

# The Modernity of Thucydides<sup>1</sup>

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...Thucydides is always termed a history writer of antiquity; he is rather a history writer of the most recent history.

So remarked a certain Professor Fournier, in the course of the discussion after a lecture by the renowned Eduard Meyer in 1913 on ‘Thucydides and the development of scientific historiography’.<sup>2</sup> Meyer did not dissent from this opinion; although he had, in the course of his lecture, identified a number of respects in which Thucydides’ work differed from contemporary conventions (most obviously his use of speeches), his main argument was that it was the first true example of modern critical-scientific historiography, a model of continuing validity and power. Just a couple of years earlier, the English historian J.B. Bury had reached a similar conclusion: ‘Thucydides came to be at home in the “modern” way of thinking,’ he argued, ‘which analysed politics and ethics, and applied logic to everything in the world’ – although, for whatever reason, his contemporaries had entirely failed to recognise his genius or the importance of his methodological innovations, and so ‘it has been reserved for modern students fully to appreciate his critical acumen’.<sup>3</sup> For many historians in this period, as for the previous century or more, Thucydides was to be hailed as a colleague and a virtual contemporary, someone whose work speaks directly to the present.

## 1. Contemporaneity

What was distinctive about this development, which began in the mid-eighteenth century (with David Hume’s oft-cited claim, for example, that the first page of Thucydides was the commencement of real history in place of myth and fable) and accelerated from the middle of the nineteenth with the rise of ‘Geschichte als Wissenschaft’ in the German universities, was its underlying motive: the recognition of Thucydides as ‘one of us’ by theorists of historiography

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<sup>2</sup> Ed. Meyer, ‘Thukydides und die Entstehung der wissenschaftlichen Geschichtsschreibung’, published in *Mitteilungen des Vereins der Freunde des humanistischen Gymnasiums* 14 (Vienna & Leipzig 1913) 75-105; quote from 104.

<sup>3</sup> J.B. Bury, *The ancient Greek historians* (London 1909) 75, 150.

was grounded above all on a reading of the methodological precepts of his work, and their apparent resemblance to the new doctrines of a critical, scientific historiography.<sup>4</sup> Taking the longer view, however, it is clear that this is just one phase within a much longer tradition of readers recognising themselves and their own times in Thucydides' work – a tradition which continues today, in the fields of political theory, international relations and strategic studies.<sup>5</sup> The reasons given for this recognition, and the particular aspects of Thucydides' work that are highlighted by such readers, both change over time; the sense of familiarity does not.

There are, broadly speaking, two different (though clearly interwoven) strands to this tradition: on the one hand, there are readers who focus primarily on the events as they are depicted and interpreted by Thucydides, and on the other hand, there are those who focus primarily on Thucydides' intellectual and artistic practices, as manifested in his account of events. The first group tends to concentrate on certain 'set piece' episodes: the Plague at Athens, the various debates in the Athenian Assembly, the siege of Plataea, the Melian Dialogue and the Sicilian Expedition. One striking example is the way that Thucydides' account of the *stasis* at Corcyra returns, again and again, as a paradigm of social conflict and societal breakdown, in quite different circumstances. In fifteenth-century Italy, Lorenzo Valla, translator of Thucydides, remarked that 'all this neatly fits the corruption of our times as well'.<sup>6</sup> In late sixteenth-century Germany, David Chytraeus came to the same conclusion, on quite different grounds:

Thucydides' very learned description of the revolution at Corcyra shows the clear image of our modern revolutions and internal struggles in the church. In these, many fight with words about the true nature of heavenly doctrine and the health of the church – but in fact they are fighting about their private hatreds and interests, and about primacy.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> D. Hume, 'On the populousness of antient nations' [1742], in ed. T.H. Grene & T.H. Grose, *Essays: moral, political and literary, Volume I* (London 1882) 468. Generally on Thucydides' reception in this period: U. Muhlack, 'Herodotus and Thucydides in the view of nineteenth-century German historians', in ed. A. Lianeri, *The western time of ancient history: historiographical encounters with the Greek and Roman pasts* (Cambridge 2011) 179-209; N. Morley, 'Thucydides, history and historicism in Wilhelm Roscher', in ed. K. Harloe & N. Morley, *Thucydides and the modern world: reception, reinterpretation and influence from the Renaissance to the present* (Cambridge 2012) 115-39; K. Meister, *Thukydides als Vorbild der Historiker: von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Paderborn 2013) 151-202; N. Morley, *Thucydides and the idea of history* (London 2014).

<sup>5</sup> See generally the chapters in Harloe & Morley, *Thucydides and the Modern World*, (n.4, above) and in ed. C. Lee & N. Morley, *A Handbook to the reception of Thucydides* (Malden MA 2015); a shorter account of the reception of Thucydides in modern international relations theory in D. Welch, 'Why international relations theorists should stop reading Thucydides', *Review of International Studies* 29.2 (2003), 301-19. The most recent example is G. Allison, *Destined for War: can America and China escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Cited by A. Grafton, *What was history? The art of history in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007) 105.

