

Review

Nicole Loraux, *La Tragédie d'Athènes. La politique entre l'ombre et l'utopie*. Seuil/Librairie du XXe siècle, Paris, 2005.

In *La Tragédie d'Athènes. La politique entre l'ombre et l'utopie* nine articles by Nicole Loraux are brought together. This may be a posthumous publication but the content has appeared before in various journals and the work was for the most part carried out when she was very active and open to the contemporary world, and when the strength of her originality and the full maturity of her choices were finding their expression in her powerful capacity for work. Three of these articles, which are older,¹ included as they are among the more recent group, only bring out all the more a continuity of research that fixed on its subject² very early on – Greek politics, with civil war (*stasis*) at its heart, as 'its essence' – and which immediately sought it in language, or rather the 'operations of thought' that this expresses, and less in what it clearly announces than in the subtle nuances, surprising ruptures, strange divergences and even the contradictions it employs.

Nicole Loraux did not call this new collection *La Cité divisée II*; she gave it a more complex title that highlights important pointers for readers.

Athens, nothing but Athens?

Athens is certainly not the only city studied in the book. Indeed we could list more, for instance Corcyra, Sparta, Kynaitha in Arcadia, Mytilene or Nakônè in Sicily. But that is not the point. Indeed the reality the author reveals in her 'roll-call'³ of research in antiquity carried out since the 1950s under Jean-Pierre Vernant, as well as the detail in the texts assembled here, prove that a subtle strategy in fact places the city of Athena at the heart of the matter.

We could take the early comparative project, which contrasted Greece with Mesopotamia, China and India. It is no longer led, as Nicole Loraux noted in 1993, solely by Marcel Detienne,⁴ who in any case, when he deals exclusively with Greece, is always careful 'systematically to avoid the extremely strong hold Athens exerts on any consideration of the city' by tirelessly deciphering the often fragmentary texts that tradition has not canonized.⁵ But the dominant tendency in 'the anthropology of ancient Greece'⁶ led people both to 'enclose Greek difference within itself',⁷ thinking

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that difference between cities was enough for a comparison, and also to leave intact by ignoring it the problem of overwhelming Athenocentrism resulting largely from the texts: anthropologists studying Greece gradually came to deal with the City as a static entity largely separate from diversity and to theorize a wholesale, general Greek alterity.

However, for anyone interested in politics and civil war, the majority of the texts are Athenian or associated with Athens: the poems by Solon (the lawmaker poet, caught between *stasis* and tyranny or the marker between the two opposing lines in the very space where they ought to come to blows);⁸ the Plato of *Cratylus* (where the etymology of the word *stasis* brings out the meaning's tension between stopping and movement);⁹ the Aristotle of the 'Constitution of the Athenians' or of course the *Politics*, quoting here Solon's law on the obligation upon citizens to engage in civil war if it breaks out; and there stressing the similarity between justice (*dike*) and division into two (*dikha*) or again theorizing the middle as the third part of the city (pp. 146–8). For narratives or analysis of civil wars and amnesty Nicole Loraux calls on Herodotus, Thucydides 'the pragmatic historian' and unregarded Xenophon; for serious or ironic expression of civic orthodoxy on Lysias, Thucydides or once again Plato. And finally we must be careful not to forget tragedy.

So does the author contradict herself and, out of thematic necessity, does she remain not only in Greece but even in Athens? The answer is not so simple.

Indeed all her efforts aim at selecting the centre only in order to decentre it more thoroughly and to do so she resorts to three decentring devices.

The recesses of the texts

The first is a particular mode of reading the texts. In choosing the ones listed above, Nicole Loraux also (I might almost say above all) chooses continuous discourse because it is as they unfold that we best discover what remains obstinately concealed. The Athenian texts that give to 'the entity polis a near-transcendence' and are 'informed by the model of the one and indivisible city' (p. 39) are in fact also those that offer the most scope for exploring sub-texts. It is through these that Nicole Loraux attempts to access this level which is not that of the unconscious nor totally repressed, but that of implicit arguments, denials and refusals capable of providing ideological benefits and, as far as the historian is concerned, giving access to another Greece.

First of all we need to study what 'bewitches' Athenians, what their political 'fantasy' (p. 181) consists of, 'what desire underlies' their discourse on the city (p. 188): their civic utopia (another word from the title). But that utopia is not foregrounded in the book,¹⁰ as it was in *Né de la terre*,¹¹ in which it was possible to follow the process of its construction. Instead it appears as a backdrop, as the thing that texts on what denies it try desperately to reconstitute: darkness. Does it yearn for an undivided city? Here are the narratives of civil wars that produce duality. So we need to follow all the work narrators put into rebuilding unity out of apparently irreparable schism.

