

Review - History of the Peloponnesian War

Written by Tom Moylan

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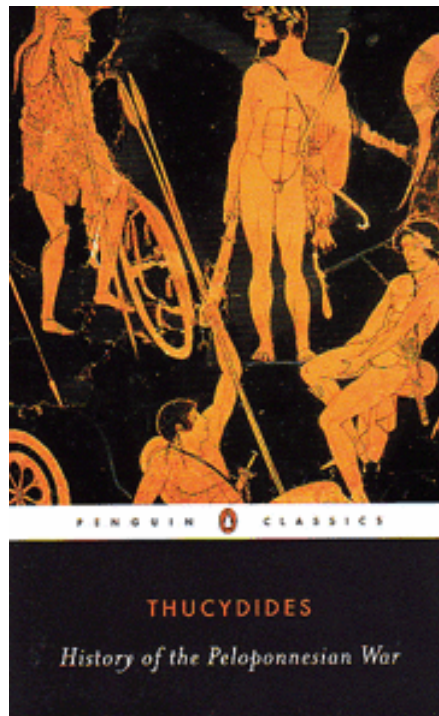
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TOM MOYLAN, MAR 14 2013

History of the Peloponnesian War

By: Thucydides



Thucydides is often cited as the father of realism in International Relations. Indeed, while reading his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, it is not hard to see how so many theorists have appropriated his work as an example of the everlasting realist qualities inherent in politics. Recently however, certain scholars have begun to doubt the realist commandeering of this ancient writing. Welch (2003), Garst (1989), and others have argued that Thucydides has been hijacked and used as a mouthpiece to express and justify views that he not only didn't imply in his work, but may have outright disagreed with. However, scholars such as Gilpin (1984), who argues that the history is indeed located in the realist tradition, oppose this view and defend the realist possession of Thucydides. In this review I will first look at the content of the text, its tone, and its intention as Thucydides states it. Then the arguments for and the arguments against its inclusion in International Relations scholarship will be considered. Finally, the conclusion will weigh up the results drawn from the discussion and assess Thucydides' place in International Relations scholarship.

Summary

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is divided into eight books that together cover twenty-one of the twenty-seven years of the Peloponnesian war – the war fought between Athens, and its empire, and the Peloponnesian League, led by Sparta at the end of the 5th century BC. Thucydides died before the *History* could be

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completed. In Book One he begins by explaining the tone and intention of the book. Whereas previous historical documents, such as those of Herodotus, were littered with incidents of poetic license or novelties, Thucydides states that he intends to write an accurate history, presenting and interpreting only the facts. He also presents his methodology, and explains how he came to have the information and accounts stated in the *History*. Positivist realists, and indeed historians, have praised this methodology as the first scientific gathering of the facts of its type. Thucydides explains the background to the conflict and lists what he has deemed the causes: Sparta's fear of Athens' power and Athens' aggressive expansion. This is worrying in that he seems to present his claims immediately as a given, with no sort of evidence to back them up, and goes on to frame the whole *History* with these unsubstantiated causes.

Book Two follows with a description of the strategies adopted by both sides. Athens depended on their ability to outlast the Spartans with their money and sea power. Meanwhile, the Spartans attempted to convince cities to revolt by telling them that they were fighting for a "free Greece" and trying to draw the Athenians from their city. It also includes an account of the plague that struck Athens at this time and its consequences. Book Two includes the first major speech of the *History* in Pericles' funeral oration. This was groundbreaking not only in its departure from traditional structure, but also in its content. He praises the city in order to praise the dead, and in doing so delivers a rousing and beautiful address that outlines Athenian character and aspiration. He also discusses what might have happened had Pericles not perished during the plague.

