

## Exploring Power and Politics Through Ancient Greek History

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<Intro>

“The strong do what they can; the weak just have to suck it up”: a line from the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, nearly written 2500 years ago, that still rings true all too often today. Thucydides’ aim, however, was not to resign people to this situation but to help them recognise and understand it, as a first step in recovering their political agency.

<Context>

How do we help young people make sense of an ever more complex, rapidly changing world? How do we combat the problem of low voter turnout and decreased political engagement, with its corrosive consequences for political culture? It is widely recognised that people do want to engage and contribute to discussions, but feel marginalised, uncertain and intimidated in the face of established institutions and confident, well-drilled professional figures.

Part of the answer must be to improve political literacy through citizenship education in schools. However, the teaching of citizenship is itself often marginalised, dependent on non-specialist teachers and provided with limited resources. The result is that often such classes are focused solely on delivering factual information about the British political system, rather than either engaging with broader issues and debates or inspiring and empowering students to explore political issues on their own terms.

<The Starting Point>

The ways that the ancient Greeks thought about such issues, in a completely different political context, may not seem an obvious place to look for an answer to this problem, especially as relatively few students in UK schools get the opportunity to study ancient history. But the key to the work of Thucydides, who lived in the fifth century BCE, was that he did not seek to teach lessons directly, or just teach facts about the past. Rather, he described a specific historical situation in a way that prompted his readers to reflect critically on their own societies.

The focus of our research is the passage in Thucydides known as the Melian Dialogue. In 416 BCE, a fleet of the Athenians – one of the superpowers of the time – arrived at the small neutral city of Melos and demanded its unconditional surrender. In his account, Thucydides presents a dialogue between the Athenians and the Melian leaders, in which the former set out the rational grounds for submitting to superior power and the latter try to argue their way out of trouble.

This passage has long been a favourite of modern theorists of politics and international relations, who see it as the first ever statement of Realism or Realpolitik. Our reading is more complex; it is not obvious (as the Realists claim) that Thucydides intends us to identify with the powerful Athenians and their claims. The Melian Dialogue sets up a debate between different world-views, the choice between principle and pragmatism – and it shows how both the powerful and the powerless tend to think and speak. It’s all intended to get us to think about issues of power and justice in our own lives.

<What We Did>

Our goal was to draw out the essential structure of this debate, and echo Thucydides’ spirit in setting up provocative analogies with the present – in a way that is meaningful and accessible to people with no prior knowledge of ancient history.

We created two games, with the aim of engaging students through the pleasures of participation and competition before leading them to reflect on the issues they raise. The first (based on the mechanics of Rock, Paper, Scissors!) introduces them to a world of conflict and conquest, in

which they gradually come to realise that some players have a built-in advantage. The second is a choose-your-own-adventure version of the Melian Dialogue, in which the group has to discuss issues of power and justice in deciding what path to choose, whether as the Athenians trying to win with the least effort possible or as the Melians trying to escape.

In collaboration with The Politics Project (<https://www.thepoliticsproject.org.uk/about/>), a community interest company dedicated to empowering young people to engage in political discussion, we incorporated these games into a set of three one-hour workshops, which draw out the issues and encourage them to reflect on analogies with their own situations – issues of power and weakness aren't confined to politics! These culminate in a 'digital surgery' in which the students interact with their Member of Parliament or other local political figure, with the greater confidence of having thought about power and how it's used and abused, and having prepared for the encounter.

The workshop materials provide enough information about Thucydides and ancient Greece to contextualise the activities, as the point of the setting is not to teach them ancient history but to provide a concrete example to think about. We have produced a lot more background information for teachers who want to investigate the topic further, as well as supporting video resources like a short animated introduction to Thucydides (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWsn-OISH30>) and a performance of the Melian Dialogue (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viDfK6Nrxbg>).

<How It Went>

We trialled the activities between March and May 2019 with a group of about twenty Year 12 and 13 students from Queen Elizabeth's School Crediton. After making some adjustments to the material, we then participated in Politics Project training sessions in Manchester and London for teachers, who have then begun delivering the workshops in their schools.

We gathered evidence on the impact of the activities through online questionnaires completed by the students before and after, and discursive feedback from teachers. The results from the first round of sessions are promising; roughly 40% of students reported significant improvement in their confidence, critical thinking, communication skills and understanding of power as a result of participating, with the majority of the others noting some improvement. The number of students expressing an intention to vote in an election if they were allowed to rose from 61% before the workshops to 85% afterwards.

Comments from teachers identified increased confidence, critical reflection and sense of empowerment among their students, and noted their ability to analyse the ways that politicians had addressed them. It is early in the project, but results so far suggest that Thucydides is indeed helping people think critically about power and apply this to their own situation.

<Future Plans>

Once trained, teachers can repeat the workshops as often as they wish for different groups of students. We want to expand the project by training more teachers (and anyone interested should contact Hattie Andrews at The Politics Project ([harriet.andrews@thepoliticsproject.org.uk](mailto:harriet.andrews@thepoliticsproject.org.uk))). Meanwhile, we continue to explore different ways of adapting Thucydides' Melian Dialogue as a means of thinking about power, making his work accessible without losing its complexity. For example, in a project funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council, we are collaborating with theatre groups to stage it in multiple versions (February 21<sup>st</sup> at the New Diorama Theatre in London!) and to develop it as an interactive experience.

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