

Thucydides and the Politics of Truth

1. A Thucydidean World?

I am curious how today Thucydides would diagnose the situation in the United States under the administration of President Trump, in the United Kingdom in the time of Brexit and permanent parliamentary crisis, in some countries in East Central Europe, where the foundations of liberal democracy and the rule of law are being undermined, or on the border of Russia and Ukraine. For sure he would have something to write about.

Donald Tusk, speech of October 2019

To judge from much media and online commentary over the past few years, especially in English but increasingly in other languages, including Polish, we live in a Thucydidean world. Current events repeatedly echo episodes from a 2500-year-old war chronicled by a minor Athenian aristocrat and unsuccessful general; comparisons between the Coronavirus pandemic and the plague of Athens are simply the most recent example.¹ Inevitably, much of this discussion is fuelled by classicists and ancient historians, conscious of the need to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of their work and write pieces for a general audience, but it is striking how far political theorists and journalists, and even some politicians, are likewise resorting to such references – not to mention the proliferation of references and quotations on social media.

Globally, the most prominent example in recent years has been the ‘Thucydides Trap’, a repackaging of power transition theory by the International Relations scholar Graham Allison; he suggests that tensions between the established power of the United States and the rising power of China makes open warfare a real possibility, following the principle established by Thucydides that ‘it was the rise of Athens and the fear this aroused in Sparta that made war inevitable’.² Allison’s reading of Thucydides and of supposedly analogous episodes in later history has been widely criticised by specialists in both classics and International Relations, but the idea has become pervasive in wider discourse in the media.³ This is not only an American phenomenon, a means of articulating anxieties about the changing world order, or just a matter of British media

¹ I offer a small selection of relevant references, rather than a complete set, focusing on comments and comparisons from non-classicists as well as classicists. For a longer list, up to mid-2017, see Morley 2017a. On coronavirus comparisons, up until early April 2020, see Morley 2020.

² Allison 2015, 2017a. This is not, it should be noted, the best translation of what Thucydides wrote, or the best interpretation of his argument.

³ Commentary and critique, a selection: Jaffe 2015, Waldron 2017, Buruma 2017, Jackson 2017.

echoing US punditry.⁴ Chinese politicians and officials have regularly engaged with the theory in order to reject its implications, while the model has been extended by commentators and Twitter users to other potential conflicts in the region: China and India, with China now taking on the role of the ‘established’ power, and India and Pakistan.⁵ The authority of Thucydides legitimises a sense that we are living in a period of increasingly fragile peace with the looming threat of inter-state competition leading to outright war – reinforced, perhaps, by Allison’s publicity team’s adoption of an entirely spurious ‘Thucydides’ quotation from the 2017 *Wonder Woman* film – ‘peace is only an armistice in an endless war’ – as part of his book marketing.⁶

The Melian Dialogue in Thucydides, an episode that stages a confrontation between imperialist aggression and would-be neutrality, and a staple of post-WWII ‘Realist’ international relations discussions, has mapped neatly onto the activities of Russia in Crimea and eastern Ukraine; but it does not require much imagination to transfer it from a military context to any other situation in which two sides of unequal strength confront one another in negotiations.⁷ The idea that the European Union exhibits the same pathological will to dominate as the Athenian empire, and deploys the same rhetoric of denial of any alternative on the grounds of ‘realism’, was first raised in the Greek economic crisis by the then Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, who had studied it from the perspective of game theory in his academic past; his understanding of the dynamics of such a situation did not lead to a happier result from the negotiations, but it at least provided him with a title for his subsequent book.⁸ The same analogy has more recently been applied to the Brexit negotiations, though often with rather more sympathy for the ‘Athenians’ and their impatience with the hapless Melians and their hopelessly optimistic assumptions about the world.⁹ In a similar manner, the UK’s vote to leave the EU on the basis of misleading claims, naïve assumptions and reckless self-confidence has been compared to the Athenian decision to launch the Sicilian expedition, while the example of the

⁴ The Thucydides Trap in the UK: e.g. Rachman 2017, Marcus 2019.

