University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications: Political Science

Political Science, Department of

2005

Thucydides [from *Encyclopedia of Social Measurement*]

Peter A. Furia
Wake Forest University

Ari Kohen
University of Nebraska−Lincoln,, akohen2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/poliscifacpub

Part of the Political Science Commons

Thucydides

Peter A. Furia

Wake Forest University, Winston—Salem, North Carolina, USA

Ari Kohen

Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA

Glossary

Alcibiades ▶ Athenian general initially chosen to lead the Sicilian expedition. He was recalled from the expedition and condemned to death by Athens, but he escaped to Sparta and helped them strategize against Athens toward the end of the war.

Athens ▶ The leading democratic city-state in ancient Greece, of which Thucydides was a citizen.

Cleon ▶ Vengeful Athenian general and rival of Thucydides whom Thucydides consistently portrays in a negative light.

Melian dialogue ▶ Diplomatic exchange presented by Thucydides in which Athenian ambassadors justify their subsequent slaughter of the male population of the island of Melos.

Pericles ▶ Creator of the Athenian empire and the leader of democratic Athens at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War.

Sparta ▶ (Lacadæmon) The leading aristocratic city-state in ancient Greece; the eventual victor in the Peloponnesian War:

The Peloponnesian War ▶ A 27 year military conflict between Athens and Sparta that took place between 431 and 404 B.C.E.

Thucydides (5th Century B.C.E.) is arguably the first person to engage in systematic social measurement. His lone surviving masterwork. *The Peloponnesian War,* stands as a founding text for the disciplines of history and political science. On its surface, *The Peloponnesian War* comprehensively and objectively chronicles the 27 year military struggle between Athens and Sparta from which the latter emerged victorious in 404 B.C.E. Yet Thucydides' aim and approach in recounting the Peloponnesian War is extensively debated, often reflecting enduring disagreements about the philosophy and methodology of social science.

Thucydides the Person

We know little about Thucydides' life beyond the few things he tells us in The Peloponnesian War itself. An Athenian citizen, Thucydides was probably born a few years prior to 460 B.C.E., likely dying shortly after the end of the Peloponnesian War. Perhaps significantly, we do know that he was elected to the office of general (*strategos*) in the eighth year of the war (424 B.C.E.) but then exiled from Athens shortly thereafter (for failing to prevent Sparta's capture of the strategically important city of Amphipolis). Thucydides also tells us that he began work on his history at the war's outset (11) and lived through its entire 27 years (II 65, V 26). He did not, however, live to complete the narrative, which breaks off abruptly in the autumn of 411, the 21st year of the conflict.

Overview of the Work

Far from a single cohesive nation, ancient Greece in the 5th century B.C.E. was composed of dozens of independent city-states (*poleis*). Most of these states were, however, militarily subject to either Athens or Sparta, the two great powers in Greece at the time. At its most basic, therefore, the Peloponnesian War was a struggle for regional hegemony between these two powers: Al-

though democratic Athens has exerted a greater influence on the thinking of Thucydides' contemporary interpreters than has aristocratic Sparta, the latter of these two powers was clearly the stronger at the war's beginning. Indeed, as Thucydides tells us, most Greeks initially believed that the Spartans and their allies would emerge victorious from the conflict within three years (VII 28). Sparta's obvious military superiority on land, however, was offset by the supremacy of Athenian sea power, which prolonged the war and left its outcome uncertain until the fall of Athens and its empire.

Book I of Thucydides' chronicle features a wide-ranging "Archaeology" of Greek society and politics prior to the Peloponnesian War. As Thucydides recounts, the Athenians and Spartans had once been allies, forming the Hellenic League in 481 B.C.E. in order to help all of Hellas rebuff a Persian invasion. Despite major victories against their common enemy, relations between the two powers were strained, eventually resulting in the withdrawal of Sparta to lead its prewar alliance, the Peloponnesian League. The Athenians in turn created an alternative alliance, the Delian Confederacy, which accepted Megara, a defecting member of the Peloponnesian League. War broke out between the two alliances in 460 and continued until 446, when both sides accepted a peace treaty. The remainder of the narrative commences with the broken peace of 431.

From the beginning of Book II through the beginning of Book V, Thucydides recounts the first, indecisive phase of the conflict often called the Archidamian war. While the Spartans regularly attacked the Attic countryside, the Athenians responded by ravaging the Peloponnesian coastline. In this 10-year period, the Athenians also suffered a plague, intervened in Sicily, and routed the Spartans at Pylos-Sphacteria; they subsequently lost important holdings in battles near Thrace. This phase of the war culminated with what was to be a 50-year peace treaty, the Peace of Nicias, in 421.