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Grafton, *What was history?*, (n.6, above) 105-6.

The paradigm of the Corcyrean civil war was equally adaptable to times of revolutionary rather than religious bloodshed. Edmund Burke drew on the language and images of Thucydides' account in his depiction of the evils of the French Revolution and its attacks on the old order

In these meetings of all sorts, every counsel, in proportion as it is daring, and violent, and perfidious, is taken for the mark of superior genius. Humanity and compassion are ridiculed as the fruits of superstition and ignorance. Tenderness to individuals is considered as treason to the public. Liberty is always estimated perfect as property is rendered insecure.<sup>8</sup>

Such parallels were not the sole preserve of conservative, anti-democratic writers; they struck the liberal George Grote just as strongly:

He has conceived and described the perverting causes with a spirit of generalisation which renders these two chapters hardly less applicable to other political societies far distant both in time and place (especially, under many points of view, to France between 1789 and 1799) than to Greece in the fifth century before the Christian era.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth emphasising that, in most if not all of these examples, the apparent contemporaneity and familiarity of Thucydides' account is not simply a matter of resemblances between actual events in themselves, but the product of Thucydides' account that works to draw out the contemporaneity and significance of those events. This is seen in Grote's emphasis on Thucydides' 'conception' and the spirit of generalisation of his description, and implicitly echoed by the fact that Burke felt this was the appropriate language with which to describe the causes and consequences of social collapse. It dates back to Chytraeus (it is Thucydides' 'learned description' that reveals the true underlying motives for conflict), to Thomas Hobbes (who drew on this passage in his analysis of political rhetoric in *Leviathan*), and to other commentators on the early modern wars of religion who felt that Thucydides' account was especially relevant not only for the events he described, but as an example of how one might attempt to achieve a neutral, impartial vantage point in order to tell the truth of fiercely contested events.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, other readers' sense that Thucydides' approach to historiography was a model for the present was founded not only on his general statements about methodology but on the results of his practice – the fact that his narrative felt relevant and compelling even to those living centuries later.

This mutual reinforcement is found in more recent receptions of the Corcyrean episode. Thucydides' account of the perversion of language and meaning, the idea that words lost their

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<sup>8</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the revolution in France* (London 1790) 160-1; see also 172: 'Plots and assassinations will be anticipated by preventative murder and preventative confiscation.'

<sup>9</sup> George Grote, *History of Greece* Vol. VI (London 1846-56) 225.

<sup>10</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis 1994) I.4.24; see J.J. Sullivan, 'Hobbes and his contemporaries', in ed. Lee & Morley, *Handbook* (n.5, above) 241-60, esp. 252; on the idea of impartiality with respect to Thucydides' account, see Morley, *Thucydides*, (n.4, above) 80-4.

meanings and were distorted according to factional loyalties, has been seen as prophetic of the Nazi period, of the development of Orwell's *Newspeak* from 1984, of the political rhetoric of the Soviet Union, and, in a work by the Austrian writer Peter Handke, as emblematic of modern society, post-68, in general.<sup>11</sup> In the last couple of years, it has been regularly referenced on Twitter as a prescient depiction of the polarisation and fragmentation of civic society, and the increasing violence of political language, in the United States and Europe.<sup>12</sup> It is not the events themselves but the way that Thucydides describes them, and the more general judgements and interpretations implicit in his description, that lead readers to recognise their own times in his account.

Put another way – and this is the argument put forward by nineteenth-century historians and twentieth-century political theorists for his relevance and contemporaneity – Thucydides seems to *reveal* the unexpected familiarity of past events through his skill and insight, or *makes* them familiar through his presentation. The invitation to find oneself and one's times in the Peloponnesian War can certainly be enhanced by the strategy of the translator, presenting Thucydides' Greek text in the most accessible form for a modern reader, and by the strategic use of paratext (as for example students of international relations are told, before they start reading any actual passage of Thucydides, that it has contemporary relevance and applicability despite being about the distant past), but it has proved persuasive to those reading in the original as well. In part, at least, this is because Thucydides explicitly leads his readers to expect to experience such moments of recognition through his opening statements about the usefulness of his history, because 'human nature' (or however *to anthrōpinon* is translated) means that events tend to repeat themselves in more or less the same manner. This is the assumption of a commentator like René Rapin; Thucydides is able, because of his particular intellectual gifts, to draw out from one set of events principles and maxims that remain valid for the present and future:

It is from these depths, so vast and rich, that he draws these great feelings, and these admirable reflections which he makes on the conduct of peoples and those who govern them, and from which he extracts the good principles which are the principle foundations of this equity and good faith which makes states flourish, and those maxims so healthful for morality and politics which serve as a rule for the conduct of men.<sup>13</sup>

At various times, this would seem to most readers like an entirely reasonable statement; the idea of continuity between past and present, such that the examples of past events and past individuals can serve as useful lessons to the present, was of course the foundation of the humanist notion of *exempla* and a primary motive for the reading of history as part of general

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<sup>11</sup> W. Müri, 'Politische Metonomasie (zu Thukydides 3,82,4-5)', *Museum Helveticum* 26 (1969) 65-79; C. Orwin, 'Stasis and plague: Thucydides on the dissolution of society', *Journal of Politics* 50 (1988) 831-47, esp. 835-7; P. Handke, *Kindergeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main 1981) esp. 17, 51; and see N. Morley, 'Peter Handke's Thucydides', *Classical Receptions Journal* 4.1 (2012) 20-47.