⁵ China: Berggruen & Gardels 2014, Liu 2015; China and India: Chatteraj 2016; India and Pakistan: Zaka 2018.

⁶ Allison 2017b.

⁷ Brenton 2014; Russell 2014.

⁸ Morley 2015 on Varoufakis; Varoufakis 2016; Hanink 2017 generally on classical comparisons in discussions of the Greek debt crisis.

⁹ Oliver 2019.

Mytilene Debate has been evoked to argue that democracies can and should change their minds rather than holding fast to a bad decision.¹⁰

Characters from Thucydides' account seem to walk again, or at least offer tempting analogies for contemporary politicians.¹¹ Cleon, the archetypal populist braggart, utterly unscrupulous in rousing the mob through provocative rhetoric and disparagement of his elitist opponents and recklessly stoking conflict, offers a template for authoritarian figures from Donald Trump to Victor Orban.¹² Alcibiades, the clownish, boundlessly self-confident and entitled aristocrat, convinced that his reckless and self-aggrandising plans cannot possibly fail, could be any number of British Brexit-supporting politicians or pundits, even if one name, that of Boris Johnson, is repeatedly brought up in this context. Nicias is a less familiar, and arguably less colourful, figure, but the image of the hapless leader, trying to take charge of an enterprise he had argued against and sinking ever deeper into despair and indecisiveness, seemed painfully relevant to Theresa May when she was the embattled UK Prime Minister.¹³ Meanwhile, multiple attempts are made to claim the mantle of the more sympathetic and inspiring Pericles, whether Brexit-supporting UK MP Mark Francois quoting the Funeral Oration at a rally near Parliament (albeit in a translation that is found on war memorials rather than in any published text, so not offering any proof that he has read the full work), or admirers of Jeremy Corbyn pointing to his use of the 'for the many, not the few' line (leaving aside the fact that this was taken from Shelley's *The Masque of Anarchy*, not Thucydides, and originally adopted under Tony Blair).¹⁴ And of course Johnson himself has on multiple occasions claimed Pericles as his hero – while his direct encounter with the 'plague' in April 2020 led other commentators to wonder if present events might imitate the past still more closely.¹⁵

None of these comparisons between past and present offers much ground for optimism. A Thucydidean world is not a happy one, and W.H. Auden's much-cited evocation of Thucydides in a poem written in the context of an earlier period of xenophobic populism

¹⁰ Higgins 2018; Oliver 2019. For a selection of perspectives on this topic in Polish, see *Przegląd Polityczny* 155 (2019): <http://przegladpolityczny.pl/produkt/pp-155-2019/>

¹¹ Swift 2015.

¹² Mackie 2016; Markovits 2016; Osborne 2017. Note that Hanson 2019: 111 offers this analogy as a compliment.

¹³ Oliver 2019; correspondence in *The Times*, 9th, 11th and 12th January 2019, and in particular the contribution from John Cloughton on the 14th:

¹⁴ Francois 2019; Morley 2017b and *Evening Standard* 2017 on the Labour Party slogan.

¹⁵ Johnson 2019; Gallardo 2020; Fraser 2020.

reinforces the sense of inexorable doom: ‘Analysed all in his book,/ The enlightenment driven away,/ The habit-forming pain,/ Mismanagement and grief:/ We must suffer them all again...’¹⁶ But the beginning of that stanza of Auden’s poem also highlights the appeal of such references: ‘Exiled Thucydides knew’. The world may be falling into chaos and crisis, beyond our control, but we can feel some relief from the fact that at least one authoritative thinker understood and foresaw this; events are not completely unintelligible and unpredictable, even if most people fail to make the effort to understand them. The idea of ‘Thucydides’ work as a source of reassurance and enlightenment is promoted by Allison’s claim that identifying the ‘Thucydides Trap’ can help the world avert the threatened war between the US and China. It’s implied by Varoufakis’ anecdote about discovering that John Maynard Keynes had underlined the same crucial passage of the Melian Dialogue in his copy of Thucydides, reflecting the feared consequences of the failure of his plans for a just global financial system.¹⁷ It’s reinforced – in a less reassuring manner – by the number of members of the Trump White House who mentioned Thucydides as an important guide and inspiration – with Steve Bannon, in particular, relishing the idea of making the world more rather than less ‘Thucydidean’.¹⁸ We must suffer them all again, again.