In Book Three, Thucydides discusses the Mytilene debate – a debate in Athens over the fate of the city Mytilene who refused to align with either Athens or Sparta – between Cleon and Diodotus, passing judgment especially on Cleon, deriving his populism. He contrasts the decision to take a less harsh line with Mytilene with the Spartan decision to allow Plataea be destroyed. Human nature is also discussed using the civil war and anarchy that followed in Corcyra. Realists looking to justify their use of Thucydides draw upon this part of the book often. This is due to his description of human beings' savagery during anarchy. Also in this section we can see the first major departure from Pericles' moderate tactics of outlasting the Spartans with the Athenians becoming involved in Sicilian affairs. We also see a change in the mood in the city, with Demosthenes choosing not to return to Athens after a defeat for fear of being persecuted. This persecution of failure by the Athenian assembly is something that is seen frequently throughout the *History*.

Book Four begins with the new Athenian policy of aggressive expansion gaining them a few victories, and ends with the Athenians on the back foot again. Notably this section includes an account of the battle at Amphipolis for which Thucydides was exiled. He barely mentions this and his account almost reads like a defense of the actions by the Athenians there. It would have been interesting to see if he had included an account of his tribunal had he survived to finish the work.

Book Five's major events include the deaths of Cleon and the Spartan general Brasidas. It also discusses the eight-year peace and its breakdown. The most notable thing to be taken from this chapter from an International Relations perspective is the Melian Dialogue, which is generally taken as one of the main justifications for Thucydides' inclusion as a realist – in the words of Daniel Mendelsohn: "to be an admirer of Thucydides' *History*, with its deep cynicism about political, rhetorical and ideological hypocrisy, with its all too recognizable protagonists — a liberal yet imperialistic democracy and an authoritarian oligarchy, engaged in a war of attrition fought by proxy at the remote fringes of empire — was to advertise yourself as a hardheaded connoisseur of global Realpolitik" (Mendelsohn 2008, p.1). The Dialogue shows how futile it is for smaller powers to stand up to those stronger than them. The implications and ways in which this dialogue can be read will be discussed later.

In Book Six we can see the growing lack of perspective the Athenian assembly has with their allocation of a massive amount of troops to a Sicilian expedition. Nicias seems to be against the idea, and tries to convince the assembly not to send the mission by grossly inflating the number of resources needed to carry it out. The assembly allocates him that which he asks and sends him anyway. This will eventually lead to massive losses on the Athenians' part. In this chapter we go on to see the initial failures of the Sicilian expedition and the breaking of the peace with Sparta with attacks by Athenians and Argives on Peloponnesian cities. We also see Alcibiades, the Athenian general, being accused of sacrilege and fleeing to join the Spartans, in a further example of the Athenian assembly's persecution of

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individuals.

In Book Seven we see the stunning defeat of the Athenians at the hands of Syracuse, Sparta, and other Sicilians. It is notable that at this point we start seeing a lot more mention of 'hope' and 'the gods' from Athenians. This is quite ironic given their previous attitude prevalent in the Melian Dialogue – a discussion of the fate of Melos after their revolt, where Athenian representatives claimed that there were supernatural forces at play in the war and derided the Melian's talk of 'hope' and 'justice'. Finally, in Book Eight, we see the tide turn strongly against Athens. They are, however, still certainly in the fight. Thucydides never survived to document their loss. We also see the beginnings of Persian involvement in the war and the implications brought by that, the fall of Athenian democracy, and the subsequent rise and fall of the Four Hundred. The Four Hundred were an oligarchy that would go on to be replaced with the Five Thousand, a larger oligarchy designed to be more inclusive.