<sup>12</sup> I have collected and discussed some examples of contemporary evocations on my blog: see <https://thesphinxblog.com/tag/corcyra/>

<sup>13</sup> René Rapin, *La Comparaison de Thucydide et Tite-Live* (Paris 1681) 28.

education (even if Thucydides was far less significant in such contexts than authors such as Plutarch or Livy).<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the claim that Thucydides had offered a perfect example of historical skill and art, which should serve as a model for all present and future historians, was in most eras entirely unproblematic – one might simply debate how far he surpassed or failed to match other, similarly exemplary, ancient historians. From the middle of the eighteenth century, however, both these ideas came to seem on the face of it increasingly untenable; not only had the moderns' knowledge and understanding of the world equalled and (at least in fields like natural science) surpassed that of the Ancients, but they became ever more aware of the differences in political, economic, social and cultural terms between past and present, and the likelihood that the future would be still more different. In the terminology of Reinhart Koselleck's classic article on the decline of exemplarity and the idea of *historia magistra vitae*, there was an ever-widening gap between the 'space of experience' (including historical accounts as well as one's own experiences) and the 'horizon of expectation', that placed in question any attempt at learning from the past.<sup>15</sup> This changing idea of the relationship between past, present and future fed into the complex of ideas that from the mid-nineteenth century would come to be labelled as 'historicism' or 'historism', emphasising the need for every historical period to be understood in its own terms and every historical text to be understood 'in context' – meaning above all its original historical context.<sup>16</sup>

This new view of the world, and of the nature of historical development, presented a problem for dedicated admirers of Thucydides, since it might suggest that the feeling of recognition and familiarity they experienced in reading his work was false and misleading; perhaps it was an effect of the deceptive workings of the text itself, or perhaps it involved some form of projection of the present onto it, but certainly it was not to be trusted. The obvious response was then to consign Thucydides to the past, along with all the other classical writers; useful in purely historical terms, as evidence for the events of the fifth century in Greece, but with no real purchase on the present; at best to be seen as a pioneer or founder of an intellectual development that had since been taken much further. This was the response of certain historians, such as G.F. Creuzer, who emphasised the limitations of Thucydides' history and its differences from modern historiography (above all in terms of how far its rhetorical aspects, especially the speeches, seemed to echo the humanist idea of 'history as art' rather than the new scientific conceptions).<sup>17</sup> However, unlike the other ancient historians, Thucydides was never wholly abandoned as a text relevant to the present, even by historians; instead, a number of readers developed arguments and strategies to justify their sense of recognition, and to explain

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<sup>14</sup> On Thucydides and exemplarity, see K. Harloe & N. Morley, 'Introduction', in ed. Harloe & Morley, *Thucydides and the modern world* (n.4, above) 6-8.

<sup>15</sup> R. Koselleck, '*Historia magistra vitae* the dissolution of the topos into the perspective of a modernized historical process', in *Futures Past: on the semantics of historical time*, trans. K. Tribe (New York 2004) 21-38. More generally on these intellectual developments, N. Morley, *Antiquity and Modernity* (Malden MA 2009) esp. 1-20.

<sup>16</sup> General introduction in G.G. Iggers, 'Historicism: the history and meaning of the term', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56.1 (1995) 129-52; P. Hamilton, *Historicism* (London & New York 2003).

<sup>17</sup> G.F. Creuzer, *Die historische Kunst der Griechen in ihrer Entstehung und Fortbildung* (Leipzig 1803) 278. See Muhlack, 'Herodotus and Thucydides', (n.4, above) and J. Süssmann, 'Historicising the classics: how nineteenth-century German historiography changed the perspective on historical tradition', in ed. Harloe & Morley, *Thucydides and the modern world* (n.4, above) 77-92 – who does, however, imply that this was the universal response.

how the apparent connections between his account and their present experiences were actually real and significant rather than illusory.

## 2. Universality

The most common approach to this problem was to insist on the existence of universal elements, some variant of the timeless and transcendental ‘human thing’ to which Thucydides had referred. Rather than taking it for granted that past and present were comparable, as humanist historiography had tended to do, Thucydides’ admirers now felt compelled to offer explicit arguments to the effect that there are underlying constants in human behaviour or institutions that persist beneath the undeniable phenomenon of change over time. They were able to draw inspiration, and often more concrete ideas on what those universal elements might be, from the emerging disciplines of social science, whose overall project was and is to identify the universal principles of society and economy that applied equally to past and present. Researchers in the present felt confident that they would then be able to understand past societies better than their inhabitants ever could, as (to quote one early nineteenth-century economist) ‘the principles of political economy are eternal and immutable; but one nation is acquainted with them, and another not’.<sup>18</sup> From this perspective, the past offered confirmation of these newly-identified principles rather than any significant alternative to them, and a strong case could be made that the present offered more abundant and more easily analysed materials for the project – but there was at least now a plausible justification for believing that the events described in Thucydides’ account could legitimately be compared to experiences in the present. In brief, we can, not unreasonably, find them familiar because they reflect underlying norms of human behaviour and recurring situations in political and social life.

