

‘The Most Politic Historiographer’: Thucydides and Political Thought

Neville Morley

But 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. He may from the narrations draw out lessons to himself, and of himself be able to trace the drifts and counsels of the actors to their seat.

Thomas Hobbes, ‘To the Readers’ (1629)

Thucydides’ account of the long war between Athens and Sparta and their respective allies in the fifth century BCE offers his readers a wealth of material on ancient Greek politics, especially the dynamics of inter-state relations and the workings of Athenian democracy. Indeed, one criticism levelled against his work since the late nineteenth century has been that it focuses excessively on politics in its presentation of historical events, to the neglect of economy, society or culture.¹ For other readers, that is precisely its strength and importance. Ever since its rediscovery in western Europe in the fourteenth century – prior to this, Thucydides was known just from remarks and references made by other classical authors like Cicero – the work has been employed, not always through explicit citation, in discussions of a wide range of different political issues and situations: the origins of wars and the possibility of ‘just war’, the nature of inter-state systems, the role of rhetoric and the passions in political life, the role of leadership, and the deficiencies and possibilities of democracy, to name just the most prominent themes.² A persistent theme in post-medieval readings of Thucydides has been the idea of his continuing, even surprising, relevance to modern problems, and hence a belief that he had developed profound, transhistorical insights into universal aspects of human nature and social and political behaviour. Unlike with most classical ‘authorities’, this belief not only survived the decline of exemplarity and the rise of self-consciously modern social science from the later eighteenth century, two developments which largely undermined any belief in the timeless wisdom of the ancients, but actually appears to have been

¹ E.g. Sahlins (2004).

² See the chapters in Parts 3 and 4 of Lee and Morley (2015) for an overview of topics.

strengthened over the last hundred years.³ Thucydides today is arguably the most-cited ancient figure in discussions of political issues.

However, while there is a widespread belief in Thucydides' authority and relevance, there has been and continues to be an enormous variety of different and often contradictory claims about the nature and source of his contribution to understanding political life. There is little consensus about what transhistorical insights he actually offers his readers, varying not only over time and between different national and disciplinary traditions of thinking about politics, but even within such traditions. This chapter outlines some of the most significant currents in political readings of Thucydides since the Renaissance, under three broad themes: the use of Thucydides' work as a source of historical information about ancient politics, which then informed modern political analysis (section 2); the deployment of quotations from his account, especially from the various speeches, as advice or cautions for political actors (3); and readings of Thucydides that take him to be a kind of political theorist, who seeks to identify the underlying principles of political structures and behaviour (4). First, however, we should consider why Thucydides has proved to be so amenable to radically different interpretations, both of the nature of his work and of its contents and message.

1. A possession for all time, for everyone?

In the field of International Relations, especially in the United States, Thucydides is often identified as a founding figure of 'Realist' thought, for his depiction (in the Melian Dialogue) of the world system as basically anarchic, dominated by power and rational interests. However, there are plenty of serious studies that argue against this label, not because of its anachronism but on the equally modernising grounds that Thucydides was rather a conscious anti-realist or a constructivist.⁴ Objections to the lessons being drawn from Thucydides' account by certain readers are often grounded in alternative readings of the work, rather than in rejecting the idea of his relevance. In response to justifications of the unilateral exercise of American superpower offered in the 1990s and early 2000s by neoconservatives, for whom he was 'a favourite text', for example, other commentators argued that the Sicilian expedition was a clear warning against overseas entanglements, and offered the debate in Athens that authorised it as a paradigm of the specious arguments and muddled thinking that lead states to embark on such disastrous enterprises.⁵ Thucydides' authority and relevance are not called into question, regardless of the revisions and reorientations his admirers are sometimes forced to make in order to preserve his standing. Interpretations of his account as a depiction of the dynamics of a bipolar world where two radically different political and cultural systems confronted one another, echoing the Cold War, were seamlessly replaced after 1989 by readings that emphasised the multi-polar character of fifth-century Greece and the significant roles of states like Corinth, Corcyra and Thebes, echoing the new international situation.⁶

³ On Thucydides and the crisis of exemplarity, Koselleck (2004) 26-7.

⁴ Johnson (1993); Ahrens Dorf (1997); Lebow (2001); Morley (2018a).

⁵ Bloxham (2018).

⁶ Cf. Novo (2016).

Both this unshakable belief in Thucydides' continuing authority and relevance, and the confusion of doctrines that his authority is taken to propound and legitimise, can in part be explained by the nature of the text itself. On the one hand, it offers a powerful construction of authorial authority at the beginning of Book 1, insisting on its own integrity and reliability through the disparagement of potential rivals who fail to enquire critically into the truth of things or who allow themselves to be distracted by motives other than establishing what really happened. On the other hand, paradoxically, there is the almost complete absence of any overt authorial voice through the rest of the narrative, so that events are rather left to speak for themselves (and hence are open to multiple interpretations).⁷ This dynamic is captured by Thomas Hobbes' characterisation of Thucydides' genius, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, in the preface to his own English translation, published in 1629: the sense, confirmed by many subsequent readers, of encountering an apparently straightforward account of events, which we can experience as if we had been present in the assemblies and on the battlefields, which is however unmistakably the creation of a brilliant mind who guides our thoughts through his arrangement of the material and yet leaves us apparently free to make our own judgements. There is a persistent emphasis in modern receptions on the concealed nature of Thucydides' teaching, from Justus Lipsius in 1589 ('everywhere does he secretly instruct') to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762 ('so far from interposing his authority, he carefully conceals himself from us') to Friedrich Nietzsche in 1889 ('there is scarcely another thinker with so many hidden thoughts'). It is left to the reader to identify the esoteric message of the text through close reading and interpretation, which can rarely if ever be properly evaluated but only answered with an alternative interpretation.⁸

Further, by explicitly claiming that readers will find his work useful because it will help them understand similar events in the present and future, Thucydides invites them to recognise their own times in his account, and to seek parallels with modern events. One can always find points of connection and comparison – such as the basic situation of a confrontation between a strong and a weak power in the Melian Dialogue (compared in recent years to the United States' activities in the Middle East, Russia's annexation of Crimea, the treatment of Greece by the troika of European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund, and the Brexit negotiations) – while discounting without any qualm the points of difference between past and present, on the basis that those are specific to the particular historical situation Thucydides described. The amount of detail offered in his descriptive passages, which clearly cannot be expected to find contemporary parallels in every respect, offers license for ignoring everything that, inconveniently, does not fit. Thucydides' account is always, potentially, both particular and general. Cleon is, in Thucydides' account, primarily a historical individual, but also an archetype of the demagogue; and modern readers have found no difficulty in taking him as both or either, depending on their needs.⁹

⁷ Forsdyke (2017) 20-30; de Bakker (2017).