The treaty, however, collapsed after only eight years (many of which were actually spent in open dispute). In 415, the Athenians intervened a second time in Sicily, assisting their allies, the Egestaeans, and attempting to expand their empire through the conquest of Syracuse, the preeminent Spartan ally in Sicily. The subject of Books VI–VII, the so-called Sicilian war, ended with a crushing defeat for the Athenians. The effect of this defeat on Athens was all the more pronounced because it coincided with the resumption of hostilities by the Spartans and their allies closer to home. Facing Spartan troops permanently based in the Attic countryside, an increasing number of subjects in revolt, and hostile naval forces subsidized by their old enemy, Persia, the Athenians were overmatched. Despite these unfavorable circumstances, this final phase of the conflict, the Ionian or Declean war, lasted another 10 years. It ended, however, with the destruction of the Athenian navy in 405 and (after being starved into submission) the surrender of Athens in 404.

Thucydidean Method

What exactly Thucydides hoped to achieve via his history of the Peloponnesian War has been endlessly debated. Though some might make a claim for Herodotus, the more rigorous Thucydides is generally considered the inventor of descriptive history as such. Noting the absence of "romance" in his narrative, Thucydides avers that it might nonetheless "be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past (I, 22)." In turn, many have suggested that Thucydides' aim is no more and no less than to provide an accurate empirical description of the events that he recounts. Indeed, historians often remind us that Thucydides' narrative contains an astounding volume of painstaking detail, detail that Thucydides' more social-scientifically inclined readers may ignore at their peril. Yet while we cannot underestimate the importance of Thucydides' invention of comprehensive historical description, social scientists are understandably drawn to the few "causal" or "explanatory" claims that he appears to be making throughout the work.

Perhaps the most significant of these claims is Thucydides' famous comment about why the Peloponnesian War began: "The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedæmon, made war inevitable" (I, 23). At first blush, this passage seems to imply that Thucydides possesses a broadly "materialist" view of empirical causation. Specifically, he seems to suggest that the onset of the Peloponnesian War is fully explained by the existence of a single, concrete and observable variable: namely, *increasing Athenian power.* To be sure, many have noted that an accurate measurement of Athenian power proves elusive. In discussing the Peloponnesian War, as in other cases, debate among international relations scholars and military strategists abounds with disagreements over the degrees to which, e.g., population, wealth, geography, and munitions determine a state's "military capabilities," and, in turn, over whether it is "absolute" or "relative" military capabilities that are most significant.

More important, however, this single sentence of *The Peloponnesian War* is characteristic of Thucydides' occasional "editorial" statements in that it has likewise spawned more radical disagreement among his interpreters. Specifically, numerous scholars have noted that the most proximate cause of the war mentioned by Thucydides is not the material change in Athenian power, but rather, the more "ideational" variable of fear or "alarm" that this change inspired in Sparta. In other words, debate over this passage closely reflects debate between idealist and materialist approaches to so-

cial science in general (as evidenced most famously via Marx's methodological critique of Hegel). Indeed, generation after generation of philosophers of social science have claimed a methodological pedigree from Thucydides. Contemporary constructivist and postmodernist scholars, for example, argue that the onset of the Peloponnesian War is explained by the breakdown of social and diplomatic discourses in 5th Century Hellas. In point of fact, however, debate over Thucydides' account of the onset of the Peloponnesian War provides only one example of how arguments about Thucydides reflect broader debates about social measurement. If anything, Thucydides' incomplete account of the outcome of the Peloponnesian war—that is, his account of why Athens loses—has proven still more suggestive to those interested in social-scientific theory and method.

As noted, a purely materialist account of Athens' defeat in the war is by no means difficult to construct. If we attend simply to the balance of power between the Spartan and Athenian sides, the fact that Athens avoided defeat as long as it did is arguably the greater mystery. Understandably, however, the balance of military power between the two sides is by no means the only variable that scholars have noted as contributing to the war's eventual outcome.