Admirers of Thucydides tended to go further, to justify paying attention to Thucydides’ text as important in itself rather than just inert source material that the new social sciences could explicate if they chose. Not only did the events he described reflect these newly-identified universal principles of politics, society and war, they argued, but his account of them was expressly intended to identify those principles and explore their workings. Thucydides’ supposed concern, as set out in the famous methodological section of Book 1, was not to describe historical events as an end in themselves or for literary and rhetorical purposes, but to draw out lessons for the future, which could only – from a nineteenth-century perspective, at least – mean the identification of the underlying and universal structures of human behaviour that were now also the focus of attention of contemporary analysts. As Jules Girard argued in his prize-winning essay on Thucydides for the Académie Française:

He conceives of history not only as the exact science of facts, but as a new science which, attaching itself to events, discerns in them the secrets combinations, determines in them the laws and recognises in them the effects of intelligence in the dramatic spectacle of the battles and trials of humanity. History, for him, is the work of intelligence examining the world of facts and discovering itself there.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jean-Baptiste Say, *A treatise on political economy* [1803], ed. C.C. Biddle (New York, 1971) 194. See generally Morley, *Antiquity and modernity*, (n.14, above) 31-4.

<sup>19</sup> J. Girard, *Essai sur Thucydide* (Paris 1860) 11.

In the older tradition of exemplarity, the historian had been conceived above all as a compiler and transmitter; what mattered were the events and individuals themselves, and the faithfulness with which these were communicated to the reader. This was no longer a sufficient justification for reading such histories, and no longer a model that many contemporary historians (let alone those studying the workings of economy, society or politics) found attractive. Rather, attention shifted to the role of the historian in making events significant because of the way they were analysed and interpreted. Thucydides was claimed as the originator of 'history as science' in the contemporary manner, not only fully rational and critical but dedicated to studying historical events as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. This idea was most forcefully promulgated by Wilhelm Roscher in his 1842 book on Thucydides as a historian, contrasting the 'historical artisan' who merely collects historical information with the true historical artist who interprets and understands his material in order to draw out its wider significance.<sup>20</sup> This characterisation of Thucydides' motives in writing his account was intertwined with the characterisation of his methodology as critical and scientific; that was after all the appropriate means by which to achieve a true understanding of human behaviour, and conversely his adoption of such a critical, sceptical, anti-rhetorical approach – in stark contrast to other ancient historians, notably Herodotus, as was regularly emphasised – made little sense except as part of such a project.<sup>21</sup> To quote a later, equally forceful account of 'Thucydides as historical scientist':

The *Histories* of Thucydides represent an attempt to apply to the study of social life the methods which Hippocrates employed in the art of healing, and constitute an exact parallel to the attempts of modern scientific historians to apply evolutionary canons of interpretation derived from Darwinian science.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Thucydides was seen to have gone further along this path of 'history as science' than most historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, let alone in antiquity, and to have offered the clearest possible proof of the utility of (the right sort of) history.

To those, however, who are content to accept the world as it is, and to walk by faith, the work of Thucydides and of scientists like him will appear anything but useless. Repudiating as false the notion that history teaches nothing, they will nevertheless refrain from any attempt to find in it a manifestation of the workings of Providence,

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<sup>20</sup> Roscher, *Leben, Werk und Zeitalter des Thukydides* (Göttingen 1842) 11-12, 144-6; see Morley, 'Thucydides, history and historicism', (n.4, above) 124-7. The apparent contradiction between the idea of the 'historical artist' and the importance of 'history as science' was solved by Roscher's redefinition of 'art' [*Kunst*] as the human creative drive and by his characterisation of 'science', alongside history, as the manifestation of this drive in order to understand the world in its reality, rather than through imagination (fiction and the visual arts) or abstraction (philosophy).