2. The World is Always Thucydidean

But it is important to remember that this is not new. The world has often seemed Thucydidean to admirers of his work, even if their conceptions of what that actually means have changed markedly over time. Twenty years ago, Thucydides’ message was claimed as legitimation for the agenda of the US neoconservatives, cheered on by certain ancient historians; for them, Thucydides’ account established that a single hegemonic power is licensed to define reality and reshape a fragmented, disordered world in its own interests.¹⁹ Over the previous half century, Thucydides had been credited instead with anticipating and explaining the confrontation of two radically different political and cultural blocs in a bipolar global system, and providing the intellectual foundations of Realism and Realpolitik.²⁰ In the mid-twentieth century, the Thucydidean perspective explained the rise of totalitarianism and leader cult, and the failure of international institutions and democracy to contain them; before the First World War, the confrontation of a maritime empire and a land-based warrior state, and conflicting

¹⁶ Auden, *1 September 1939* (1940).

¹⁷ Varoufakis 2016: 19-20.

¹⁸ Crowley 2017, Nwanevu 2017.

¹⁹ Brecher 2005, Charles 2006, Bloxham 2010, Morefield 2014.

²⁰ Lebow & Strauss 1991, Gustafson 2000.

interpretations of which one was ultimately responsible for the outbreak of hostilities, had dominated debates over his significance.²¹

From the late 18th to the mid-19th centuries, Thucydides was read mainly in relation to internal politics, and debates around the growing power of the people and its consequences for society. The British ancient historian George Grote admitted that there might be some validity in an analogy between Thucydides' account of the civil war in Corcyra and the upheavals in Revolutionary France, but insisted that the appropriate comparison for contemporary Britain was Periclean Athens, offering a model of cultural achievement that was grounded in popular participation in the affairs of the state.²² This claim was put forward as a response to the anti-democratic readings of earlier generations; the Corcyrean stasis supplied the conservative politician and philosopher Edmund Burke with imagery for his denunciation of the French Revolution and the threat of popular unrest – 'every counsel, in proportion as it is daring, and violent, and perfidious, is taken for the mark of superior genius... Tenderness to individuals is considered as treason to the public' – themes which had also inspired the writers of the Federalist Papers to propose political institutions that would prevent the emergence of 'faction' in the United States of America.²³ This drew on a centuries-old tradition of taking Athens as the epitome of mob rule and irrationality, with Thucydides providing the historical evidence that confirmed the philosophical critiques of Plato and Aristotle and the implicit justification for monarchy – partly by negative example, partly in the idealised portrayal of Pericles – in opposition to Tacitean republicanism.²⁴

The incorporation of ideas and examples from Thucydides' work into early modern political thought, from the speculations of humanist scholars like Alberico Gentili, Hugo Grotius and Francis Bacon in the late sixteenth century about issues of just war and pre-emptive attack to discussions of 'thalassocracy' and comparisons of the conflicts between Athens and Sparta and England and France in the eighteenth, implied the contemporary relevance and usefulness of his account; likewise the deployment of maxims from the speeches as practical political advice, for monarchs like Mary I, Charles I, Louis XIV and the rulers of Venice.²⁵ But we can also find plenty of examples of commentators who believed that Thucydides had not only identified timeless principles of political life, which now recurred in the present, but had somehow

²¹ Lord 1945; Morley 2018

²² Grote 1907, Vol. V: 197, Vol. VI: 459. Cf. Stray 1997.

²³ Burke 2014: 69, Hamilton 1787; generally on this theme, Armitage 2017.

²⁴ Hobbes 1991: 88; Slomp 1990; Sullivan 2015: 253-7. On comparable receptions of Tacitus, Gajda 2009.