Many of Thucydides' interpreters, for example, stress the critical role in the conflict played by individual Athenian leaders. The charismatic Pericles is seen as crucial to Athens' initial pursuit of empire, the vengeful Cleon blamed for the subsequent alienation of her subject states, the perplexing Alcibiades alternately celebrated and condemned for his role in the initiation and execution of the Sicilian expedition. Despite the no doubt significant role played by these individual citizens, however, a still more common mode of explaining Athens' defeat centers on the political context in which they came to power: namely, as leaders of the Athenian democracy. Even the most prominent defenders of the benefits of democracy in the conduct of foreign policy, including Michael Doyle, note that the experience of Athens during the war casts the *demos* in a not entirely favorable light: "It is here, in Thucydides' *History*, that democracy first acquired its reputation for such disastrous factionalism" (79). In Athens, of course, the *demos* exercised much more direct control over foreign policy than it does in representative democracies today. Moreover, even insofar as it delegated some of this authority to the elected *strategoi*, Thucydides notes that the most jingoistic of these Athenian generals, such as Cleon, were often successful in appealing to what he seems to have regarded as the lowest common denominator of popular support.

We return to the question of Thucydides' moral stance in regard to the Athenian polity and its foreign policy in a moment. At present, it is enough to note that *The Peloponnesian War* raises many of the classic causal questions about whether a state's system of government influences its foreign policy: Advocates of the "democratic peace" proposition, for example (sometimes called the one "iron law" of contemporary international relations scholarship) argue that even if Athens was bellicose in its relations with Sparta and other autocracies, it avoided conflict with democratic states. In contrast, those who see democracies as possessing a particularly pronounced tendency for the foolish overextension of empire have likewise found an early cautionary tale in Athens. Last but not least, scholars intrigued by the fact that modern democracies rarely lose the wars they enter—the so-called "powerful pacifists" hypothesis—look back to the counterexample of Athens in hopes of determining whether anything inherent in democracy predicts its military success.

Yet is it appropriate for scholars to cavort across the millennia in search of universal social-scientific laws? Is not everything that Thucydides says about democracy and foreign policy so wrapped up in a bygone social context that to try and apply it to today's world constitutes a fateful hubris? To argue as much is certainly credible, but, to claim that Thucydides himself would have made this argument strikes us as less so. For just as he can be claimed as the inventor of "ideographic" methods and "thick description," so too can Thucydides be noted as the first researcher to possess a universalizing or "nomothetic" urge. He makes this evident, of course, in telling us that "the future … in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect [the past]," and in turn that, "In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time" (122). It is this justly famous remark, perhaps, that constitutes Thucydides' most important and controversial contribution to the history of social measurement.

Measurement and Morality

Even if Thucydides is attracted to the project of a nomothetic social science, however, this as yet tells us nothing about how this may or may not comport with his other aims in writing *The Peloponnesian War.* He is, after all, read far less by methodologists than he is by political theorists, and apart from the question of his empirical aims stands the question of what, if any, moral lesson he wishes us to take from the narrative. Asking this question is interesting for various reasons. First, there is the possibility that Thucydides displays normative bias in recounting the events of the war, leading us to think twice about his status as an objective historian and social scientist. Alternatively, it could be that Thucydides felt that even an unbiased presentation of the facts of the war would lead the reader to certain moral or ethical conclusions. But just what are Thucydides' moral

and ethical commitments, if any? Many readers have seen Thucydides as the father of *realpolitik*, that is, of the view that morality and politics are incompatible. Such an ethos was, to be sure, frequently articulated in ancient Greece, as, for example, by some of Socrates' more famous interlocutors. In Thucydides, *realpolitik* is most clearly defended by the Athenian ambassadors to Melos. For various reasons, however, most scholars now aver that Thucydides is little more sympathetic to these ambassadors than is Plato sympathetic to, e.g., Thrasymachus or Callicles.

While the preceding section discussed the claim that Sparta began the war out of fear, Thucydides also notes that the Spartans were compelled by the Corinthians to oppose Athenian injustices at Potidæa (I, 71). The Athenians, for their part, argued that they were obligated to acquire and expand their empire out of fear of external threats, despite the knowledge that to do so would result in widespread opprobrium. In addition to this line of thought, they also suggested that "honour and interest afterwards came in" (I, 75). These claims, in addition to the Athenian assertion that they are uniquely entitled to rule others, serve as the ground upon which Thucydides bases his discussion of Athens.