<sup>21</sup> On the regular contrast of Thucydides with his predecessor, almost invariably to his advantage, see N. Morley, 'The anti-Thucydides', in ed. J. Priestley & V. Zali, *The reception of Herodotus in antiquity and beyond* (Leiden, 2016): 143-55. Comparisons with other historians, notably Livy and Tacitus, which were more common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tended to be much more balanced.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Norris Cochrane, *Thucydides and the science of history* (Oxford & London 1929) 3. Girard, Roscher and others likewise emphasised the parallels; see Morley, *Thucydides and the idea of history*, (n.4, above) 59-69.

or a realization of the Idea, or any other religious or metaphysical principle. But accepting the postulate of a stable constitution both of man and of nature, and looking for the causes of historical events in modifications of the stimuli to which men are exposed, they will content themselves with formulating such uniformities as they may observe.<sup>23</sup>

By the middle of the twentieth century, historians were increasingly sceptical of such claims, not least because of their implicit rejection of historicism and contextualism and the risk of blatant anachronism; those readers who persisted in believing in Thucydides' relevance to the present, rather than simply dismissing him to the classical past, were more likely to identify him as a kind of a political theorist than as a historian in the conventional, historicist sense. For Leo Strauss, for example, Thucydides was to be understood as a political philosopher rather than a historian, for 'his work is meant to be a possession for all times, whereas the works of the scientific historians do not seriously claim to be "definitive"'.<sup>24</sup> The belief that Thucydides provides vital insights into universal principles of human society and politics persists from the nineteenth century until today; it is simply grounded in a different conception of his methodology, and held by a different set of readers.

In such readings, there is a double process of dehistoricisation and universalisation: the events that Thucydides described are understood above all as manifestations of universal principles, hence of interest to present-day readers, and his methodology is taken to be an example of (universally) correct scientific analysis, hence if not a model for the present then at any rate an echo of present-day approaches, and hence to be trusted and invoked as an authority.<sup>25</sup> The Peloponnesian War is in itself of no particular interest, except insofar as it spurred Thucydides to the discovery of proper critical methodology and universal principles. He is seen to have attained the same level of intellectual development as modern social scientists, and to have been engaged in the same enterprise; even if certain aspects of his presentation (again, most obviously the inclusion of speeches, and the dominance of narrative rather than explicit analysis) are out of line with current practice, these could be ignored as incidental to his primary purpose (whereas for more historicist readers, above all those in the philological tradition, these were precisely what showed Thucydides' inextricable embeddedness in his original cultural and historical context).<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Modernity

There was at least one major problem with this line of argument: if Thucydides had indeed anticipated present-day scientific methodology and approaches, how was this actually possible? It

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<sup>23</sup> Cochrane, (n.21, above) 168. On these developments, see J. Hesk, 'Thucydides in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries', in Lee & Morley, ed. *Handbook*, (n.5, above) 218-37, and S.N. Jaffe, 'The Straussian Thucydides', in *ibid.*, 278-95.

<sup>24</sup> L. Strauss, *The city and man* (Chicago, 1964) 142.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. N. Morley, 'Contextualism and Universality in Thucydidean Thought', in Thauer C, Wendt C (eds) *Thucydides and Political Order: concepts of order and the History of the Peloponnesian War* (Basingstoke & New York, 2016) 23-40.

<sup>26</sup> On this last point, see above all F.M Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London 1907), discussed by Hesk, 'Thucydides in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries' (n.22, above).



was generally agreed that these ideas had only recently been properly developed and perfected, and that classical antiquity had been dominated by pre-scientific and mythical conceptions – indeed, critics of ‘modernity’ like Friedrich Schiller frequently mourned the loss of the enchanted, mythological world-view of the ancients – and yet somehow Thucydides was supposed to have overcome the prevailing assumptions of his era to attain a universal, transcendental perspective on the world. This was a particular concern for historians and philologists, whose instincts were to make sense of the work by considering it in context (political philosophers had fewer hesitations in offering ahistorical readings). There was too strong a tradition of offering accounts of Thucydides’ background and education as part of the explication of his text for this context to be ignored altogether – even Roscher, for all his determination to focus on Thucydides as a model historian, included substantial material on these topics in his book, and was nevertheless criticised for not offering a sufficiently lively portrait of his subject – but that constantly threatened to paint the ancient Greek as a figure of his time, hence of the past, and hence as someone whose ideas and arguments could relate to the present only by chance or as the result of an over-imaginative reading.<sup>27</sup>

There were two main responses to this problem, if we exclude the (many) readers who ignored it and simply received Thucydides as a familiar kind of writer without any questioning. The first rested on the fact that it was only a small step from the idea that Thucydides had anticipated modern science to the idea that he must therefore have been somehow ‘modern’ in order to do this. In many cases, as in the quotations from Fournier and Bury at the beginning of this chapter, this was simply asserted; the modern reader’s recognition of Thucydides as a ‘colleague’ and kindred spirit was, apparently, sufficient to establish the truth of this reaction. More detailed accounts simply elaborated on the different ways in which Thucydides’ approach and sensibility appeared to be modern – above all, by emphasising the resemblances between his methodology and that of modern scientific history or political theory, and ignoring or explaining away those elements that seemed less familiar.<sup>28</sup>

A marginally stronger case could be built by presenting Thucydides as detached from his own time, already alienated from its cultural assumptions just as the moderns now were. While the parallels between his historical approach and the new ideas of the Hippocratic writers were sometimes emphasised, the latter could also be assimilated to modern science; when it came to Thucydides’ relation to his predecessors, contemporaries and successors in historiography, the emphasis was firmly on contrast and distancing. Herodotus, his obvious rival as the inventor of modern historiography, was presented (as indeed Thucydides himself had done) as credulous and uncritical, repeating unlikely stories rather than seeking to discern the truth of things. Xenophon was presented as limited and unimaginative, a mere continuator of the narrative of events without any grasp of how they should be understood and explicated. Later ancient historians entirely failed to grasp what was significant about Thucydides’ innovations:

He handed down to posterity his work as a single unique treasure for learning and wise use; he hit knowingly the highest goal that history writing could set itself. But

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<sup>27</sup> On criticism of Roscher’s work as a piece of biography and character portrayal, see Morley, ‘Thucydides, history and historicism’, (n.4, above) 130-1.