²⁵ Hoekstra 2012; Earley 2018; James VI of Scotland 1918: 53, 56, 77.

foreseen the specific circumstances of the reader's situation, especially in relation to civil disorder and the breakdown of society. 'Thucydides' very learned description of the revolution [*seditio*] at Corcyra shows the clear image of our modern revolutions and internal struggles in the church,' claimed the Rostock theologian and historian David Chytraeus in the late sixteenth century. 'All this neatly fits the corruption of our times as well', remarked Lorenzo Valla, the fifteenth-century Florentine historian and translator of Thucydides into Latin, of the same passage.²⁶

If we compare these past evocations of Thucydides as 'the man who knew' with the pattern of present-day references, we find both continuity and change. The most famous set-piece episodes in his work continue to command the greatest attention, though with changing interpretations. Readings of the Mytilene debate, for example, shift from seeing it as a source of practical advice about how to deal effectively with rebellious subjects, as it was for sixteenth-century monarchs and their advisers, to seeing it as a warning against the irrationality and susceptibility to rhetoric of the masses. Pericles' Funeral Oration gradually changed from an example of strong leadership to a celebration of democracy (though it was still being cited as the epitome of the *Führerprinzip* in 1940s Germany, as part of a justification for the relevance of classical studies).²⁷ In reflections on the great confrontation of Athens and Sparta, the question of which side one should wish to be identified with has been answered in very different ways in different national and historical contexts: Cold War Americans, for example, might equally well favour Athens for its liberal democratic values or Sparta for its commitment to freedom, virtue and religion. Thucydides' own views and sympathies have been interpreted in radically different ways over the centuries. But two themes are almost universal: belief in Thucydides' unquestionable authority (however its source and nature are understood), and belief in the idea that his work speaks to the reader's present.

The obvious explanation for this persistent conviction is that Thucydides primed his readers to expect to notice such parallels, by asserting that resemblances between past and present events are a basic attribute of the world (1.22). This is the basis for the claim that his work, offering an accurate account of past events, will be useful for those wishing to understand present and future events, thus excusing its lack of rhetorical polish (at the same time as that disavowal of easy pleasure flatters readers into believing that they alone will appreciate the merits and importance of this forbidding text). But this idea has likewise been interpreted in quite different ways, especially over the last century, as Thucydides' own self-presentation as, in the

²⁶ Cited in Grafton 2007: 105.

²⁷ Nippel 2016: 334-9.

broadest sense, a critical observer of the world has been assimilated to different disciplinary identities.²⁸ Until the twentieth century, he was understood as a historian (if not *the* historian), whose goal was to present an accurate account and interpretation of past events as an end in itself. What it might mean for such an account to be at all ‘useful’ in concrete terms became ever less obvious, as a growing sense of historical difference undermined earlier assumptions about the exemplary nature of past events and figures. However, this question was scarcely considered within professional historiography, which contented itself with implying that ‘Thucydides’ claim to offer a ‘possession for all time’ in fact applied to historiography in general, without further specification.²⁹ Any apparent resemblances between present and past events offered historians an opportunity to reach out to a wider audience, but only rarely – and for the most part unconvincingly – to claim to explain the present or predict the future on this basis.

The strongest and most coherent claims for ‘Thucydides’ actual relevance and usefulness are found instead in the social sciences, where he has been interpreted over the last century as a forerunner in the search for normative principles of society and politics. ‘The human thing’, *to anthrôpinon*, the explanation Thucydides offered for the tendency of present and future events to resemble the past (1.22), is understood in these disciplines in a strong sense as ‘human nature’: continuities of human behaviour, human interactions and the operations of human institutions that underlie apparent change and discontinuity across history and thus make it feasible to develop transhistorical generalisations.³⁰ Of course, the problem with claiming Thucydides as a social scientist in this manner is that, while such an interpretation pays more attention to the nature of his own claims for his work than the conventional historical reading does, it struggles to identify any such explicit statements of normative principles in his work.³¹ Hence the various strained efforts to extract something from his account that resembles a law; the elevation of remarks about specific developments (‘it was the rise of Athens and the fear this provoked in Sparta that made war inevitable’) into general historical laws (‘the Thucydides Trap’), stripping away all complexity and nuance – and often dependent on highly arguable translations, where a different reading would imply a quite different principle. Since Thucydides rarely speaks in his own voice, many such principles are taken from the speeches of his characters, attributed (often without any acknowledgement) to Thucydides himself – the Melian Dialogue, foundation of

²⁸ Generally, Morley 2016.