⁸ Lipsius (2004) 732; Rousseau (1762) 209; Nietzsche (1988) 156.

⁹ Hall (2018).

Thucydides' work offers a radically open, under-determined text that is nevertheless suffused with politics and concrete political ideas. We can easily interpret this approach as deliberate, his chosen strategy being to create something that would indeed be a 'possession for ever', as he claimed, rather than a mere account of what happened for its own sake. But his authorial strategy has in practice also given occasion to a tradition of reception in which the nature of the work, insofar as that can be determined from the text itself and from knowledge of its historical and cultural context, has been overshadowed by readings which assimilate it to one or other modern style of discourse.¹⁰ The work is persistently interpreted and represented as prescient and innovative in its nature as well as its contents, transcending the thought and intellectual practices of its original fifth-century context and anticipating current practices – whether those of the 'scientific' critical historian or those of the realist International Relations theorist. For all the warnings of classicists about the non-modern, non-scientific nature of the text – Nicole Loraux's remark that 'Thucydides is not a colleague' – most political readings continue to assume, generally without even considering the point worth arguing, that it is in essence something familiar and already known.¹¹

This is of course scarcely unique to Thucydides, as other chapters in this volume make clear. What makes his tradition of political reception distinctive is, arguably, the fact that he is claimed as a colleague and honoured predecessor by at least two different intellectual traditions, both historians and political theorists and philosophers; and, secondly, the way that the most interesting and productive interpretations of his work have tended to be those that recognise and explore its trans-disciplinary, protean and problematic nature, as if taking their cue from Hobbes' characterisation of him as a 'most politic historiographer'.

2. History of/as Politics

Thucydides has over the centuries most commonly been regarded as a historian; indeed, especially in the nineteenth century, he was seen as a (or *the*) model historian, who had invented and virtually perfected critical historiography or 'Geschichte als Wissenschaft' along modern lines.¹² Belief in his absolute reliability and his commitment to offering a true account of events, founded on this nineteenth-century reading, is one of the bases for Thucydides' continuing authority today, even though contemporary historians have long ceased to refer to his work as any sort of model for their own research. Thucydides' statements about his methodology are taken at face value (or even interpreted charitably, in the case of the speeches; the fact that he himself admits that it was not possible to reproduce the words spoken accurately is frequently glossed over in favour of assuming that his rendition must be quite close to what was actually said). A range of arguments has been deployed to establish his authority, trustworthiness and impartiality, often drawing on limited and unreliable biographical information: his expertise as a general and politician, his willingness to present Athenians as well as Spartans critically, his lack of bitterness over his

¹⁰ Morley (2016).

¹¹ Loraux (1980).

¹² Murari Pires (2006); Muhlack (2011); Morley (2014).

military failure and exile. Finally, his claim about the usefulness of his account has been expanded into a claim about the usefulness of knowledge of the past in general, and hence a foundational statement both of professional historiography and of studies of politics that seek to ground themselves in reality rather than abstract theory. From this perspective, the value of Thucydides' work for understanding politics is the information he provides about his own times, which is then the basis for wider reflection.

From the Renaissance, but especially from the eighteenth century, different aspects of Greek history were evoked and discussed in relation to a wide range of contemporary political themes: the political and social institutions of Sparta and Athens (often taking the former as a model and the latter as a warning against the dangers of democracy and uncontrolled passions), the workings of different kinds of empires (land-based and thalassocratic), and the origins and course of wars.¹³ Thucydides undoubtedly played a significant role in these debates, as an unimpeachable source; among Greek historians, he was second only to Plutarch in terms of the number of editions produced in Europe between 1500 and 1600, with a striking rise in the level of interest from the 1550s onwards.¹⁴ However, because the majority of such discussions focus their attention on what can be learnt from the significant events of Greek history, rather than from a particular authority on Greek history, discerning Thucydides' specific influence can be difficult, except by default where he is known to be the only extant source on a topic – and even then, the influence may be second or third hand.

This problem is exemplified by the modern scholarly debate about whether or not Machiavelli had read Thucydides or engaged at all with his ideas, given that we do not have an equivalent of the sort of explicit engagement with an ancient text represented by his *Discourses on Livy*. On the one hand, the two writers are often associated with one another (under the heading of 'realism') but, on the other hand, there are few unmistakable references to Thucydides in Machiavelli's writings, and these often seem to be vague, confused or even distorted.¹⁵ Insofar as Thucydides was being read by Machiavelli, it was as a source of information rather than as a theorist of politics. For example, Machiavelli's argument that contrary to the claims of Pericles the outcome of the Peloponnesian War was the victory of the arms of Sparta over the resources of Athens looks like a commentary on Thucydides 1.83, as the idea that 'wars are won not by arms but by money' is not attributed to Pericles by any other extant ancient source. However, there is no explicit mention of the historian, let alone of his analysis of the war – Machiavelli takes Pericles as his interlocutor here on the specific point, and ascribes the general idea of 'money being the nerve of war' to Quintus Curtius.¹⁶ The same is true of almost all the other significant discussions of the relevance of Greek

¹³ See e.g. Moore, et al. (2008); Vlassopoulos (2009), (2010); Macgregor et al. (2012).

¹⁴ Cox Jensen (2018). All Greek historians except Plutarch were dwarfed in importance by Roman historians like Livy, Sallust, Caesar and Tacitus – and since Plutarch may have been read primarily for the light he shed on Roman history rather than Greek, Thucydides' significance may have been still greater. On Thucydides in Renaissance education, Iori (2019).