<sup>28</sup> Morley, *Thucydides and the idea of history*, (n.4, above) esp. 35-69, 125-33.

the whole series of subsequent historical writers in antiquity and other later ones in the middle ages understood this completely wrongly.<sup>29</sup>

Accounts of Thucydides' biography likewise emphasised his uniqueness and alienation from his times: his education by the philosopher Antiphon and hence his association with radical scepticism (if not outright atheism), his particular combination of expertise and experience in war (matched by few other historians, then or since) and critical acumen, and the circumstances of his exile, which was both the basis for his remarkable objectivity, allowing him to gather material from all sides, and the greatest challenge to it – his ability to overcome the bitterness he must surely have felt against those who expelled him from Athens was the unimpeachable proof of his remarkable character.<sup>30</sup> Overall, in the view of Creuzer, Thucydides manifested 'the sharpest opposition against the ruling idea of the Greeks both before and after him', he was 'a unique, remarkable appearance'; this detachment from his upbringing and culture made it less improbable that he could have developed ideas that transcended their historical context.<sup>31</sup> He was, in his mind and spirit, a modern, long before modernity.

The alternative approach was to explain Thucydides' achievement by 'modernising' ancient Greek, or more particularly ancient Athenian, culture in general. Nineteenth-century awareness of differences between past and present societies did not invariably involve the dismissal of all earlier cultures as primitive; and nineteenth-century theories of global historical development did not always adopt the model of a series of stages, each one higher than the last. A number of writers offered instead an account of world history as cyclical; in their view, the natural laws of historical change (based above all on biological models of the life cycle) showed that there had been other periods of modernity in the past:

We may also learn a more sensible division of history than that which is commonly adopted of ancient and modern. We shall see that there is in fact an ancient and a modern period in the history of every people; the ancient differing, and the modern in many essential points agreeing with that in which we now live. Thus the largest portion of that history which we commonly call ancient is practically modern, as it describes society in a stage analogous to that in which it now is; while, on the other hand, much of what is called modern history is practically ancient, as it relates to a state of things which has passed away. Thucydides and Xenophon, the orators of Athens, and the philosophers, speak a wisdom more applicable to us politically than the wisdom of even our own countrymen who lived in the middle ages; and their position, both intellectual and political, more nearly resembles our own!<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> G.G. Gervinus, *Gesammelte kleine historische Schriften* (Karlsruhe, 1838) 349-50.

<sup>30</sup> Morley, *Thucydides and the idea of history* (n.4, above) 71-96.

<sup>31</sup> Creuzer, *Historische Kunst*, (n.16, above) 207, 208.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Arnold, 'Essay on the social progress of states', = Appendix I, on Thuc. 1.13, in *Thucydides Volume I* (Oxford, 1830) 615-39, here 636-7; reprinted in his *Miscellaneous Works* (London, 1845) 79-111.

Thomas Arnold was a firm believer in the ‘general laws of a nation’s progress’, fully analogous to the ‘natural laws’ of Newtonian mechanics; these relate above all to the succession of political institutions and conceptions of rule. Of course this does not imply that events repeat themselves exactly, just as not all individuals develop in an identical manner – but ‘states, like individuals, go through certain changes in a certain order, and are subject at different stages of their course to certain peculiar disorders’.<sup>33</sup> The duration of different stages of development are not constant, and likewise there are always other factors involved besides the underlying principles of historical change, but:

...even where the disturbing cause is certain in its interference, as in mechanics the resistance of the air always prevents a body from obeying the natural laws of motion, still the general principles of the science are universally held to be essential to the attainment of a true knowledge of it. Much more does this hold good in political science.<sup>34</sup>

The most crucial stage in this scheme, according to Arnold, is the period of emergence from the dominance of the aristocracy: ‘Such was the state of Greece in the time of Thucydides; of Rome during the last century of the commonwealth; and such has been the state of England since the revolution of 1688’.<sup>35</sup> There is therefore no difficulty at all in seeing Thucydides as a ‘modern’ writer, whose work can speak directly to us; the society that produced him was comparable to our own, so that knowledge of it could offer direct and relevant insights into history in general, and he was therefore enabled to develop a truly modern historiography. This perceived affinity between the classical world and the Victorian present was the basis for Arnold’s approach to education, as he explained in an essay a few years later; of course all human beings share something in common (Thucydides’ ‘human thing’), but some are much closer than others:

With the Asiatic mind, we have no nearer connexion or sympathy than that which is derived from our common humanity. But the mind of the Greek and of the Roman is in all the essential points of its constitution our own; and not only so, but it is our own mind developed to an extraordinary degree of perfection. Wide as is the difference between us with respect to those physical instruments which minister to our uses or our pleasures; although the Greeks and Romans had no steam-engines, no printing-presses, no mariner’s compass, no telescopes, no microscopes, no gunpowder; yet in our moral and political views, in those matters which most determine human character, there is a perfect resemblance in all these respects. Aristotle, and Plato, and Thucydides, and Cicero, and Tacitus, are most untruly called ancient writers; they are virtually our own countrymen and contemporaries.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 615.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 628.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 633.