We might take the canonical distinction between *stasis*, hideous civil war, the

absolute scourge, and *polemos*, foreign war, the only acceptable war because it is waged against what is not the city. But if we read attentively in Thucydides' account of the fratricidal confrontation between the city's oligarchs and the democrats back from Samos which, in the late 5th century BC, ends the episode of the tyranny of the Thirty, the weakness of this distinction is exposed. Indeed both armies of citizens get to the point 'willy-nilly' of fighting the war which in the end is a legitimate one (p. 57) because it is a *polemos* (p. 53). A well-regulated war paradoxically introduces something like order and/or justice and so allows room for a reconciliation (p. 54), in other words the restoration of unity. Thus at the very heart of *stasis* its contrary is working and bringing about an inversion of signs: all-out war will be exclusively for barbarians; *stasis* must be a regulated conflict, the very paradigm of war, because citizens can only transcend it to unite. Nicole Loraux can then find a meaning in the law attributed to Solon which requires every citizen to commit to one camp in a civil war (p. 58): in this area good order is a promise of unity regained. *Stasiôtes* (rebels) and *stratiôtes* (soldiers) can reflect each other and only the soldier citizen is then seditious (p. 70).

The same desire for unity and the same type of 'imaginative solution' (p. 47) are at work in the use narratives of the civil wars make of the reflected instead of the reciprocal and more generally in their determination to make asymmetry symmetrical. To be in *stasis* is to fight against oneself and not against forces that are far enough away to respond to attacks on them (pp. 40, 142). It is finding the same at the height of dissimilarity. At the heart of division civil war brings civic unity.

The result of all this is a kind of conceptual revolution to which Nicole Loraux gives one of her most precise formulations in this collection. Politics is not sharing and irenic circulation of the *logos* in a civic community regulated by justice and keeping war for what is external. It is *stasis*, 'generalizing conflict throughout the city' because 'it can have no other subject but the undivided community of citizens' (p. 43). The equalizing tendency inspiring it reveals its fully positive essence (p. 48). It is not one of the species of the sub-political, or the sub-human,¹² but the political itself insofar as it is transcendence of the direct, decisive opposition between the One and the Two, and as it also places on the horizon of the movement it creates, not transcendence of the opposition between human and beast but between human creature (*anthrôpos*) and male citizen (*anêr*).

It is in that sense that Athenian politics connects with tragedy (*La tragédie d'Athènes*, as the title says once more). An anti-political and not apolitical genre,¹³ tragedy is indeed an essential manifestation of civic life, a part of the institutional arrangements with the citizens in that role as its audience. But it brings them together for them to see and hear what undermines the orthodoxy of civic discourse: foreigners, women with their continual moans and the obstinate resentment of their anger-memory (*mênis*); the strangling and throat-slitting that contradicts the generic, de-actualized 'good death' of citizen soldiers in funeral orations.

Anachronism, analogy

The second shifting, decentring mechanism lies in what Nicole Loraux calls 'a controlled practice of anachronism' (p. 180). This means comparing Athens and the present in which the research is being conducted, in a continual to-and-fro guided by analogy, but also, which is crucial, revealing other temporalities than the disjointed one typical of anthropology, which juxtaposes alterities that are sealed off from one another, or the continuous, ordered one typical of historical narrative: a temporality of repetition, fits and starts, irregular and, as Nicole Loraux likes to say, borrowing from Shakespeare, 'out of [its] wits'.

By giving the Greeks back their alterity and making it possible to get away from the idea not only that, from them to us, it is the eternal human we are dealing with, but also that miraculously they have already said everything and probably far better than us, historical anthropology of Greece was a liberation, even a revolution. But to fulfil her project of 'returning to the Greeks' and effectively resisting the dogma of the traditional humanities, she had to rely on a strong methodological principle: thinking about Greek issues with Greek concepts. The result was extremely rich, whether we are talking about thinking problems of war, land, sacrifice, divination, the phenomenon of tragedy, understanding forms of thought such as *metis* (cunning intelligence) or psychic dispositions such as memory. However, in wanting to think about the Greeks in their words, the concern arose that eventually you end up repeating them and getting caught up in their recognized styles of discourse. Among them was politics as pacified exchange, war as external, the tyrant as a figure outside the city, to give just a few examples. And another concern: the one resulting from the contradiction that consists in isolating the Greeks' humanity within the solid bounds of alterity and claiming to understand it immediately and without mediation.

It is via Marc Bloch (pp. 178–9) that Nicole Loraux formulates these two divergences from a practice which she says she adopted enthusiastically at first. She prefers to speak directly and suggest a modified practice that takes on board what historical anthropology has always done more or less openly: ask the Greeks questions thrown up by the present. But she adds that it is equally fruitful to do the opposite and ask the present questions raised by the Greeks. We should not be surprised if the examples she takes are connected with politics.