¹⁵ Murari Pires (2008), (2010).

¹⁶ Machiavelli (1883), book 2 chapter 10.

history to politics until well into the eighteenth century: except for the discussion of specific points where Thucydides' account needed to be contrasted with that of Plutarch or another ancient author (where his authority was usually preferred), he is simply subsumed within the broader reception and rhetorical deployment of examples from Greek history, and not ascribed any particular authority on political issues.

Thucydides' invitation to his readers to identify their present circumstances in his account was regularly accepted, but was understood in terms of actual resemblances between past and present events, rather than as an effect of his analysis of those events; it is the effectiveness of his descriptive powers in making these resemblances clear that matters, not his interpretation of them. We can see this in responses to one of the most commonly 'recognised' episodes in his work, the depiction of the *stasis* or civil disorder in Corcyra. 'All this neatly fits the corruption of our times as well,' remarked Lorenzo Valla, the fifteenth-century historian and translator of Thucydides into Latin, of the passage.¹⁷ A century later, David Chytraeus, a Lutheran theologian and Rostock historian who produced translations of several of Thucydides' speeches for his students, offered a different reading of the essential message of Thucydides' account when making his comparison:

Thucydides' very learned description of the revolution [*seditio*] 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.¹⁸

The dangers of factionalism, now on political rather than religious grounds, were a pressing concern for key thinkers of the American Revolution. One of the strongest claims of a Confederacy or Union, according to *Federalist* No. 9, written by Alexander Hamilton (as 'Publius'), is as a safeguard against the domestic faction and insurrection to which popular governments show such a strong propensity. Hamilton established classical Greece and Renaissance Italy as the touchstones of the problem of factionalism, but also sought to counter the argument that this therefore revealed the undesirability of any form of general civil liberty.

It is impossible to read the history of the petty republics of Greece and Italy without feeling sensations of horror and disgust at the distractions with which they were continually agitated, and at the rapid succession of revolutions by which they were kept in a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy. If they exhibit occasional calms, these only serve as short-lived contrast to the furious storms that are to succeed. If now and then intervals of felicity open to view, we behold them with a mixture of regret, arising from the reflection that

¹⁷ Cited in Grafton (2007) 105.

¹⁸ Grafton (2007) 105-6.

the pleasing scenes before us are soon to be overwhelmed by the tempestuous waves of sedition and party rage.¹⁹

Thucydides' account contributed to this picture, but without him being named; Corcyra is absorbed into a broader picture of the evils of ancient civil wars and revolutions.²⁰ Edmund Burke likewise did not explicitly refer to Corcyra or Thucydides in his account of the French Revolution, but the episode supplied him with the appropriate language and images for depicting the breakdown of society and morality:

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.²¹

Plots and assassinations will be anticipated by preventative murder and preventative confiscation.²²

George Grote, in his historical account of the Corcyrean *stasis*, made Burke's analogy explicit, at the same time as acknowledging Thucydides' generalising intent and hence usefulness:

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.²³

Nevertheless, this comparison is still primarily conceived in terms of the resemblances between actual past and present events, which Thucydides' literary skill brings out, rather than in terms of a self-conscious theory of the 'perverting causes' of factionalism and social fragmentation that is intended to be applied to different historical contexts. Even when Grote (like John Stuart Mill after him) found himself in the position of needing to dispute elements of Thucydides' account of democracy in order to present Athens as a positive model for the present, he approached this task by questioning the historical impartiality and hence reliability of his depiction of the Athenian assembly in general and of Cleon in particular, rather than his underlying political ideas:

We cannot but say of this criticism, with profound regret that such words must be pronounced respecting any judgement of Thucydides, that it is harsh and unfair

¹⁹ Hamilton (1787).

²⁰ Cf. Armitage (2017).

²¹ Burke (2014) 69, echoing Thuc. 3.82.3-7.

²² Burke (2014) 80, echoing Thuc. 3.83.4; other parts of this passage of Burke evoke the loss of the 'ancient simplicity' and nobility described by Thucydides (3.83.1).

²³ Grote (1907) vol. 5, 197.

towards Kleon, and careless in regard to truth and the instruction of his readers. It breathes not that same spirit of honorable impartiality which pervades his general history; it is an interpolation by the officer whose improvidence had occasioned to his countrymen the fatal loss of Amphipolis, retaliating upon the citizen who had justly accused him.²⁴

Thucydides' unflattering portrayal of demagoguery and the susceptibility of the Athenian assembly to rhetoric and emotion is explained (away) as the result of a personal grudge, not of different political views, let alone of a critical theory of democracy. In part this reflects Grote's own approach, presenting a history of Greece that was easily read (by friends and opponents alike) as an encomium of Athenian democracy rather than explicitly arguing for democracy as a political system; but it clearly also reflects a prevalent view of the status of Thucydides' work, as political history rather than philosophy. In a similar manner, Richard Shilleto's combative response to Grote's account, denouncing him as a Republican and criticising his philological judgements, defended Thucydides on the grounds that there was no reason to believe that he was swayed by personal feelings, and that in any case Cleon *did* deserve censure, not on any more theoretical basis.²⁵

The idea that Greek history or Greek political institutions had anything significant to contribute to the understanding of modern politics came under increasing strain in the course of the nineteenth century, with a growing awareness (promoted especially by the emerging disciplines of social science) of the vast differences between ancient and modern in terms of scale, values, technology, conceptions of freedom and many other elements.²⁶ If antiquity was considered relevant at all, it was rather as a point of contrast, establishing the particular characteristics of modern political life through juxtaposition with strikingly different Greek practices, and exploring the implications of these differences. Further, over the same period there was growing scepticism, fuelled by the new critical approaches to historiography pioneered in Germany, about the reliability of ancient historians, given their adherence to old-fashioned notions of 'history as art' and their primitive methods. Thucydides survived the first wave of scepticism, being proclaimed instead as the pioneer of such critical historiography but, by the early twentieth century, his credentials as a wholly objective and reliable reporter were also being questioned, especially on the grounds of the highly rhetorical and literary nature of his work.²⁷ Insofar as Greek history continued to be referenced in political debates in the twentieth century, it was an account of Greek history based on modern research that interpreted ancient authorities critically, rather than one based on direct citation and paraphrase of those sources. Some readers continued to recognise their own times in Thucydides' account of events – compare recent evocations of the Mytilene Debate as a precedent for reversing the UK's Brexit referendum – but these comparisons are superficial at best.

