes and consequences of riotous behaviour in Megara. It is striking that the occasions for festive rebellions in the early modern period were often the worsening economic conditions of the labouring poor, usually as a result of famine, high prices or oppressive taxation.<sup>56</sup> In the case of Darnton’s printer’s apprentices, moreover, the workers were responding to the outsourcing of work to cheap day-labourers. This practice was undermining the status of the apprentices and contributing to the breakdown of a more traditional relationship of mutual dependence between shop owners and journeymen. In the words of Darnton, the cheap day-labourers ‘personified the tendency of labor to become a commodity instead of a partnership’.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the workers were responding to the breakdown of traditional patriarchal relationships between rich and poor, not trying to change them.

In his study of food riots in eighteenth-century England, E.P. Thompson shows how the forms of protest adopted by crowds both imitated centuries-old official procedures for setting a fair price for corn, but also drew from traditional rituals of hospitality involving the feasting of the poor by the rich.<sup>58</sup> Thompson concludes, moreover, that worsening economic conditions and, even more importantly, the breakdown of traditional notions of reciprocity between rich and poor (‘the moral economy’) were the root causes of the food riots:

It is of course true that riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute a moral economy of the poor.<sup>59</sup>

In another study, Thompson shows how peasants borrowed from cultural rituals involving cross-dressing, black-face and incursions on the properties of the rich to protest against their exclusion by the Crown from the forests in eighteenth-century England.<sup>60</sup> The peasants had traditionally used the forests as sources of timber, turf (for fuel), and wild game, and therefore viewed the Crown’s action as a violation of their customary rights. Interestingly, the meticulous attention paid by the Crown to the well-being of the royal red deer was a glaring symbol of its indifference to conditions of the poor, just as in Darnton’s account of the Paris printing shop, the good life enjoyed by the mistress’ favourite cat (‘la grise’) highlighted the misery of the printer’s apprentices and provoked them to riot.

Building on Thompson’s work on the relation between popular culture and protest in early modern England, David Underdown has argued that incidents of revelry and riot in seventeenth-

<sup>54</sup> Burke (1978) 203-4.

<sup>55</sup> Darnton (1984) 75-104. Lincoln (1985) similarly explores the potential of religion to serve as the basis for rebellion. Lincoln, however, is less motivated by anthropological approaches to festivity than he is reacting to Marxist views of religion as the tool of the élite, as in Hobsbawm (1959).

<sup>56</sup> Thompson (1993) 188.

<sup>57</sup> Darnton (1984) 80.

<sup>58</sup> Thompson (1993) 224-8, *cf.* 239-40. Thompson also notes (234-5) that rioters made use of ‘ritualised hooting or groaning outside retailers’ shops’ as well as popular recreations such as football to gather a crowd.

<sup>59</sup> Thompson (1993) 188-9.

<sup>60</sup> Thompson (1975).

century England not only borrowed from widespread social rituals involving the inversion of norms, but became particularly violent when changing economic conditions threatened the traditional village life and the reciprocal relation between wealthy landowners and labouring peasants.<sup>61</sup> Underdown's analysis suggests that revelry and riot were aimed at the enforcement of the traditional order. As Underdown writes, '[The intention of riot] was usually to compel authority to maintain a traditional order, rather than overturn it. Food rioters were inspired by the values of a vaguely sensed "moral economy" in contrast to the values of a market economy now being adopted ...'<sup>62</sup> Finally, Kirkpatrick Sale has shown how the Luddite revolt of 1811/12 utilized black-face to protest against the changes of the Industrial Revolution which were undermining the traditional economy.<sup>63</sup>

Through these early modern comparisons, I do not intend to suggest that Archaic Megara was undergoing economic changes of the nature and scale of, for example, the Industrial Revolution. Rather, I suggest a much more general similarity with the Megarian case, namely that the poor used cultural rituals of revelry to protest against changing economic conditions and their worsening situation. More specifically, I suggest that changes in society and the economy (discussed below) threatened the traditional reciprocity between rich and poor. Instead of the customary relation whereby the rich ensured the basic economic well-being of the poor in return for their 'labour, goods and deference', the poor now found themselves subject to more formally enforced debt mechanisms and increasing economic hardship.

