CHAPTER 2

When is a Revolt not a Revolt? A Case for Contingency

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A stimulating little book has served as touchstone for several of the papers in this volume. Jack Goldstone’s Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction offers a recent and useful entrance into the subject. Goldstone very helpfully provides both a definition and a set of criteria. Revolution, he says, “is the forcible overthrow of a government through mass mobilization (whether military or civilian or both) in the name of social justice, to create new political institutions” (Goldstone, 2014:4).

And how do you know a revolt when you see it? Goldstone offers a check-list of five items that collectively constitute the circumstances generating resistance and rebellion. First, economic or fiscal strains. Second, growing alienation and opposition among the elites. Third, increasingly widespread popular anger at injustice. Fourth, an ideology that presents a persuasive shared narrative of resistance. And, finally, favorable international relations (Goldstone, 2014:16–19). Goldstone, to his credit, recognizes that all five of these elements are not likely to coincide at any one time. And, although they might supply the setting and conditions for revolt, they do not count as causes. For that, according to Goldstone, one needs to look both to long-term structural trends that bring underlying instability and to transient events or contingent circumstances.

I do not wish to dissect Goldstone’s criteria, nor indeed to dwell on what most commentators, including Goldstone, emphasize, i.e. underlying, long-developing structural causes. I want to focus on the unexpected, the unanticipated, the contingent. Not that I embrace what has been called the “Cleopatra’s nose theory of history,” i.e. if Cleopatra’ nose had been longer, there would have been no rivalry for her favors, no civil war, and the whole of Roman history would have been changed. (Actually her nose was rather unattractive anyway, as coin portraits show, so the very label for that theory is off the mark). Rather, I want to focus on certain major upheavals in the ancient Mediterranean world, case studies which have been regularly construed as revolts against the established order or as a rising of the oppressed to overthrow the hegemony of the imperial power, thus to bring about either autonomy and independence
or a new political structure. That is the task implicit in the title of the conference, “In the Crucible of Empire,” that gave birth to this volume. It operates on the presumption that rebellions directed themselves against the authority of empire. I want to argue, however, that things are not always what they seem, that imperial power is not always the target—and that, on Goldstone’s own definition, a revolt is not always a revolt.

1 The Chremonidean War

I begin with the empire of the Macedonians, ruled by the dynasty of the Antigonids, stemming from the greatest of Alexander’s successors, Antigonus Monophthalmus, Antigonus the One-Eyed. Its imperial holdings extended over significant portions of mainland Greece in the first part of the 3rd century BCE. Uprisings occurred briefly and with only limited success in the states within the Antigonid sphere of influence. The hegemony of Macedon seemed solid and secure under Antigonus Gonatas in the third generation that followed Alexander the Great, particularly after the death of Pyrrhus in 272. Macedonian garrisons at key sites, like the Piraeus and elsewhere in central Greece and the Peloponnese, maintained a firm control over the Hellenes. Yet an upheaval of potentially major proportions did indeed emerge in the 260s, an ostensibly concerted resistance of some size and extent. This is what moderns have dubbed the Chremonidean War. On the face of it, this seems the most well-organized and wide ranging collection of Greek states to produce a rebellion against imperial overlordship in the Hellenistic world. But let us look at it a little more closely.

The event has achieved notoriety primarily through the preservation of an Attic decree sponsored by a certain Chremonides. The decree announced conclusion of a treaty between Athens and Sparta to which several other states subscribed. The terms in which it is couched are quite revealing for the public image presented by the participants in this endeavor. The text presents the allies as reviving nothing less than the glorious collaboration dating back to that memorable era when Hellas rebuffed the invasion of Persia, when Athenians and Spartans fought against the minions of Xerxes who sought to enslave the cities, the contest in which the allies earned lasting repute and brought freedom to the rest of the Greeks. The new contest is represented in that same fashion, a resistance against those who wish to dissolve the laws and