²⁴ Grote (1907) vol. 6, 459.

²⁵ Shilleto (1851) 1; Stray (1997).

²⁶ See e.g. Morley (2009); Nippel (2016).

²⁷ Morley (2012), (2015).

3. Thucydides' Political Wisdom

This shift in attitudes and assumptions did not render Thucydides irrelevant for political analysis; they simply required him to be read in a different way. Rather than gathering information about past events, one could seek to extract from his work knowledge and understanding that transcended his time and so could be applied to the present, either because it was timeless or, less commonly, because it spoke to situations that were now being repeated. (For example, Graham Allison has promoted the idea of a recurring 'Thucydides Trap' in global politics: a world in which an 'established' power is confronted by a 'rising' power.²⁸) The focus is now on Thucydides' own ideas and interpretations, his understanding of the events he described, rather than on the events themselves; he is seen to have compiled his narrative of past politics not as an end in itself, but as a basis for identifying general principles of human political life that his readers can employ to make sense of their own world.

This tradition of reading arguably existed from the beginning of Thucydidean reception in early modern Europe, insofar as key passages and phrases, taken from the speeches included in his work, were cited as political maxims and lessons. In 1554, for example, the ambassador from the Holy Roman Emperor at the court of Queen Mary reported to his master that he had given her a copy of Thucydides translated into French 'so that she may see the counsel he gives and what punishments should be inflicted on rebels.'²⁹ Presumably, given that Thomas Wyatt's rebellion had just been suppressed, this made reference to Cleon's speech in the Mytilene Debate. An assortment of authors in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Venice quoted Thucydides for a variety of purposes: as a model for the Republic's institutions and ideals (drawing especially on Pericles' Funeral Oration); as a source of guidance for the Venetian empire in dealing with restive subjects (Cleon in the Mytilene Debate again); and as a justification for war, or at the very least active preparation for it (Pericles' first speech).³⁰ 'I fear,' claimed Henry Wootton, James I's ambassador at the Venetian court, 'that Thucydides' exclamation may apply to the Republic when he says: "Happy had Athens been had her wise resolves found rapid execution".' Clearly the expectation was that Venetians would respond to this sort of argument.³¹

It is not entirely clear what passage of Thucydides Wootton was actually referring to; his phrase echoes several different statements by different speakers, without being a close match to any of them.³² This is of course a familiar problem in tracing the influence of any classical authors in this period; the original authors of ideas and maxims may not be mentioned at all, but certainly they are not accompanied by exact references. The short book of advice that James VI of Scotland wrote for his son in 1599, the *Basilikon Doron*, which

²⁸ Allison (2017).

²⁹ Cited by Hoekstra (2012) 25-6.

³⁰ Hoekstra (2012) 29-34.

³¹ Hoekstra (2012) 30-1.

³² Hoekstra suggests a misappropriation of Thuc. 2.40.2-3, 3.38.1, 6.18.4-7, or most probably 1.70.

sold in the thousands when reprinted in London in 1603 after his accession to the English throne, mentions Thucydides five times in its footnotes, but simply refers to the number of the book, and the connection between the advice offered and the text is rarely obvious. For example, ‘Be curious in devising stratagems, but alwayes honestly: for of any thing they worke greatest effects in the warres, if secrecie be ioyned to inuention’ (note: ‘Xen. 1. Cyr. Thuc. 5’) or ‘Choose then for all these Offices, men of knowen wisdom, honestie and good conscience; well practised in the points of the craft, that yee ordaine them for, and free of all factions and partialities; but specially free of that filthie vice of Flatterie, the pest of all Princes, and wracke of Republicks’ (note: ‘Thuc. 6’).³³ The first must surely be referring to the speech of Brasidas at 5.9, given the absence of other plausible candidates in Book 5, while the second echoes Nicias’ warnings against Alcibiades in the Sicilian Debate. James’s footnotes offer ancient authors like Thucydides not as authorities, let alone as thinkers whose arguments must be expounded and analysed at length, but rather as possible examples to be considered further or as sources of inspiration for his own thoughts. They assume on the part of his reader either a ready familiarity with relevant sections of the text so that, for example, a reference to the importance of martial discipline will call to mind the speech of Archidamus in Book 2, or a willingness to read quite extensive passages of text to identify the intended lesson.³⁴

Such readings, fully in the tradition of *historia magistra vitae* and the search for ancient exempla, were abetted by the publication of editions and translations of the speeches alone, or a selection of them. The first translation of Thucydides into a modern European language, made at the request of the Aragonese statesman Juan Fernández de Heredia, had been a collection of thirty-eight speeches, and the practice continued well into the seventeenth century: sometimes collections of speeches just from Thucydides, sometimes substantial sections devoted to Thucydides in collections of speeches from a range of ancient authors, such as Henri Estienne’s 1570 *Conciones*.³⁵ Some of these collections included all or almost all of the Thucydidean speeches; some focused on a kind of ‘greatest hits’, in which the Funeral Oration, the Mytilene Debate (the theologian Philip Melancthon commissioned an edition just of Diodotus’ speech for his students in 1520), and the Sicilian Debate seem to have been especially popular; and others took a different principle of organisation, such as Melancthon’s 1531 edition of the speeches from Book 1 alone. One function of these collections was of course as a source of lessons in rhetoric, and so speeches were selected partly on the basis of their perceived literary qualities, though generally Latin orators were preferred for that purpose. Just as important, however, was the sense that the most useful elements of the work were to be found in the sections where ‘Thucydides’ speaks to and advises his readers – it was rare for much distinction to be drawn between Thucydides and his characters, or for the identity of the supposed speaker to influence the reception of the advice.