To illustrate the movement of the present towards the past which Nicole Loraux prioritizes, she first chooses public opinion. The author stresses that the idea assumes a representative political system in which citizens do not exercise their power directly but delegate it to those who have previously canvassed their votes. However, she points out that in a direct democracy type of regime like the one in Athens use of the idea of public opinion allows us to discover certain expressions, which cannot be captured otherwise and which indicate political bodies that fall outside regular terms but whose presence and even activity are felt: 'they', the neuter nouns, 'the others'. But we still run the risk of giving way sometimes to an over-speedy feeling of familiarity that leads us to believe we find prefigured in Greece political experiences that are strictly modern. Thus on both sides democracy is mentioned, but the 20th century has known the dictatorship of the proletariat whereas in Athens 'democracy beyond itself' (p. 182) is the scary fantasy of an oligarch

who knows his opponent well enough to paint him without distortion, just exaggerating.

And so to demonstrate how the present can be better understood if Greek problems are put to it. Here democracy comes up again. On the basis of the remarkable analysis of the word *dēmocratia* as a sobriquet which its oligarch opponents bestowed on rule by the people, the author, in order to emphasize that it does not represent all citizens (the first meaning of *demos*) but was imposed by the force (*kratos*) wielded by only part of them (the *demos* as a partisan section), brings out the recurrence¹⁴ of the movement that makes democrats wish to deny the partisan nature of their position via the repeated practice of amnesty after the conflict from which they emerge victorious, both in Athens in 403 BC and in 20th-century France.

Choosing the uncomfortable

Finally we should mention a third decentring mechanism: the analysis of the 'affects', 'expectations', 'disappointments', 'illusions', 'enchantments', 'fears', 'daring' of historians themselves, which with implacable vigilance runs alongside the analysis of their objects. Because the Athenians are not alone in weaving imaginary constructions with their 'passions'. Historians work with expectations, desires and rejections, and, as Nicole Loraux shows, they have to take care to clarify the detours these impose on their 'impulse to know'. In the subject of knowledge as much as in the object, complacency needs to be disturbed.¹⁵ This encourages the author not only to recount the history of the strand of thought she belongs to and make her place in it quite clear, pointing out the areas of agreement as well as difference or even rejection, but also to give the detail of her analysis alongside a commentary on her own changes of viewpoint as a self-conscious researcher. You move forward, take a side turning for a while, go around, turn back, find a linking point, open up a path you promise yourself you will follow: these are metaphors taken from driving which set in motion the whole of the research carried out.

Detecting the logic of subtexts and understanding the dynamic it imposes on the surface discourse, continually going to and fro from the present to the past without ever stopping too long at either end of the road, and working like that in the constantly renewed instability of analogy; sending yourself out of kilter while making your object move about in that way, that is how Nicole Loraux can talk about Athens without turning it into a centre, a site of knowledge that is solid and exclusive; more generally that is her way of doing history.

Catherine Darbo-Peschanski
CNRS-Centre Louis Gernet, Paris
Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. 'Solon au milieu de la lice' (1984), pp. 199–214; 'Thucydide et la sédition dans les mots' (1986), pp. 95–134; 'Cratyle à l'épreuve de la *stasis*' (1987), pp. 49–69.
2. 'Thucydide et la sédition dans les mots', p. 81.
3. 'Back to the Greek?', pp. 9–29.
4. In the next generation I would add Christian Jacob who collaborated on the comparative volume edited by M. Detienne, *Transcrire les mythologies*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1994, and whose current research on educated worlds and practices and material vectors of knowledge compare cultures systematically and extensively; and part of the recent work by François de Polignac who, with regard to Alexandria for instance, compares Greek and Arab traditions.
5. Jesper Svenbro also illustrates very well a similar trend.
6. The title given by Jean-Pierre Vernant to a collection of articles by Louis Gernet which was published by Maspero in 1968 and also resulted in the research he led at the Centre de recherche comparée sur les sociétés anciennes being defined as research in historical anthropology.
7. 'Back to the Greek?', p. 25.
8. 'Solon au milieu de la lice', pp. 145–56.
9. 'Cratyle à l'épreuve de la *stasis*', pp. 109–17.
10. However the first part of the article 'La cité grecque pense l'un et le deux', pp. 125–43, subtitled 'Une cité idéalement une', reminds us of its components. But we should point out that in doing so Nicole Loraux is then detained by another problem which remained central to her work: that of thinking the city as a subject, when the autonomy of Greek politics is posited, by opting to make it the result of a series of operations of thought and imaginary solutions consisting of 'denial, repression and forgetting, in preference to consciousness' (p. 143).
11. *Né de la terre. Mythe et politique à Athènes*. Paris: Seuil, 1996.
12. See the article 'La guerre civile grecque et la représentation anthropologique du monde à l'envers', pp. 61–79, in which N. Loraux shows that it is incorrect to assimilate civil war to becoming animal, but that *stasis* borrows the very gestures of sacrifice on which the city is based and reveals the human creature (*anthrôpos*), exposed to 'human nature', in the male citizen (*anêr*).
13. 'La tragédie et l'antipolitique', *La voix endeuillée. Essai sur la tragédie grecque*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999.
14. On repetition see pp. 188–90: 'Pour une histoire du répétitif'.
15. In this connection see N. Loraux's article, which I consider crucial: 'L'homme Moïse et l'audace d'être historien', *Le cheval de Troie* 3, pp. 83–98.