Obviously the most striking evidence for these conditions in Megara is the *Palintokia*, which, as Plutarch attests, was passed as a result of the riotous behaviour of the poor (*Mor.* 295d). Under this law, the poor received back the interest that they had given to their creditors. As mentioned already, similar legislation is attested for early sixth-century Athens, and it is therefore likely that debt and worsening economic conditions for the poor were felt in many regions of Greece at this time. Solon's 'Shaking off of Burdens' (*Seisachtheia*) involved even more radical measures than the Megarian *Palintokia*. In Athens, debts were cancelled altogether, and the practice of enslaving individuals for debt was abolished (*Ath. Pol.* 6 and 9). The latter practice had apparently led not only to the reduction of the poor to 'unseemly slavery' (δουλίην ἀεικέα) in Athens, but also to the sale of debtors into slavery abroad (Solon *fr.* 36.8-15). We can imagine that the labouring poor of Archaic Megara faced similar prospects of enslavement and sale abroad when they rose in riot and, conversely, that poor Athenians used ritual forms of revelry to provoke Solon (and his élite supporters) to 'lift their burdens'.<sup>64</sup>

This latter suggestion brings a comment made by W.R. Connor into a new perspective. Connor observed that the word *Seisachtheia* echoes the names of festivals ending in -eia, and, furthermore, that Plutarch mentions that the term was the name given to a public sacrifice (θυσία) made to celebrate Solon's reforms.<sup>65</sup> Connor argues therefore that Solon's reforms should not be conceived simply as legislative or legal measures but also 'a festival, perhaps a procession through the countryside or a ritualized destruction of the boundary markers [which marked encumbered property]'.<sup>66</sup> If we accept my suggestion that the poor used ritual revelry to force Solon and his fellow élites to enact economic reform, then the creation of a festival and rituals to commemorate these events makes even more sense. One can imagine indeed that 'the ritualized destruction of boundary markers' echoes the ritual violence meted out against the property of the rich in the events which led up to the reforms.

<sup>61</sup> Underdown (1985).

<sup>62</sup> Underdown (1985) 118.

<sup>63</sup> Sale (1995).

<sup>64</sup> For fuller discussion of Solon's reforms, see Forsdyke (forthcoming).

<sup>65</sup> Plut. *Solon* 16.

<sup>66</sup> Connor (1987) 49.

One more comment about Solon's reforms is significant in this regard. Solon's economic legislation included a ban on the export of all agricultural produce except olive oil.<sup>67</sup> If we follow the logic of E.P. Thompson's observation that protest in eighteenth-century England was provoked in particular by the export of grain during times of dearth, we might imagine that Solon's ban on exports was a response to riots over the export of grain by the wealthy while the poor were suffering starvation, debt and enslavement.<sup>68</sup>

But what were the root causes of the dire conditions of the poor in Athens and Megara? Here we may adduce two interrelated factors: population growth and increased production for market trade. Recent demographic studies have shown that while earlier models of explosive population growth in the eighth century are untenable, steady population growth of up to 1 percent per annum throughout the Archaic period would have resulted in considerable strains on the economy by the sixth century.<sup>69</sup> On the one hand, population growth meant that there were 'more mouths to feed'. On the other hand, there was more labour available to work the land, and as a result the value of land outstripped the value of those available to work it.<sup>70</sup> As Ian Morris puts it:

the most likely situation is that population growth produced a situation where landowners would actually want to get rid of some of their sharecroppers, or else renegotiate the terms of dependency. No doubt most landowners felt constrained by custom and by patriarchal obligations towards 'their' *hektemoroí* ['sixth-parters' = share-croppers]. But ... [t]he implication of much of Solon's poetry is that new market opportunities were transforming the ideology of gain.<sup>71</sup>

While Morris draws these inferences on the basis of Athenian evidence, the parallels with Megara at this time are strong. Besides the comparable evidence for economic reforms (*Palintokia/Seisachtheia*), a similar transformation of 'the ideology of gain' is detectable in Megarian poetry. If we take the poetry preserved under the name of Theognis as representative of ideological conflicts in Archaic Megara, then the vitriolic condemnations of selfish pursuit of gain echo those in Solon's poetry.<sup>72</sup>

Good men have never yet destroyed the city,  
But whenever it is pleasing to evil men to act outrageously  
And destroy the people and claim that unjust deeds are just  
For the sake of private gain and power,  
Don't expect that city to remain quiet for long,  
Even if now it is at peace.  
When these things are dear to evil men  
Private profit brings public misfortune. (43-50; cf. 145-6, 149-50)

Theognis' poetry, as Solon's, seems to reflect the attempt of the ruling élite to check the tendencies towards rampant pursuit of personal gain which was undermining the relation between rich and poor and threatening the stability of the community.<sup>73</sup> In Athens we can be fairly certain that the export of grain, wine and olive oil was one mechanism by which the wealthy sought to increase their personal profits at the expense of the poor.<sup>74</sup> Besides Solon's ban on agricultural exports, Athenian transport amphorae and pottery attest to widespread Athenian trade links

<sup>67</sup> Plut. *Solon* 24.1.