³³ James VI (1918) 56, 77.

³⁴ James VI (1918) 53, a long passage on different aspects of war, where Thucydides is cited alongside Sallust, Cicero, Demosthenes, Livy, Caesar and Vegetius.

³⁵ Iglesias-Zoido (2015); Pade (2015).

This tradition continues today, one might argue, with the role of snippets from the Funeral Oration in political rhetoric (speeches in the US Congress, for example, or the preface to the draft European Constitution) and the deployment of Thucydidean maxims, not all of them genuine, in military contexts like war memorials and veterans' organisation Twitter feeds.³⁶ Words from Thucydides are extracted from their context and reproduced as expressing important wisdom and insight, about the nature of democracy or the role of the soldier in defending freedom and democracy. The main difference from the early modern examples is the heavy dependence on the authority of Thucydides' name to legitimise the sentiment, hence the habit of attributing other quotes, with suitable contents but more obscure authors, to him – such as the line associated with Solon about justice not coming to Athens until those who are not injured are as indignant as those who are. Thucydides today is regarded as a man of deep insight into the realities of political life – insight that can, as in the exemplary tradition, be adequately conveyed in the form of a few decontextualized maxims.

The beginning of a more extensive and intensive engagement with Thucydides as a political thinker is most commonly associated with Thomas Hobbes, not least because of his role in translating the work early in his career and the concomitant assumption that this must therefore have had an influence on his thought. In fact Hobbes' interest in the text seems to have been sparked, at least in part, by its relevance to contemporary political debates around the idea of just war and pre-emptive aggression, including in the writings of Alberico Gentili, Hugo Grotius and Francis Bacon.³⁷ As Kinch Hoekstra has argued in relation to this period, 'This is not to say that modern political thought would not have unfolded in something like the form it did without Thucydides (nor is it clear how such a claim could be established or refuted), but that it did unfold in part via interpretations of Thucydides.'³⁸ Gentili, for example, cited the speech of the Mytileneans as offering a correct view, *contra* Cicero, of the legitimacy of a pre-emptive attack if the commonwealth really is in danger; it is presented initially as 'the reply of the Mytileneans to the Athenians', rather than attributed directly to Thucydides, but shortly thereafter he addresses the dissenting views of two other authorities by asking rhetorically, 'Are we not to value more highly ... the opinion of Thucydides, an eminent and wise man; an opinion confirmed also by reason?'³⁹ Grotius directly countered this argument by looking to different passages in Thucydides: first citing book 1, advising against action on the basis of uncertain perceived threats; and then turning to later in book 3, where those who indulged in pre-emptive aggression in the Coryrean stasis are condemned.⁴⁰

Bacon, arguing that apprehensions of danger are a legitimate ground for war, turned to yet another passage:

It is good to heare what time saith. *Thucydides*, in his *Inducement* to his Story of the great *Warre* of *Peloponnesus*, sets downe in plaine termes, that the true Cause

³⁶ Sawyer (2015); Morley (2013).

³⁷ Hoekstra (2012); O'Driscoll (2015).

³⁸ Hoekstra (2012) 26 n.4.

³⁹ Hoekstra (2012) 40-1.

⁴⁰ Hoekstra (2012) 47.

of that Warre was: *The ouergrowing Greatnesse of the Athenians, and the feare that the Lacedemonians stood in thereby*; And doth not doubt to call it, *A necessity imposed upon the Lacedemonians of a Warre*: Which are the Words of a mere *Defensiue*: Adding, that the other Causes were but specious and Popular.⁴¹

There is of course a certain ambiguity here, unlike in Gentili or Grotius, as to whether the ultimate source of this wisdom is ‘history’ (‘what time saith’), conveyed accurately by Thucydides, or Thucydides himself. Hobbes, too, saw Thucydides as a historian rather than any other kind of thinker; in particular, he clearly distinguished his approach from that of a philosopher, because he confined himself to narrative and deliberative orations: ‘Digressions for instruction’s cause, and other such open conveyances of precepts (which is the philosopher’s part), he never useth’ (1629, xx). But the rest of that sentence makes it equally clear that Thucydides is a special kind of historian: ‘as having so clearly set before men’s eyes the ways and events of good and evil counsels, that the narration itself doth secretly instruct the reader, and more effectually than can possibly be done by precept.’ That is to say, what distinguishes Thucydides is not his purpose, but his method; like other writers on historical and political matters, he expects that attentive readers will learn from his account about the workings of politics and the consequences of different decisions – Hobbes claimed in the dedicatory letter to William Cavendish that Thucydides’ writings have in them ‘profitable instruction for noblemen’ – but he allows these readers to come to their conclusions themselves, through reflection on his ‘coherent, perspicuous and persuasive’ narrative, rather than telling them what to think. What is clear is that the text offers Thucydides’ version of events, carefully organised and presented for his own purposes, rather than a transparent account of the reality of the past with the historian a mere conduit; and we should be interested in Thucydides’ understanding of events at least as much as in the events themselves.

This is what we find in Hobbes’ reading – both his direct reading of Thucydides as represented in the translation, which develops some of his developing political ideas in dialogue with the text (and in particular engages with the issues of preventative war and deterrence that had concerned his mentor Bacon), and in his subsequent engagement with Thucydidean themes and examples.⁴² Still more than with other authors in this period evoking passages from the speeches, this analysis involves the identification of Thucydidean echoes and phrases in Hobbes’ work even when there is no explicit reference to the Greek author or his text, and arguing for the existence of shared concerns. There is a distinct danger of projection, of assuming that such influence and intellectual engagement *must* be present, so that any faint resemblance must be significant. The late twentieth-century incorporation of Hobbes into the tradition of Realism has involved not only the back-projection of various modern theoretical tenets onto his work but also the construction of a story of coherent intellectual development derived from the earlier founding figures, Thucydides and

⁴¹ Bacon (1624) 474.

⁴² On the political dimensions of Hobbes’ translation, see Iori (2015).