Discussion

For a very long time Thucydides' place in International Relations scholarship was taken as a given, and it is not surprising as to why. Gilpin states that when Thucydides lays out the motivators of men as honor, greed and above all, fear, he is clearly stating the importance of security and survival which are central tenets of realism (1984, p. 290). The Mytilenian debate (Thucydides 1972, pp. 212-222) and the Melian Dialogue (Thucydides 1972, pp. 400-408) are examples of the fate that befalls cities that fail to recognize the importance of realist thinking. The dialogue and debate are also often stated as being a key demonstration of how power is the only thing that matters when it comes to state survival and behaviour. The less powerful Melians stood up to the Athenians, only to be destroyed. This is the state of nature – as deduced by the 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes – as realism would illustrate it, so this section is often cited as a reason for Thucydides being a realist. A point made against Thucydidean inclusion in IR scholarship is the Spartans 'just' war and the amount of cities that sided with them (Ahrens Dorf 1997, pp. 238). However, one can see from Sparta's letting Plataea be destroyed by the Thebans (Thucydides 1972, pp. 124-132) and by their eventual collusion with the Persians (Thucydides 1972, pp. 541-542) that they cared less for justice for the Greek states than they did for victory and advancing their power. Another point that Ahrens Dorf makes in the same paper is that Sparta's moderation in not attaining an empire cannot be used as an example to unseat Thucydides from the realist platform due to the fact that through the existence of the Helots, a slave race within Sparta, they were essentially maintaining a domestic empire already (Ahrens Dorf 1997, pp. 249). These are some of the stronger arguments I would consider in favor of Thucydides being a part of the realist tradition.

Gilpin states that the economic aspect of the *History* is something that ties it in with structural realism especially. He says that Thucydides can be read "as an examination of the impact of a profound commercial revolution on a relatively static international system" (Gilpin 1984, pp. 293). According to Gilpin, everything that neorealists find interesting about the interaction between economics and politics can be found in there. Here I would have to disagree. Thucydides' concentration on economics is not about a theory of politics, but more about good historiography. He acknowledges at several points the importance of money in fighting a war, but I would not read into his economics any sort of indicator of his politics. Take the Megara sanctions for example: they are listed as one of the causes of the war, but Thucydides goes in to few other details (Thucydides 1972, pp. 73). This does not seem to be the action of a man overly-concerned with economics. Gilpin also suggests that Thucydides' methodology aligns him with the realist school. He claims that his scientific approach to his study makes him more conducive to realism in IR (Gilpin 1984, pp. 291-292). This argument could be effective in the sense that it could be a further point to hammer home Thucydides' realism, if there were not already so many holes in the argument. In light of the problems with the overall argument this point seems slightly superfluous, and even could be perceived as grasping at straws.

Ahrens Dorf suggests that Thucydides may be a theoretical realist, but that the *History* is an illustration of how when applying realism to foreign policy making one cannot overcome the human faults that are indelible in politics such as passion, hope, and anger (Ahrens Dorf 1997, pp. 231). He also suggests it is a tale of warning about their suppression. I fear, however, that this argument, though attractive for someone searching for a middle ground, is continuing to put words in Thucydides' mouth. One of Forde's major criticisms of the use of Thucydides was in his failure to 'toe the party line' in regards to state-centric thinking. Thucydides puts far too much emphasis on state-

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formation and individuals to be considered a realist (Forde 1986, pp. 144). Now I feel we are getting closer to discrediting the idea of Thucydides as a realist. In order to do this effectively however, what Thucydides was actually trying to say must be illustrated. It could be possible to argue that the *History* is a piece of purely historical writing, but I do not believe this is so.

Forde (1986) presents the most convincing argument as far as I am concerned. It conflicts with none of the truths that are stated in the *History*, and explains the slightly tragic tone that I sense throughout the whole book. Forde suggests that during the Persian War when the Athenians fled their city and put to sea, they completely uprooted themselves, separating themselves from their history, their gods, and their traditions (Forde 1986, pp. 435). He argues that this separation from their ancestry and their way of life was so significant in an ancient Greek context that it brought about a change in the Athenian psyche (Forde 1986, pp. 436). Being separated so completely from their roots and having survived may have brought about the do-or-die, amoral attitude of the Athenians throughout the Peloponnesian war. Lebow suggests that Thucydides' tale is one of warning against framing domestic and foreign policies outside of the language of justice (Lebow 2001, pp. 547).

In conclusion, there are strong arguments for one to be convinced by on all sides. Coming from a background in the classics, I have become accustomed to feeling like there is a more philosophical, moral side to ancient Greek writings, and therefore may be reluctant to give them up to IR scholarship so readily. All this said, I remain wholly convinced that although Thucydides relates events that realists may find attractive for their arguments, he will always remain in my mind primarily a diligent, insightful, and innovative historian.

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