<sup>68</sup> Thompson (1993) 212-15.

<sup>69</sup> Morris (2002); Scheidel (2003).

<sup>70</sup> Morris (2002) 36.

<sup>71</sup> Morris (2002) 36. Compare Balot (2001) 73-98 and Forsdyke (forthcoming).

<sup>72</sup> For the controversy over the relation of the corpus of Theognis to an actual historical figure, see essays in Figueira and Nagy (1985), Bowie (1997) and Lane Fox

(2000). My formulation reflects the position of Cobb-Stevens, Figueira and Nagy (1985), who view the corpus as 'the crystallization of archaic and early classical poetic traditions emanating from Megara' (p. 2).

<sup>73</sup> Compare van Wees (1999), who uses the terms 'aggressive acquisitiveness' and 'spiralling acquisitiveness' to describe this phenomenon in Megara.

<sup>74</sup> This claim is fully argued in Forsdyke (forthcoming).

throughout the Mediterranean.<sup>75</sup> Evidence for Megarian trade is more elusive, but indicative none the less. First, Megarians were at the forefront of the movement to found new settlements overseas. Recent research suggests that these early settlements abroad were not state-sponsored responses to overpopulation, but often the result of individual adventurism in pursuit of gain.<sup>76</sup> In the Classical period, moreover, Megara was well known for its export of woollen garments, and it is likely that the seeds of this trade go back to the Archaic period.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, Aristotle reports that the late seventh-century tyrant Theagenes won the support of the poor by ‘slaughtering the cattle of the rich’.<sup>78</sup> While we may reasonably doubt Aristotle’s claim that Theagenes gained tyrannical power through this act, the anecdote does reflect the basis of élite wealth in Megara, namely sheep and grazing land.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, we may suspect that one cause of the sixth-century crisis was that the wealthy sought to increase the size of their herds and their control over land in their pursuit of profit.<sup>80</sup>

It is important to emphasize that neither population growth nor production for market trade were new phenomena in the sixth century. Indeed, these trends go back to the eighth century at least.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, it must be stressed that the surplus production must have been rather small given the increased needs of the growing population.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, the poetry of Solon and Theognis, as well as the emergency economic measures taken to respond to the situation, suggest that these two trends together contributed to a crisis in the early to mid sixth century. Interestingly, the response of the ruling élite to the crisis is paralleled in the early modern examples. The comparative examples suggest, moreover, that élites sought to address the economic plight of the poor in order to *contain* violent protest and *prevent* rebellion against their rule. In other words, the ruling élite recognized the potential for the economic crisis to lead to a more serious threat to their rule, and took steps to prevent this.

In her study of food riots in sixteenth-century France, for example, Natalie Zemon Davis shows that one response to riot was the creation of a new public institution (the Aumône Générale) to replace traditional mechanisms for poor relief such as ‘handing out alms at the door’, ‘handouts at funerals and other anniversaries, doles from monasteries and ... cathedrals’ and ‘sporadic action’ by municipal authorities.<sup>83</sup> These new measures were devised by élites ‘so there would be no cause for the people to get stirred up’.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, E.P. Thompson observes that municipal authorities in eighteenth-century England occasionally engaged in symbolic enforcement of the traditional paternalist model of the market when the gap between this model and the realities of the market grew too great. The authorities acted sporadically to ensure that the poor had access to grain at a reasonable price in order to demonstrate ‘to the poor that the authorities were acting vigilantly in their interests’.<sup>85</sup> Later, the authorities took more concrete action through the creation of charities and subsidies designed ‘to buy off riot’.<sup>86</sup>

The comparative examples suggest that the *Palintokia* and *Seisachtheia* represent measures to address the economic problems of the poor in order that they might not lead to more serious

<sup>75</sup> For transport amphorae, see Johnston and Jones (1978). For pottery and its implications for regular and widespread trade, see Osborne (1996).