²⁹ On the decline of exemplarity and *historia magistra vitae*, Koselleck 2004.

³⁰ Cf. Ober 2001, 2006.

³¹ Cf. Johnson 1993 and Welch 2003.

Realism, is simply the most familiar example – and, removed from their narrative context, they are protected from the fact that the subsequent course of events frequently falsifies the speaker’s claims or at least puts them in a different light. There is no reason to imagine that Thucydides endorsed the claims of the Athenians about the power of the stronger to dictate terms to the weaker or to disregard issues of justice; the fact that Athens’ disastrous decision to attack Syracuse followed immediately afterwards this episode suggests that, on the contrary, the lesson here is to beware of the sort of arrogance and over-confidence that leads one to assume that ‘might makes right’.

The other problem with these social-scientific interpretations, leaving aside the question of how far they misrepresent Thucydides’ text, are that the results are often rather disappointing. Thucydides is read as offering confirmation of modern theories, rather than presenting anything original or unexpected. He is claimed as the original formulator of principles, such as those of Realism, that have now been elaborated and established as orthodoxy; his role is the legitimising founding figure, part of the mythology and self-identity of the discipline.³² Alternatively, he may be invoked as a caution against such confident, absolutist claims, emphasising instead contingency and uncertainty – but again, in a manner that conforms to the modern scholar’s prior assumptions, rather than bringing something genuinely new to the discussion.³³ Thucydides becomes a source of confirmation and reassurance, and it is easy to argue that modern readers project their own ideas back into his text, not least in assuming that he shares their academic and political commitments.

However, it is undoubtedly the case that these readers are genuinely convinced that the key insights are those of Thucydides, and that they have simply recognised rather than invented them; this is not a matter of conscious misinterpretation and appropriation. This might suggest a third way of understanding his apparent contemporaneity, as residing not in the repetitive nature of actual historical events, nor in intellectual continuity and his anticipation of modern thinking, but in the capacity of his text to invite such identification between past and present. Thucydides deliberately primes his readers to expect to notice such parallels between past and present. He does this both through his explicit statements about the usefulness of his account (1.21-2) and in the relationship he constructs between contemporary events and the early history of Greece in the opening chapters of his work – for example, his complex and provocative invitation to think about past Mycenae by speculating on the future conditions of Athens and Sparta (1.10). His

³² Ruback 2015 and 2016.

³³ E.g. Lebow 2001, 2003; Sahlins 2004; Hawthorn 2014; cf. Morley 2017c.

main narrative is then so detailed and specific that a reader can easily identify some points that echo their own experience, without feeling the need to find parallels for everything (for example, selecting some of the long list of symptoms of the Athenian plague that match one or other modern disease, while ignoring those that don't fit that particular theory). No one expects the entire Peloponnesian War to repeat itself exactly, but one can select those episodes that seem relevant to the present situation, highlighting details that conveniently match (rumours that the plague was caused by enemy action! declining obedience to the law!) and simply failing to notice, rather than actively ignoring, those that do not (loss of faith in religion has yet to appear as a significant feature of the current pandemic). One might even connect this to the phenomenon of 'apophenia', the human tendency to perceive meaning and intentionality in randomness, and to believe in connections between unrelated things; if you *expect* to find echoes of the present in Thucydides' account of past events, it is easy to do so.³⁴

3. The Politics of Truth

This may be an excessively pessimistic conclusion. The fact that Thucydides artfully constructed his account to encourage his readers to think about connections between past, present and future, and that generations of readers have done this, does not itself prove that these identified connections are wholly imaginary. We can at least attribute to Thucydides a sincere belief in the potential usefulness of his work, even if we are sceptical about some of the conclusions that his readers have actually been drawn from it.

