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Success and failure of anchoring political innovation:
The case of Solon’s seisachtheia

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Case study: Solon’s seisachtheia

- The problem:
  Debts of peasants → debt bondage, debt slavery

- The solution: formal institutional innovation
  a. Cancellation of debts
  b. Prohibition of making debts on the person
  c. Liberating persons in slavery/ oppressed in Attica
  d. Bringing back those sold abroad and those who had fled to avoid such a fate

- Anchoring?
  a: no  b, c, d: yes

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Anchoring innovation:
Formative questions

Models of anchoring innovation
(e.g. path dependency)

- What kind of innovation is involved?
- Why is the innovation introduced/developed?
- For whom is the innovation introduced/developed?
- By whom? Context?
- Values (language, images)
  Social settings (formal and informal)
  Social practices (material culture)
- What were the results?

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Solon’s seisachtheia

- Problematic debts; social-economic inequality; political turmoil

Ath. 2.2 All the land was in the hands of a few, and if the poor failed to pay their rents both they and their children were liable to seizure. All loans were made on the security of the person until the time of Solon, he was the first champion of the people. 2.3 The harshest and bitterest aspect of the constitution for the masses was the fact of their enslavement, though they were discontented on other grounds too; it could be said that there was nothing in which they had a share. (Transl. P.J. Rhodes).

- 594 BCE: Solon action with special powers
Debt-area

Tradition of debt
remission

No debt remissions known prior
to Solon

Values: no enslavement of own population

Institutions: debts undermining state and economy

But: debt
inevitable

Ideology of kingship: divine ordination to kings
restoration of primordial justice

debt remission — recurrent; public;
agricultural debts (individuals);
debts due to taxation (cities);
liberating and bringing back slaves

(A Prohibition of debt on the person unknown)

Ath. Pol. 6.1: On gaining control of affairs Solon liberated the people, both immediately and for the future, by forbidding loans on the security of the persons and he enacted laws; and he made a cancellation of debts, both private and public, which they called the Shaking-off of Burdens, since by means of it they shook off the weight lying on them. (Transl. P.J. Rhodes, London (Penguin Classics), slightly modified).

Κύριος δὲ γενόμενο τῶν πραγμάτων Σόλων τόν τε δήμον ἠλευθέρωσε καὶ ἐν τῷ παρόντι καὶ εἰς τὸ μέλλον, κωλύσας δανείζειν ἐπὶ τοῖς σώμασιν, καὶ νόμους ἔθηκε καὶ χρεῶν ἀποκοπὰς ἐποίησε, καὶ τῶν ἱδίων καὶ τῶν δημοσίων, ὡς σεισάχθειαν, ὡς ἀποσεισάμενοι τὸ βάρος.

Fr. 4 W.
"many of the poor are going to a foreign land, sold and bound in shameful fetters" (l. 24-5).

Fr. 36 W.
"Speaker freed the enslaved earth (l. 6-7: πρόσθεν δὲ δομήλουσα, νῦν ἐλευθήρη) by removing the horoi (boundary markers) and "brought back to Athens, to their homeland founded by the gods, many who had been sold, one legally, another not (ἄλλον ἐκδόκως, ἄλλον δικαίως), and those who had fled under necessity's constraint, no longer speaking the Attic tongue, as wanderers far and wide are inclined to do. And those who suffered shameful slavery (δουληία) right here, trembling before the whims of their masters, I set free (ἐλευθήρωσα ἔθηκα)" (l. 8-15).
Innovations successfully anchored

- Law: abolition of debt slavery (not: debt bondage)
  anchor value: no enslavement of own population (‘free’)
  question: who are the ‘own population’?
  action: liberation/retrieval of debt slaves

- Law: Prohibition of debts incurred on the person (cause of debt slavery)
  anchor: as above

- (some other laws, among others on legitimacy and citizenship)

Innovation: anchoring failed

- Debt remission: one-off case
  law: Prohibition to cancel debts
  introduced at some point after Solon
  anchor: as above

- No ‘positive’ value
- Strong ‘negative’ value
- ‘Negative’ political-institutional context

Negative value: debt cancellation is unjust

Plato (Rep., 615a-616b): And is it not true that in like manner a leader of the people who, getting control of a docile mob, does not withhold his hand from the shedding of tribal blood, but by the customary unjust accustomations brings a citizen into court and assumes him, blinding out a human life, and with unfulfilled tongue and lips that have tasted kindred blood, besides and shops and hides at the shedding of debts and the portion of kinds • is it not the inevitable consequence and a decree of fate that such a one be either slain by his enemies or become a tyrant and be transformed from a man into a wolf? (transl. P. Shorey, Cambridge, Mass.)

Plutarch: Sol. 15.2-3): the seisachtheia fits a list of Athenian euphemisms: it was called ‘shaking-off of burdens’ but in fact it was cancellation of debts (ἀποκοπὴ χρεῶν).

NB: change of perspective from have-nots to haves

Debt cancellation unjust

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NB: change of perspective from have-nots to haves
Debt cancellation typical of single ruler (king, tyrant); in such a situation differences among citizens ultimately do not matter.

Solon was not a single ruler:

- S. refuses to be or act like a tyrant: Fr. 32 (Plut. Sol. 14.8); Fr. 33 (Plut. Sol. 14.9-15.1); Fr. 34 (Ath. Pol. 12.3).

Plut. Sol. 16: Lycurgus, lawgiver of Sparta, was more successful than S. in making all citizens equal. But the latter could work with other means: he was a descendant of Herakles and had been king in Sparta for many years, he used force rather than persuasion and by making all citizens roughly equal in wealth brought unanimity to his polis. Solon could not effectuate such a long-lasting security, as he was a man of the middle and made the most of the powers given to him, which relied on the trust the citizens put in him.