<sup>36</sup> Arnold, ‘Rugby School – Use of the Classics’, *Quarterly Journal of Education* 1834, reprinted in *Miscellaneous Works*, (n.30, above) 339-60; here, 349-50. There are some interesting points of connection and contrast here to Karl

Arnold sought to claim a wide range of classical writers as moderns and hence entirely suitable for his didactic purposes; it was not only Thucydides that he wished to rescue from historical irrelevance. Nevertheless, it is striking that he first hit upon the arguments with which to do this in the first volume of his commentary on Thucydides, in an essay on Thucydides' own account of the early development of Greece. Reflection on the ancient historian's reflections on historical change – which admittedly seemed to offer a progressivist rather than cyclical perspective – led Arnold to the ideas that would justify his sense of recognition, that both the developments Thucydides described and the way in which he described them could be considered modern. He returned to this theme in the third volume of the commentary.

In conclusion I must beg to repeat what I have said before, that the period to which the work of Thucydides refers belongs properly to modern and not to ancient history; and it is this circumstance, over and above the great ability of the historian himself, which makes it so peculiarly deserving of our study... Where Thucydides, in his reflections on the bloody dissensions of Corcyra, notices the decay and extinction of the simplicity of old times, he marks the great transition from ancient history to modern, the transition from an age of feeling to one of reflection, from a period of ignorance and credulity to one of inquiry and scepticism.<sup>37</sup>

The events are interesting in themselves, because they were modern, and not just because they were written about by Thucydides; but at the same time, it is clear that Thucydides was engaged on a thoroughly modern historical enterprise, charting the transition from one state of development to the next and the birth of modernity.

Only a few years after the publication of Arnold's commentary, Wilhelm Roscher offered a similar account (there is no indication in his book that he had read Arnold). His approach was cultural rather than political; whereas Arnold had focused on the emergence of popular institutions in ancient Athens as the hallmark of modernity, Roscher concentrated on distinctive forms of thought and artistic production, such that modernity is conceived in terms of natural science, historical science, drama and philosophical systems, in contrast to earlier periods of chronicles and myths.<sup>38</sup> However, their accounts share a focus on the role of the collective (the state for Arnold, the *Volk* for Roscher), conceived as a unity that follows a set pattern of quasi-biological development from the lower to the higher stages of existence, so that there are clear parallels between different eras at the same level of development. Like Arnold, Roscher established this as a basic methodological principle of historical research, and indeed developed this idea in more detail; the study of the development of different peoples is the equivalent of the work of the researcher into nature, who has the advantage of being able to gather data under

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Marx's very different view of the impact of printing-presses and gunpowder on culture and society in the *Grundrisse* – 'Is Achilles possible with powder and lead?' (trans. M. Nicolaus, Harmondsworth 1973) 110-11.

<sup>37</sup> Arnold, 'Preface' to *Thucydides Volume III* (Oxford, 1835) iii-xxii, here xviii-xix; reprinted in *Miscellaneous Works* (n.30, above) 381-99.

<sup>38</sup> Roscher, *Leben, Werk und Zeitalter*, (n.19, above) 3-16.

controlled conditions.<sup>39</sup> This would become the main theme of his later work on historical political economy, seeking to identify general principles of social change on the basis of analogies between supposedly comparable states.<sup>40</sup>

The reader will note that my work is rich in historical parallels, so-called analogies. In our time analogies are frequently misused... Analogy may only be used as a tool, not as an end in itself. It teaches us through comparison with objects that are as similar as possible to get to know the material before us in different aspects and more thoroughly.<sup>41</sup>

The main difference between Arnold and Roscher is that the former was happy to understand Thucydides as a product of his time, of 'the really modern history of the civilization of Greece and Rome' that is often (so Arnold claimed) miscalled ancient history.<sup>42</sup> For Roscher, Thucydides' achievement could never be reduced to that; he was fully the product of the 'modern' culture of ancient Athens, but the development of true historiography depended on his particular genius – he had been able to learn from the work of Herodotus and develop it to a far higher level, whereas Xenophon and later historians, products of the same culture, had entirely failed to learn from his example. Roscher's Thucydides, one might say, is doubly modern, the product of an era analogous to modernity who was (uniquely) able to realise the full potential of this cultural heritage and thus to transcend his context. Only with the development of true historical science within modern German culture has Thucydides' achievement been properly recognised; its full potential can only now be realised; his time has finally come. It is no longer necessary to learn from him the basic principles of modern historiography – those have, partly if not largely through his influence, now been identified – but he remains a model for how these should be put into practice, as well as a figure of genius whom one cannot hope to imitate but only admire.