The heart of Thucydides' account is a concern with truth – and an acute awareness of the difficulty of obtaining accurate knowledge of things. Early in his account he highlights the problem, that most people are inclined to accept the first story they hear rather than taking the trouble to enquire into things more carefully, and even eyewitnesses of events will give different accounts, according to their loyalties and their memories (1.20-22). This is not merely self-advertisement, that he sees the world more clearly, nor flattery of his audience that they will become equally enlightened. Rather, accuracy matters; this is never a purely scholarly matter, but is central to politics, especially deliberative politics. In its absence, rational decision-making becomes impossible; instead, decisions are influenced by emotions and wishful thinking, stoked and manipulated by self-interested opinion formers. Thucydides' narrative offers multiple examples of failed deliberation. The clearest example is the Athenian debate about whether to launch an expedition to invade Sicily (6.8-24); despite having little knowledge of the place, the majority of the citizens readily believed the claims of Alcibiades about the lack of opposition, the

³⁴ Helpful summary in Brugger 2001, applying the idea to belief in the paranormal.

readiness of local groups to join their side, the strength of their own position, and the overall ease of the enterprise, rather than hesitating because of the lack of solid evidence to support these claims. But even when the result is less catastrophic – in the Mytilene Debate, for example, where the Athenians eventually reach the ‘right’ decision not to massacre an entire population for the actions of a minority – Thucydides’ presentation seems designed to emphasise the problematic nature of the arguments advanced by both sides, with both Cleon and Diodotus, in different ways, highlighting the fact that the Athenian assembly can only be induced to make a good decision through subterfuge and rhetorical manipulation.³⁵

Given the prominence of the theme in contemporary political debates, it is tempting to claim Thucydides as a pioneering analyst of ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’.³⁶ Some episodes seem especially prescient, above all his account, in the *stasis* episode at Corcyra, of how shared values and assumptions about truth and political discourse can be undermined or even destroyed under the stress of political partisanship (3.79-83). In a society that is increasingly divided, ‘words lose their meanings’ – ‘recklessness’ becomes ‘courage’, for example, and ‘caution’ becomes ‘cowardice’ – as everything, even the question of truth versus falsehood, is interpreted from the perspective of one’s own factional loyalties. Unlike some modern accounts of similar ‘culture wars’, this is not something that is orchestrated by bad actors (politicians, new media companies); it is rather a process that builds its own internal momentum, once the bonds of community have become sufficiently loose. While Thucydides repeatedly shows the role of individuals in manipulating the masses for their own ends – not just ‘demagogues’ like Cleon or Alcibiades, but a figure like Pericles, who successfully exerted almost autocratic power in ‘what was in name a democracy’ – he is at least as much concerned with the capacity of people to be open to manipulation. This, arguably, is ‘the human thing’ that leads to events resembling one another, as people continually make the same kinds of cognitive errors: in modern terminology, actors in Thucydides’ account repeatedly exhibit poor risk assessment, with a reliance on emotion rather than rational calculation, leading to the over-weighting of small probabilities and the under-weighting of near certainties; a propensity to group-think, homogenisation of opinion, and confirmation bias; excessive confidence in their own capacities and degree of understanding, and a failure to acknowledge the existence or significance of uncertainty.³⁷

It is easy for this line of thought to become just another version of the usual social-scientific reading of Thucydides, praising him for anticipating key insights of a discipline (in this

³⁵ A key theme in Orwin (1994)’s account of the debate.