The most famous defense of the ethical underpinnings of Athenian war aims comes from Pericles, in an oration for the war's first fallen soldiers. He encourages the Athenians to love their city as the soldiers have and to be ready to make the same sacrifice should they be called on to do so (II, 43). Athens, he says, is so beautiful and noble as to inspire love among its citizens, not merely because it is powerful but also because it acts for reasons beyond self-interest (either individual or collective). Arguably, however, this still falls well short of acting justly. As David Bolotin points out, Pericles "boasts that Athens has everywhere established everlasting memorials of evils as well as goods … And when he speaks of everlasting memorials of evils and goods, he has in mind the evils that Athens has suffered as well as the harm it has done to others" (20).

While Pericles may exaggerate the virtues of the Athenian people, Thucydides himself is often critical of the city in the post-Periclean era. At times, to be sure, Thucydides clearly approves of the workings of Athenian democracy. After a lengthy siege succeeded in crushing a rebellion at Mytilene, the Athenians initially determined that all the male citizens should be punished with death, and the women and children sold into slavery (III, 36). A day after dispatching a ship to deliver the order, however, they experienced a change of heart and Thucydides gives a lengthy recounting of their second debate, with speeches by his perennial rival Cleon, who favored the original decree, and Diodotus, who opposed it. In the end, the Athenians adopted the position of Diodotus and hastily sent a second ship to prevent the original order from being carried out (III, 49).

As Michael Walzer observes, "It is the appeal to interest that triumphs—as has often been pointed out—though it should be remembered that the occasion for the appeal was the repentance of the citizens. Moral anxiety, not political calculation, leads them to worry about the effectiveness of their decree" (9).

In stark contrast, Thucydides provides no account of any democratic process leading to the decision to attack the island of Melos and, ultimately, to kill its male citizens and enslave its women and children. Unlike Mytilene, a former ally of Athens that rebelled and joined the Spartans, Melos had chosen to remain neutral until the Athenians violently encroached on their territory (V, 84). All that is recorded, this time, is the exchange between the Athenian generals, Cleomedes and Tisias, and the Melian representatives prior to the official outbreak of hostilities. Here, the Athenians remove the notion of justice from the discussion at the very outset:

> For ourselves, we shall not trouble you with specious pretences—either of how we have a right to our empire because we overthrew the Mede, or are now attacking you because of wrong that you have done us—and make a long speech which would not be believed; and in return we hope that you, instead of thinking to influence us by saying that you did not join the Lacedæmonians, although their colonists, or that you have done us no wrong, will aim at what is feasible, holding in view the real sentiments of us both; for you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is in question only between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must (V, 89).

In the end, the Melians chose not to subject themselves to Athens and were besieged. After months of fighting, Melos was betrayed by a number of its citizens and yielded to the Athenians, who put to death all the men, and sold the women and children into slavery (V, 116). According to Walzer, "We are to understand that Athens is no longer itself. Cleomedes and Tisias do not represent that noble people who fought the Persians in the name of freedom. … They represent instead the imperial decadence of the city state" (7). Whether or not the potential for imperial overreach was always present in Athenian democracy, however, it is eventually this imperial impulse that carries the day, ultimately leading to the ill-fated Sicilian expedition.

What did Thucydides himself think of Athenian imperialism and this final campaign to extend it? Thucydides clearly does not possess the outright aversion to imperialism that Walzer and most of the rest of us do today. He presents Pericles, the father of Athenian empire, in a highly favorable light, and various commentators note grounds on which the Athenian empire would have been viewed as a progressive enterprise at the time. (It is, for example, generally agreed that the limited de-

mocracy brought by Athenian rule was embraced by the lower classes in her subject cities.) Even if this is the case, however, it is unclear that Thucydides himself was sufficiently fond of the political system of post-Periclean Athens to advocate its export to other Greek states.

In any case, a quite different account of Thucydides' stance regarding Athenian imperialism suggests that he actually condemns it for being too hesitant. This reading centers upon the mysterious destruction of the city's statues of Hermae that occurred just prior to the Sicilian expedition. The expedition was decided upon at a time of great factional conflict within Athens, and citizens sympathetic to Alcibiades, the brilliant general chosen to lead the expedition, were widely blamed for the statues' destruction. Eventually, this led to Alcibiades being stripped of his post. Thomas Pangle and Peter Ahrensdorf, among others, argue that the expedition might have succeeded were it not for this strange turn of events: "According to Thucydides, the Athenians could have conquered Sicily, and consequently could have won the war, if only they had retained the services of Alcibiades" (26).