Machiavelli, which then shapes the interpretation of all writers assigned to this tradition.⁴³ Nevertheless, we can identify at least five major themes in Hobbes' later work that certainly owe something to Thucydidean ideas.

The first three are broadly 'historical', in the sense that they draw on Thucydides' description of events as revealing more general truths, without it being clear how far Hobbes considered that such generalisation was Thucydides' own purpose. The depiction of early Greece in the 'Archaeology' at the beginning of Book 1, before the development of trade, peace and civilisation, informed Hobbes' account of the natural condition of mankind presented in *Leviathan*; the depiction of the Corcyrean *stasis* supplied a powerful image of the 'war of all against all' and the fragility of social cohesion and shared meaning, representing one of the basic problems of human political life that Hobbes sought to address in *Leviathan*; and, more generally, Thucydides' account offered ample evidence of the destructive effects of oratory and its ability to fire up dangerous passions within the body politic.⁴⁴ Interestingly, Hobbes offered a warning remark about the contemporary dangers of the political reception of ancient authors and their provocative ideas, the dire consequences of which had been revealed by his translation of Thucydides:

And by reading of these Greek, and Latine authors, men from their childhood have gotten a habit (under a false shew of Liberty,) of favouring tumults, and of licentious controlling the actions of their Sovereigns ... with the effusion of so much blood; as I think I may truly say, there was never any thing so deerly bought, as these Western parts have bought the learning of the Greek and Latine tongues.⁴⁵

This does imply a recognition that Thucydides had framed his account around speeches because of his insight into the workings and failings of Athenian democratic politics – in other words, he should be seen as a critical observer rather than a mere chronicler. This perspective is still more obvious in the other two Thucydidean themes identifiable in Hobbes' work. Firstly, the idea of politics as motion and perpetual tumult echoed Thucydides' description of his subject as 'the greatest *kinesis*' in Greek history, an idea that was continued in James Harrington's *Oceana*, likewise drawing on Thucydides. Secondly, the nature of the passions that created such upheaval, especially war, which were characterised in Thucydides as the three motives of fear, honour and interest, became in Hobbes competition, diffidence and glory: 'the first maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation'.⁴⁶ This last theme, in particular, carried Thucydides' influence beyond the civil wars and political tumults of the seventeenth century and into the present.

⁴³ Johnson (1993).

⁴⁴ Scott (2009) 414-15, 420-4; Klosko and Rice (1985); Brown (1987); Johnston (1986) 56-60; Sullivan (2015) 250-4.

⁴⁵ Hobbes (1991) 149-50; Scott (2009) 416-17.

⁴⁶ Thuc. 1.75.3; Hobbes (1991) 88; Slomp (1990); Sullivan (2015) 253-7.

4. History as Political Theory

As noted above, with the partial exception of Hobbes and a few other early modern thinkers, the dominant interpretation of Thucydides until the mid-twentieth century has been to see him as a historian, a more or less reliable source of information about the past that might or might not be relevant to present political concerns. The modern shift to seeing him rather as a significant political thinker, and a founding figure in different fields of political thought, draws on the repeated sense on the part of his readers that there is far more to his account than a simple narrative of events.

Friedrich Nietzsche's insistence on the significance of Thucydides' hidden thoughts, and his characterisation of him as a man unafraid to confront reality (in contrast to Plato's flight into the ideal), helped to cement the impression that he was more than a mere chronicler, but was rather someone who sought to uncover broader truths about human behaviour.⁴⁷ Thucydides' establishment as a core text in the classical canon, albeit only for advanced students, meant that – at least until the middle of the twentieth century – a significant number of political theorists, especially those working within the European philosophical tradition, might encounter him and thereafter incorporate some of his ideas or phrases into their work. Hannah Arendt, for example, who learnt Greek as a child and studied classics at school and university, drew at times on the Melian Dialogue, on the Corcyrean *stasis* and on Pericles' Funeral Oration to consider the dynamics of imperialism and the nature of the political community.⁴⁸ Raymond Aron likewise made passing references to Thucydides throughout his writings on inter-state relations, but portrayed him predominately as a historian, albeit a sophisticated one; this was largely in order to insist on the difference between ancient and modern assumptions, and that a twentieth-century Thucydides still focused on the role of individuals in events, rather than on economic and social structures, was simply inconceivable.⁴⁹

Arguably the most influential of these mid-twentieth century readers was Leo Strauss.⁵⁰ Thucydides was one of his touchstones, a key text in his major work *The City and Man*, and the subject of a lecture course he delivered at Chicago in 1962 and of some of his later seminars: 'the man who has grasped and articulated most fully the essence of political life, the life of politics as it actually is.'⁵¹ Thucydides offers a text that is well suited to the Straussian approach to close reading, which includes an extreme unitarianism in which every aspect can be assumed to be significant, and where apparent discrepancies and contradictions are taken to offer clues towards deeper authorial intentions.⁵² But one might also say that the text, and the sense of its hidden complexities and thoughts experienced by many readers, helped make the Straussian method more plausible. Certainly Strauss's interest helped to

⁴⁷ Zumbrunnen (2002).

⁴⁸ See e.g. Klusmeyer (2011).

⁴⁹ Aron (1961).

⁵⁰ Orwin (2015).

⁵¹ Strauss (1989) 75.

⁵² Jaffe (2015).

legitimise Thucydides as a writer about whom one would, as a political philosopher working within the Straussian ‘school’, be expected to have opinions; and a significant number of his pupils and those influenced by his ideas have written books and articles on Thucydides, from many different perspectives, but arguably with a particular focus on questions of justice.⁵³

At the heart of Strauss’s reading is the idea that Thucydides offers us political wisdom; that he not only provides evidence of the nature of pre-philosophical political thought, the classical rationalism that provided the basis for Socratic thinking and has subsequently been misunderstood and misrepresented by mainstream philosophy, but also thereby provides a transhistorical understanding of the first principles of political life, which he consciously sought to derive from his study of actual historical events.