³⁶ Cf. D’Ancona 2017, Ball 2017, Bennett 2018

³⁷ Ober & Perry 2014, Hesk 2017, Turner 2018.

case, behavioural economics and social psychology), and thus subsuming him into that discipline as an honoured founder who confirms the timeless validity of its ideas. It is worth re-emphasising the differences: not just that Thucydides has attained these insights through personal reflection on human affairs rather than through controlled experiments and data analysis – which is of course the key claim to superiority of modern social science – but that he presents his insights not as abstract principles or a set of theoretical propositions about human cognition, but as dramatic episodes embedded within a detailed narrative of events. This might be – and effectively has been, by scholars such as Cornford – presented as a failure on Thucydides' part to be sufficiently 'scientific', falling instead under the influence of pre-scientific ways of thought drawn from myth and tragedy.³⁸ But other literary models were available to him, in philosophy and medicine, if he had wished to write in a more explicitly analytical manner. Rather, this must be understood as a deliberate choice: by implication, sequences of events, and the detail of specific situations and contexts, are just as important as the more general principles. If one of the problems with 'the human thing' is a tendency to over-simplify and deny complexity, then trying reduce complex events to simple 'laws' may be part of the problem.³⁹

One answer to this apparent paradox is offered by one of the greatest interpreters of Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes, who clearly identified the complex character of the work and its effect on the reader:

Thucydides is one, who, though he never digress to read a lecture, moral or political, upon his own text, nor enter into men's hearts further than the acts themselves evidently guide him: is yet accounted the most politic historiographer that ever writ. The reason whereof I take to be this. He filleth his narrations with that choice of matter, and ordereth them with that judgment, and with such perspicuity and efficacy expresseth himself, that, as Plutarch saith, he maketh his auditor a spectator. For he setteth his reader in the assemblies of the people and in the senate, at their debating; in the streets, at their seditions; and in the field, at their battles. So that look how much a man of understanding might have added to his experience, if he had then lived a beholder of their proceedings, and familiar with the men and business of the time: so much almost may he profit now, by attentive reading of the same here written.⁴⁰

³⁸ Cornford 1907; Hesk 2014: 219-24.

³⁹ Compare Orwin's suggestion (1994: 12) that Thucydides' great advantage is his innocence of political science as much as his intimate knowledge of politics

⁴⁰ Hobbes 1629, viii. Cf. Morley 2014, 98-100, 142-3.

As Hobbes remarked later, ‘the narration itself doth secretly instruct the reader, and more effectually than can possibly be done by precept’.⁴¹ We might characterise this as a kind of experiential learning: our understanding improves as a result of working our way through Thucydides’ artfully constructed text, reflecting on events and the way they are presented to us, and left to reach our own judgements rather than explicitly directed by the writer. Knowing the eventual outcome, we are prompted to speculate as to whether things could have turned out differently. Above all, placed in the assemblies of the Athenian people or the other occasions for debate, we become not just spectators but vicarious participants, confronted just as the Athenian citizens were with the seductive rhetoric of Cleon or Pericles or Alcibiades; we are prompted to recognise their techniques of argument, and our own susceptibility to being misled, and thus to arm ourselves against similar manipulation in the real world.

From this perspective, Thucydides’ work does indeed appear as a vital text for a world in which truth is increasingly contested or undermined; it offers an education in political literacy. This does create a problem, however. Clearly, making use of Thucydides by extracting general principles from his work and presenting them in abstract form is to miss the point entirely, almost as much as offering decontextualised quotations from the funeral oration as nuggets of New Age wisdom.⁴² This practice reinforces his reputation for timeless insight, but primarily as a means of legitimising pre-existing ideas by giving them a veneer of classical authority. But is the only correct way to benefit from Thucydides’ insights into political life to read the whole of his work in detail? Is it possible to draw on his power without abusing it, to make his work accessible without simplifying and distorting the message? In many ways this is an entirely un-Thucydidean project. He introduces his work in an unashamedly elitist tone, expressing his willingness to alienate half-hearted readers who are hoping for something readable; he would, we can imagine, have hated soundbite culture, making the popularity of ‘Thucydides’ quotes on social media a fearsome irony. But we can take heart from his willingness to innovate – not just helping to pioneer the genre of writing we now call ‘history’, but experimenting with different literary forms within it – with the aim of creating something that would be ‘a possession for all time’ precisely because it would teach people how to recognise and value truth as the foundation of political life.

⁴¹ Hobbes 1629, xxii.

⁴² Cf. Morley 2013.

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