His clarity and depth of observation, his impartial judgement, his greatness of mind, his purity and strength of form – the talent for all of these must be innate; it can be developed, but never learnt. What one should and can learn from Thucydides, however, are the many inconspicuous and often violated laws of the scientific conscience. To spare no effort in gathering material, and to consider one's work at best only half done when one has done this. Never, whether in the longest book or the smallest words, to wish to appear more than one is. Finally, to value fame and freedom highly, the fatherland higher still, but the truth above all. *If someone's reading*

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., vii-viii.

<sup>40</sup> See Morley, 'Thucydides, history and historicism' (n. 4, above), for discussion of Roscher's approach, and criticisms of it.

<sup>41</sup> Roscher, *Leben, Werke und Zeitalter*, (n.19, above), xi-xii.

<sup>42</sup> Arnold, 'Preface' (n.35, above) xxii.

*of Thucydides has not given new life to these resolutions, then, however many grammatical rules or historical facts he may have learnt from it, he has read Thucydides in vain*<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. The Historiography of the Future

Roscher did not claim Thucydides as a fellow modern just in order to justify his own interest and sense of familiarity; he wanted to put him forward as an authority, inspiration and model, even within the self-consciously modern and progressive field of economic thought. Thucydides offers the discipline of scientific history a long, classical pedigree, but more importantly establishes it as something timeless and universal. Moreover, Thucydides' work is seen not only to anticipate the practices and assumptions of the modern era but to point the way forward to the historiography of the future, the full and final realisation of current developments within the discipline.

Roscher conceded the existence of elements of Thucydidean historiography that fit less well with contemporary expectations: his narrative artistry and rhetorical skill above all. Whereas many commentators sought to explain these elements away or ascribed them to the persistence of pre-modern conceptions of 'history as art' that even Thucydides could not wholly escape, Roscher identified them as essential components of Thucydidean historiography with which modern historians still need to come to terms. Modern scientific historiography, he argued, remains an art; Thucydides shows us that the interpretation of events is insufficient on its own, without the skill to re-present this interpretation to the reader. In its eagerness to escape from the old idea that historiography was no more than a rhetorical art, historians have formed a misconceived idea of their discipline; thus Thucydides' work seems at times alien, despite all its apparent modernity, not because it is really embedded in its original pre-modern context, but because contemporary historians are not yet modern enough to appreciate it fully.<sup>44</sup> The historian as artist-scientist is just as modern a figure as the narrow technical specialist who had become established as the archetype of 'Geschichte als Wissenschaft', and to at least some commentators a far more attractive figure.<sup>45</sup>

This seems to echo Thucydides' own critique of contemporary historical practice: his work establishes a norm, through the explicit promulgation of methodological principles, through the decrying of predecessors and through the force of its example, which places in question alternative approaches to writing the past. He presents himself as an authority, to be trusted implicitly by those with enough intelligence to recognise what he has to offer. He does not represent himself as a modern – that would clearly be impossible – but as a contemporary, so that any subsequent age is induced to claim him for its own and to interpret him and his work in its own terms. He writes in order to create this feeling of recognition on the part of readers, so

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<sup>43</sup> Roscher, *Leben, Werk und Zeitalter*, (n.19, above) x-xi.

<sup>44</sup> Roscher, *Leben, Werk und Zeitalter*, (n.19, above) 146, 154, 174; Morley, *Thucydides and the idea of history*, (n.4, above) 115-35 on the speeches in general, 135-7 on Roscher's arguments.

<sup>45</sup> The idea that this image of Thucydides, specifically Roscher's version thereof, was an important influence on the work of Max Weber is explored in W. Hennis, *Max Weber und Thukydides. Nachträge zur Biographie des Werks*. (Tübingen, 2003).

that they experience his text and example as (to borrow a phrase of Nietzsche's) working on their own time for the benefit of a time to come.<sup>46</sup> Modern readers were not unique in feeling that Thucydides spoke to them of their own situation in their own idiom – after all, they have now been succeeded by those who find an unmistakably post-modern Thucydides in his text.<sup>47</sup> It is simply that the modernisation of Thucydides required rather more intellectual effort – to interpret his character and biography in suitable terms, to develop a grand narrative of cyclical historical change or to explain away features which seemed un-modern – than was needed to claim him as a colleague or contemporary in earlier and less self-consciously distinct eras.

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<sup>46</sup> F. Nietzsche, 'Zum Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben', *Unzeitgemässige Betrachtungen II*, in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritischen Studienausgabe* (eds. G. Colli & M. Montinari, Berlin, 1967-77) 257.

<sup>47</sup> W.R. Connor, 'A post-modernist Thucydides?', *Classical Journal* 72 (1977) 289-98.