<sup>76</sup> Foxhall (1997) uses the evidence of survey archaeology to demonstrate that the land had not reached its carrying capacity in the sixth century BC; *cf.* de Angelis (1994). For new settlements abroad as the product of individual adventurism and profit-seeking, see Osborne (1998) 257-9, 268. For a list of early settlements abroad with Megarian involvement, see Graham (1982) 160-2.

<sup>77</sup> Ar. *Acharnians* 519, *Peace* 1003; Xen. *Mem.* 2.7.6; Diog. Laert. 6.41.

<sup>78</sup> *Politics* 1305a 8-28.

<sup>79</sup> In Forsdyke (in press), I interpret the slaughter of the cattle of the rich as a result of intra-élite conflict over power and prestige; *cf.* van Wees (2000) 66.

<sup>80</sup> Compare van Wees (1999) for a similar interpretation of the Megarian crisis.

<sup>81</sup> See the archaeological evidence cited in n.76 above.

<sup>82</sup> Frier (2000).

<sup>83</sup> Davis (1975) 37. Doxis Doxiadis (personal communication) informs me that wills from early nineteenth-century Greece contain provisions for the support or feasting of the poor of the village or town.

<sup>84</sup> Davis (1975) 28-9.

<sup>85</sup> Thompson (1993) 199-200.

<sup>86</sup> Thompson (1993) 243-4; *cf.* 300-1, 303.



challenges to élite rule. In other words, these measures were mechanisms for preserving élite rule, not an indication of the overturning of élite rule in favour of democracy. But what do I mean by ‘élite rule’? I suggest that the political system of sixth-century Megara was not so different from that of other Archaic *poleis* at this time: a relatively small group of wealthy families managed public affairs through rotating public offices and a council.<sup>87</sup> It is of course possible that access to public office (including the council) was extended during this time to a broader group of well-off citizens who were not among the traditional ruling élite, as apparently happened in Solonian Athens.<sup>88</sup> But even if we posit similar reforms at Megara, few scholars would call this political system a democracy.<sup>89</sup> Even in Robinson’s insightful analysis of the full range of ancient forms of democracy, Solonian Athens does not qualify as a democracy.<sup>90</sup>

That said, it is important not to underestimate the long-term consequences of the riotous action of the poor in Archaic Megara and Athens. Despite the general success of the *Palintokia* and *Seisachtheia* in checking rebellion, the implications of the action of the poor could not be erased. The poor had demonstrated their ability to force the rich to act on their behalf, and gained stature and self-consciousness in the process. As E.P. Thompson has noted, it is only at this point in historical investigation into popular riots that really interesting questions get asked. That is, ‘granted that the primary stimulus of [economic] “distress” is present, does their behaviour [that is the behaviour of the poor] contribute towards any more complex, culturally mediated function, which cannot be reduced ... back to stimulus once again?’<sup>91</sup> In the case of Megara, we may surmise, the efficacy of the ritualized forms of protest adopted by the poor must have increased non-élite self-awareness of their collective identity and potential to influence the affairs of the community. To quote E.P. Thompson once again:

While [the] moral economy [of the poor] cannot be described as ‘political’ in any advanced sense, nevertheless it cannot be described as unpolitical either, since it supposed definite, and passionately held, notions of the common weal – notions which, indeed, found some support in the paternalist tradition of the authorities; notions which the people re-echoed so loudly in their turn that the authorities were, in some measure, the prisoners of the people.<sup>92</sup>

Though the increased political consciousness of the Megarian poor is a long way from democracy, we must recognize that this trend was an essential precondition for the creation of more egalitarian forms of political organization. While we can be relatively certain that the main features of a democratic government were instituted in Athens in 508/7 BC, we are less certain of the institutional trajectory of the Megarian political system. Some scholars posit the existence of a democratic régime in Megara *c.* 427-424 BC on the basis of Thucydides’ references to a group of exiles banished by the masses (τὸ πλῆθος) at this time.<sup>93</sup> An ostrakon discovered in Megara may reflect the existence of a democracy, but as I argue in a forthcoming publication,

<sup>87</sup> Formal public offices appear throughout Greece during the seventh century and are commonly interpreted as a device for regulating competition between élites for power (Foxhall (1997) 119). The following magistracies are attested for Megarian colonies in inscriptions dating to the Hellenistic period (323–31 BC): *basileus*, *aisymnatae*, *damiourgoi*, *stratego*i and *grammateus* (see Legon (1981) 55-8).