By understanding Thucydides’ wisdom, we ourselves become wise; but we cannot become wise through understanding Thucydides without realizing simultaneously that it is through understanding Thucydides that we are becoming wise, for wisdom is inseparable from self-knowledge. By becoming wise through understanding Thucydides, we see Thucydides’ wisdom.⁵⁴

Strauss labeled Thucydides a historian rather than a philosopher; but a historian who escaped the trap of historicism, and of reducing everything to its historical context, thus causing true philosophical enquiry to cease ‘to be intelligible as a legitimate and necessary pursuit’ – a historian, in other words, who can be claimed for philosophy.⁵⁵

The other great shift in modern readings of Thucydides was a direct product of the First World War, with the development over the following two decades of a new discipline of international politics in which Thucydides was enshrined as authority, model and inspiration.⁵⁶ This development was partly contingent, as influential figures like Arnold Toynbee and Alfred Zimmern happened to be classically trained and already familiar with Thucydides; but their turn, from the academic study of the past to concerted efforts to build a new world order through both political activism and the study of inter-state relations, arose in a context in which the use of Thucydides’ work as a means of engaging with contemporary political and global issues was already established. Zimmern had begun to reflect on the relevance of the Periclean Funeral Oration to Great Britain and its empire in his *The Greek Commonwealth* of 1911, and in the preface to the second edition in 1914 he argued explicitly for the utility of the Greek example; his version of the speech was later printed as a cheap pamphlet, with extracts from his preface, and a quotation used in a government military recruitment campaign.⁵⁷ In 1919 Zimmern returned to academia, but now in the field of

⁵³ E.g. Orwin (1994); Forde (1989); Palmer (1992); Nichols (2015); Dobski (2017).

⁵⁴ Strauss (1989) 90; cf. 84: ‘Thus by understanding the Peloponnesian War, one grasps the limits of all human things. One understands the nature of all human things. One understands all human things completely.’

⁵⁵ Generally on the relationship between history and political philosophy, Floyd and Stears (2011). Marcotte-Chenard (2018) offers a detailed comparison of Strauss and Aron on this issue.

⁵⁶ Keene (2015); Earley (2020).

⁵⁷ Morley (2018b).

international politics; his publications henceforth focused on current affairs, but references recur to ancient history in general and Thucydides in particular, especially in public lectures.⁵⁸ Reflecting on the relevance of ancient Greece for modern America after the Second World War, he remarked: 'I remember what Thucydides said of war, that war is a teacher who educates by means of violence.'⁵⁹

Arnold Toynbee went still further in promoting an engaged historical study focused on global politics, having been struck in 1914, so he later claimed, by the contemporaneity of Thucydides' account: 'the age of Thucydides, so far from lying behind me in my past, had been standing all that time in front of me in my future until now, when I was just beginning to catch Thucydides up through meeting in my own life with Thucydides' experiences.'⁶⁰ He too shifted from ancient history to the study of international politics, and by 1948 was a transatlantic public intellectual, featuring on the cover of *Time* magazine and entering the bestseller lists in the United States, among other things popularising the idea of Thucydides as a significant authority.

In the development of International Relations, the liberal internationalists like Zimmern and Toynbee lost the battle of ideas, and their contribution to the founding of the discipline is now largely ignored in favour of more heavyweight and intellectually amenable figures like E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau. However, their influence – partly mediated through the American political theorist Louis Halle – does account for the prominence of Thucydides as a recognised authority in the field, despite the fact that neither Carr nor Morgenthau had much to say about him.⁶¹ When scholars like Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin established 'realism' and 'neo-realism' as distinctive forms of the academic study of international relations in the late 1970s, including providing this cluster of ideas with an impressive prior history and identifying (or laying claim to) its intellectual antecedents, Thucydides was identified as the key classical authority, standing alongside Machiavelli, Hobbes and Kant as thinkers whose ideas need to be studied by every student.⁶² His work, or at least extracts from it (above all the Melian Dialogue) became a basic text in every university course on realism; his name became familiar to most if not all scholars in the field, as a prestigious founding figure, a significant authority on key issues, and even a source of disciplinary identity.⁶³

There is no agreement on how Thucydides' ideas should be interpreted – as noted above, the mainstream tradition of claiming him as an archetypal realist has been supplemented with anti-realist and constructivist interpretations – but, with rare exceptions, his status as a core thinker in international relations is not questioned.⁶⁴ His current ubiquity

⁵⁸ Morefield (2005).

⁵⁹ Zimmern (1947) 11.

⁶⁰ Toynbee (1950) 9-10.

⁶¹ Cf. Boucher (1998) 7-8; Dunne (1998) 1-30.

⁶² See e.g. Brown, Nardin and Rengger (2002).

⁶³ As Ruback (2015) has argued.

⁶⁴ Even the sceptical overview offered by Welch (2003) concludes by reintegrating Thucydides into the discipline.

in discussions of the future of US-China relations, as a result of Graham Allison's energetic promotion of 'Thucydides's Trap' as a model for understanding the dynamic between the two powers, is a clear illustration of this; critics have frequently questioned whether Allison's reading of Thucydides is plausible or complete, and have argued that the development of nuclear weapons has transformed the context of relations between great powers such that pre-modern and early modern models are now irrelevant, but the status of Thucydides as a thinker who *might* have relevant ideas to contribute to the discussion of contemporary global politics is not disputed.⁶⁵

While scholars in this field have offered a wide range of interpretations of Thucydides, and have invoked his name in many different contexts, it is possible to identify some recurrent themes which clearly differentiate this tradition of political reception from those already discussed. Firstly, Thucydides is conceived not as a historian in any conventional sense but as a pioneering political theorist, someone concerned not with narrating past events as an end in itself but with identifying and elaborating the general principles of human behaviour and political life.⁶⁶ Thucydides' claim (1.22) about the intended usefulness of his work in giving his readers understanding – since present and future events will tend to resemble those of the past 'because of the human thing' – is interpreted as the first proclamation of a normative political science, grounded in the assumption of a fixed and predictable 'human nature' (the standard translation of *kata to anthrôpinon* in these contexts). Thucydides is interpreted as having uncovered transhistorical laws and principles of political relations, both inter- and intra-state, through his study of the events of the Peloponnesian War, and then to have chosen the form of a narrative of those events as the best means both to communicate his claims and to support them. For the most part – above all in student textbooks, but also in some of the most influential accounts of Thucydides as a realist thinker – this account of his disciplinary identity is taken for granted rather than argued; it captures one aspect of what could be termed Thucydides' 'project', one that has often been neglected by readers who saw him as a conventional historian focused solely on reconstructing the past, but at the expense of obscuring others, above all the literary form of his account and the level of detail in the narrative.