Such a reading returns us to a view of Thucydides as an advocate of *realpolitik*. That is, rather than responding to the mutilation of the Hermae with the cool rationality that Thucydides, it is argued, himself recommends, the Athenians took drastic action in the face of a religious crime that they also interpreted as a sign of divine displeasure with their imperial ambition. "It would seem," Pangle and Ahrensdorf argue, "that the Athenians interpret the mutilation of the Hermae not in the light of their own argument on justice and self-interest but in the light of their suspicion or fear that they are guilty of injustice" (27–28). Like much else in Thucydides, however, the suggestion that he sympathizes with Alcibiades is controversial: Alcibiades is likewise responsible for undoing the Peace of Nicias, and Nicias is perhaps the only figure for, whom Thucydides expresses even greater personal fondness. Commenting on his "unwarranted butchering" during the war, Thucydides remarks that "of all the Hellenes in my time, [Nicias] least deserved this fate, seeing that the whole course of his life had been regulated with strict attention to virtue" (VII, 86).

Many scholars thus point to Thucydides' remark about Nicias, among other passages, as evidence that he views war as fundamentally tragic. While it would be a stretch to view Thucydides as a thoroughgoing pacifist, a case can certainly be made that he came to see the Peloponnesian War as a mistake—not just for Athens, but for all of Greece. Such a view is perhaps most strongly evidenced in Thucydides' discussion of prewar Hellenic society and politics at the beginning of Book I. For here, Thucydides speaks less of Athens and Sparta than he does of the Pan-Hellenic "country" (I, 2) and "race" (I, 1). Indeed, on more than one occasion, Thucy-dides seems to regret the fact that, except for during the war against Persia, the states of Greater Hellas proved "incapable of combination for great and national ends" (I, 15), much less of uniting in "a spontaneous combination of equals" (I, 16). While hardly a contemporary global citizen, then, it would seem that Thucydides is, like Socrates, drawn to the Pan-Hellenic ideal of cooperation and perhaps even confederation among Greek states (an ideal by no means uncommon in his time). Viewed from this perspective, *The Peloponnesian War* becomes a tragic story indeed, one in which an unwarranted and essentially "civil" conflict slowly engulfs a divided Hellas.
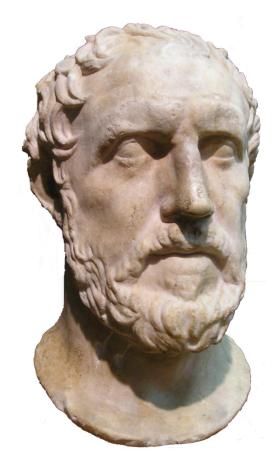
Conclusion

Obviously, we will never know exactly what sort of justice, if any, Thucydides felt that his native Athens owed to the rest of Greece and the world beyond. Nor, for that matter, will we know in what sense, if any, he thought it inevitable that states powerful enough to engage in hegemonic war will do so. We should, perhaps, take seriously the possibility that Thucydides changed his views of these issues while writing a very long narrative about a very long conflict. In any event, not only the diverse ethical thinking that Thucydides has inspired but also the numerous methods that he introduced to social measurement will continue to prove important gifts to posterity.

Further Reading

Bolotin, D. (1987). Thucydides. In *History of Political Philosophy* (L. Strauss and J. Cropsey, eds.), 3rd Ed. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Connor, W. R. (1994). *Thucydides.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Crane, G. (1998). *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism.* University of California Press, Berkeley.

Doyle, M. W. (1997). *Ways of War and Peace.* Norton, New York.

Forde, S. (1989). *The Ambition to Rule: Alcibiades and the Politics of Imperialism in Thucydides.* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Garst, D. (1989). Thncydides and neorealism. *Int. Studies Quart.* 33, 1.

Johnson Bagby, L. M. (1994). The use and abuse of Thucydides in international relations. *Int. Organ.* 48, 1.

Lebow, R. N. (2001). Thucydides the constructivist. *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 95, 3.

Luginbill, R. (1999). *Thucydides on War and National Character.* Westview, Boulder.

Pangle, T. L., and Ahrensdorf, P. J. (1999). *Classical realism: Thucydides. In Justice Among Nations: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace.* University of Kansas Press, Lawrence.

Thucydides (1982). *The Peloponnesian War* (R. Crawley, transl.; T. E. Wick, ed.). Modern Library, New York.

Walzer, M. (1977). *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations.* Basic Books, New York.

Bust of Thucydides from the Royal Ontario Museum.