<sup>88</sup> For this change in Solonian Athens, see *Ath. Pol.* 7 and Raaflaub (1996) 1064-5. Foxhall (1997) argues that Solon’s property classes did not extend significant political rights beyond those who had very considerable wealth. The only evidence for a similar change in Archaic Megara would be Theognis 53-60 (cited above), though these lines are ‘constitutionally unspecific’ (Robinson (1997) 116).

<sup>89</sup> Compare scholarly assessments of Solonian Athens: Rhodes (1981) 118-20; Raaflaub (1996) 1062-71; Robinson (1997) 39; Foxhall (1997). Wallace (1997) represents a dissenting voice.

<sup>90</sup> Robinson (1997) 39: ‘We may safely eliminate Solonian Athens as a candidate for democracy, for while important measures were taken to create or enhance the participation of the demos, such as the admission of thetes (for the first time?) into the assembly, the assembly itself still played a meager role, and the power of the aristocratic Areopagus continued to dominate.’

<sup>91</sup> Thompson (1993) 187.

<sup>92</sup> Thompson (1993) 188-9; *cf.* 293-4.

<sup>93</sup> Thuc. 4.66.1; *cf.* 3.68.3 with Legon (1981) 235-7. Hornblower (1996) 231-2 summarizes competing scholarly views, but ultimately accepts that Megara was democratic at this time.

need not necessarily do so.<sup>94</sup> In general, the sources suggest that Megara remained oligarchic for much of the fifth and fourth centuries.<sup>95</sup> If so, the success of the *Palintokia* – and most likely other unpreserved legislation – in fending off ‘democratic’ political revolution in Megara is remarkable.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to offer additional answers to the more general theoretical question of why subordinate groups use ritual forms to express discontent with the *status quo*. Indeed, the lengths to which the poor went to borrow from ritual forms in engaging in protest strikes the modern mind as an extraordinary and unnecessary expenditure of effort.<sup>96</sup> Scholars have adduced numerous plausible reasons for the use of ritual, including the lack of available formal mechanisms for protest, the role of rituals of reversal in providing occasions and models for the expression of discontent, and the importance of the socially sanctioned licence to criticize authorities in facilitating popular protest.

There are, I believe, several further reasons for the frequency of ritual forms of protest in the pre-modern world. First and most obviously, the practices of ritual were useful as an organizing principle for the masses.<sup>97</sup> By borrowing from traditional cultural forms of revelry, the crowd of protesters were able to co-ordinate their actions and speech in a way which otherwise was not possible without elaborate preparation – an impossibility among groups who must earn a living through constant toil. Secondly, the use of ritual forms lent a certain symbolic clarity to the protests. Ritual forms of hospitality between rich and poor, for example, were ideal mechanisms for signalling discontent with changes in the traditional reciprocity between these two classes. By engaging in symbolic forms of ritual reversal, moreover, the rich were made to understand that an extreme consequence of their inaction would be violent uprising and the overturning of their superior position in the community.

Perhaps even more important than the symbolic clarity of ritual protest was the restraint that the language of ritual imposed on the actions of rioters. By articulating their protest at least in part through symbolic forms, the rioters actually refrained from more widespread and destructive forms of protest. Although many of the examples surveyed above do involve violent actions, the relatively limited level of destruction is striking. These limitations were important for the poor, who, after all, might suffer most from the disruptive effects of widespread violence. The rich also benefited from the restraint imposed by ritual, since they were spared the potentially devastating effects of rampant violence against their property, but still gained a powerful warning to uphold their side of the ‘social contract’. It was a warning which they readily heeded.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> I argue in Forsdyke (in press) that ostracism-like procedures attested outside Athens (e.g. at Argos, Miletus, Megara, Syracuse, Cyrene and the Chersonesus) are local versions of a general Greek practice of using written ballots (leaves or potsherds) as a means of determining a penalty (removal from public office or exile). As such, they are not necessarily direct imitations of Athenian ostracism nor necessarily democratic.

<sup>95</sup> Legon (1981) 276-9, 289-94 discusses two unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the oligarchy in 375/4 and the 340s BC.

<sup>96</sup> Note especially Thompson’s demonstration ((1993) 185-258) of the striking restraint of food rioters in enforcing the price of grain. Rather than plunder and steal from those who produced or sold the grain, the rioters went to great lengths to give such persons what they thought ought to be the right price for their grain.

<sup>97</sup> Kertzer (1988) 153 touches upon this point.

<sup>98</sup> Thompson (1993) 289-93 makes a similar point by stressing the restraint of rioters and the general success of the riots in moderating the conflict between the marketers and the consumers of grain.

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