The most serious problem for this reading of Thucydides as normative political analyst is the difficulty of identifying any of the theories that he is supposedly concerned to identify and elaborate; for the most part, such readings depend on taking the statements of certain speakers – which do include normative claims, such as the familiar idea that 'the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must', as expressions of Thucydides' own views, to be taken at face value and generalised beyond the immediate situation. Thus the conventional realist reading assumes that Thucydides intended us to accept the arguments of the Athenians at Melos about the irrelevance of justice, the dominance of power relations and the overriding importance of rational calculations of advantage as his own theoretical position. The claim of the Athenian speakers in the debate at Sparta about the three successive motives of fear, honour and interest that had led to the expansion of their empire

⁶⁵ Allison (2017); Foot et al. (2017); Jaffe (2017); Lee (2019); Misenheimer (2019).

⁶⁶ Ober (2001); Ober and Perry (2014).

(1.75.3) is read as an analysis of the rational motivations of all states, operating simultaneously; and so forth. This is just as unsophisticated an interpretation as the attempt by some historical readers to argue that the speeches are straightforward transcriptions of what was actually said; it recognises Thucydides' role in composing their words and using them as a means of conveying ideas, but collapses any distinction between the author and what he makes his characters say – or certain characters, as there is no suggestion that the claims of the Melians should be taken as expressions of Thucydides' position.

Further, these passages tend to be read in isolation (especially when extracts are reprinted in textbooks). Far from the Melian Dialogue being a straightforward endorsement of Athenian Realpolitik, one could easily argue that Thucydides' subsequent narrative shows how misguided the views expressed by the Athenians at Melos about the workings of the world and their own position of advantage actually were; indeed, it is plausible that his aim was precisely to emphasise a connection between the pathology of superiority and a tendency to make catastrophic errors of judgement. Similarly, Allison's interpretation of the 'Thucydides' Trap' takes a single sentence – the claim at 1.23 that the 'truest cause' of the war was the rise of Athens and the fear this provoked in the Spartans – and elevates this to the status of an invariable principle in the mind of Thucydides (albeit one which is found to operate only in 13 out of 16 comparable historical situations according to Allison's own analysis). In fact, Thucydides effectively qualifies his statement though the subsequent narrative of events, showing how the tensions between Athens and Sparta played out in practice but also emphasising complexity (the role of other players like Corinth) and counterfactual possibilities.⁶⁷ Finally, we should note the tendency in IR discussions not only to rely on translations, with the risk of obscuring the complexity and ambiguity of the original Greek (there are of course long debates about the exact meaning of 'the truest cause' or 'because of human nature' that are simply not registered in many of these discussions), but to rely on fairly unreliable translations, especially Richard Crawley's much reprinted 1874 version.⁶⁸ The claim that Thucydides in 1.23 is establishing a general principle about 'what made war inevitable' is rendered questionable by the more literal rendition of the phrase, 'what compelled the Spartans to war'.

Just as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians did, international relations theorists tend to treat Thucydides as a colleague who shares their goals, methodological precepts and theoretical assumptions – or, more commonly, they simply echo the claims made about his ideas and the nature of his work developed by earlier scholars in the tradition who recognised their own ideas and preoccupations in their reading of his text. Thucydides is wholly incorporated into the mainstream of the discipline, and evoked in passing to provide different axioms and aphorisms with a classical veneer and timeless authority: the ritual opening of 'Ever since the days of Thucydides ...'.⁶⁹ However, such practices are neither inevitable nor universal. There are many examples of sophisticated readings within political

⁶⁷ Cf. Novo (2020).

⁶⁸ Cf. the slightly confusing claim in Kirshner (2018) that '... despite classicists' reporting the prose to be often very challenging, countless passages (in translation) are visionary.'

⁶⁹ Ruback (2016).

theory, which engage with the text in detail in order to develop or critique other theoretical positions – arguing against crude realism via the supposed founder of realism, for example – and/or draw on classical scholarship on Thucydides in order to open up political questions.⁷⁰ The continuing evocation of Thucydides in the study of International Relations, even in the crude form of quotes from the Melian Dialogue, keeps open the possibility of more concerted engagement, reading his work as a provocation rather than a confirmation of taken-for-granted methods and ideas. And even the most crude or conventional readings can spark new ideas when introduced into new contexts: for example, the rise of the ‘Thucydides Trap’ as a supposed key to US-China relations, and Chinese responses to the claims of the theory, have raised new questions about the uses of the past and responses to Western political thought in non-Western traditions.

In these contexts, Thucydides may be read not as a colleague but perhaps as a kindred spirit, with greater awareness of how far the persistent belief in his contemporaneity and authority may be a construct both of the traditions of his modern reception and of Thucydides’ own authorial approach. Acknowledging the *strangeness* of Thucydides’ text, its multiple failures to conform to the norms of modern political analysis (as it likewise fails to conform to the norms of modern historiography), can raise questions about the way those norms are taken for granted as immutable and inevitable. Reflection on how Thucydides narrates past events as a means of developing political understanding can promote more general reflection on the uses of history and the place of historical thinking in modern social science – even raising doubts about confident belief in the existence of normative principles.⁷¹ Reading Thucydides as a transdisciplinary ‘most politic historiographer’, as a kind of novelist, or as a writer who wholly transcends modern (and ancient) ideas of genre offers a basis for a more sophisticated idea of how his work can nevertheless continue to illuminate modern political thinking.

⁷⁰ See e.g. Crane (1998), Lebow (2003).

⁷¹ Cf. Hawthorn (2014).

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