Review - Thucydides on the Outbreak of War

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Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest
By Seth N. Jaffe
Oxford University Press, 2017

Drums of war have not sounded in Iran but tensions with the United States are dangerously rising after the recent tanker attacks in the Gulf of Oman (13/6/2019). Relations between the nuclear armed adversaries, North Korea and the United States, remain strained despite the proclaimed détente following the 2018 Singapore Summit between the leaders of the two countries. The future of the United States-China relationship is replete with dangerous uncertainties that might spiral into conflict. War is again more thinkable than it was in the optimistic years following the end of the Cold War.

In *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest* Seth Jaffe offers an eminently readable analysis of Thucydides' classic work on the *History of the Peloponnesian War* that addresses the million-dollar question: why do wars break out? Interestingly, he focuses on the relative importance of the opposing national characters of Athens and Sparta, much like the opposing characters of the United States and China or Iran or North Korea, to explain the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. His analysis adds value to contemporary debates about war by virtue of being less deterministic and more psychological than other accounts. His approach departs significantly from (and offers an implicit critique of) recent dominant analyses of Thucydides, like Graham Allison's thesis that the United States and China are in danger of falling into 'Thucydides' Trap'; hence, sleepwalking into a conflict. Jaffe avoids such quasi-deterministic metaphors, and opts for a more holistic analysis of Thucydides' understanding of history, the specific causes of the Peloponnesian War, and the causes of war in general as a guide for public policy. The whole volume revolves around the elusive concept of the national character of great powers, what shapes it, and how, in turn, it shapes war. Crucially, this can be approximated partly subjectively and partly objectively.

Jaffe maintains that International Relations scholars, mostly realists (more on this below), have misunderstood Thucydides' explanation for what made the Peloponnesian War inevitable or 'necessary'. Jaffe argues that it was not only the rise of Athenian power that made the war necessary (the realist argument) but also the characters of the two great powers, Athens and Sparta. For Jaffe, national character shapes what nations perceive as 'necessity' (an idea associated with the national interest), which then propels them into action and war (p. 205). Character is not destiny, he carefully clarifies, but shaped by human nature (p. 11) and the development of various political orders. 'Necessity' in this reading is intertwined with a distinct type of political psychology (p. 9) and cannot be reduced to security/fear, profit/interest, and honour. These motives, key to political realism, central to Thucydides, characteristically described by Michael Howard as 'the Thucydidean co-ordinates', are important; but for Jaffe, they have to be explained in conjunction with how and why they manifest themselves. It is not enough to say, "fear and advantage compel Sparta to fight, while honour and advantage compel Athens to resist" (p. 19). Here is the rub: each city understands 'necessity' differently due to two dynamics: their distinct historical development, which shapes their character; and, decision points, like public deliberations, that can generate path-dependencies (p.201). In other words, character or inclination influences the actors' perceptions of the pragmatic options at their disposal. There is no materialist determinism here.

Jaffe makes two choices that justify his topic and his approach. He explains the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War

by following the progression of Thucydides' work. He reconstructs a view of Thucydides' logic of history and presents the historical events in the order Thucydides' depicts them rather than in a chronological order or according to recurring themes (p. 1-2). This historiographical choice is meant to help us reconstruct Thucydides' view of how the world really works. This may be an anathema to post-modernists, but it is very much in line with Jaffe's view of Thucydides' mind-set. Jaffe also presents a unitarian view of Thucydides' text; one whose work is that of a political psychologist of fighting groups, and a sociologist of the longue durée type (Jaffe does not express things in these terms, but it is a plausible interpretation of his view). This unitarian view means that Thucydides lays out the 'necessary theoretical context'[i] and main themes of his work in Book 1 rather than changing his perspective in subsequent volumes of his *History*. This serves to legitimise Jaffe's choice to focus on only one book instead of all eight of them. For Jaffe then, the whole Peloponnesian War is "a contest between the characters of the Athenian and Spartan regimes", and Thucydides explains this (not in full but) programmatically in Book 1 (p. 210).

Jaffe and Realism

Jaffe's analysis challenges realist interpretations of Thucydides, and provides support for synthetic or constructivist readings of Thucydides. Jaffe is able to delve with ease into the secondary historiographical literature as well as into the international relations one. As a result, he contests the realist emphasis on material factors, and instead stresses motives, speech acts, and national character. He also opens the 'black box' of the state and provides an analysis of the fluctuating domestic balances of power within Athens and Sparta throughout the centuries and in the 5th century BC to explain conflict and international divisions.

The book, however, does injustice to realism. Admittedly, Jaffe refers to theories of international relations (IR) only tangentially in a few footnotes (p. 7, 198). It would be unfair to judge him on this; yet, it is worthwhile clarifying the point. It is true that since Kenneth Waltz's ground-breaking *Theory of International Politics* neo-realists over-emphasised the structuring principle of anarchy in shaping states' motives. Still though, there is a raging debate among newer neo-realists, modern classical realists, and neoclassical realists on the role of motives in their theories. The 'apple of contention' is the degree to which the structure of the international system shapes state motivations. Neorealists, like Stephen Walt, have drawn a link between foreign policy elites and lobbying groups and their ability to motivate hegemonic over-extension. Modern classical realists, like Sten Rynning, have significantly de-emphasised neorealism's quasi-architectonic view of international relations by focusing on state motives, and even challenging the possibility of creating a positive theory of international politics. Neo-classical realists, like Jeffrey Taliaferro, Norrin Ripsman, and Steven Lobell, have modified neorealism's view of the international system by opening the 'black box' of the state with its motives, and creating a typology of international environments based on the level of information that policymakers have about the latter (systemic clarity and level of threats).

What is absent from much of modern realism though, and characteristic of Jaffe's Thucydides is the depth of the sociological and psychological dynamics that Thucydides provides to explain foreign policy choices. Jaffe notes: "the *History* situates the many judgements of the characters, the multiplicity of their claims and counterclaims and their various successful or unsuccessful outcomes within a more encompassing account of political life", which, he adds, "constitutes Thucydides' political thought itself" (p. 15). This view of politics is one way to open the notorious 'black box' of the state, that realists and non-realists alike attempt to realise, and complements some of the arguments advanced by Richard Ned Lebow; whose work Jaffe cites favourably (p. 4). Both Jaffe and Lebow deal with the political underpinnings of social and political orders and the role of motivations, and offer a much-needed adjustment to restricted culturally and historically understandings of human nature across the discipline of IR. Unlike Lebow, though, Jaffe is not so clear in emphasising the continuity of change; a useful corrective to realism and especially neorealism's fetish with continuity.

Even though the continuity of change analytically is an idea that seems to run across Jaffe's work (given the centrality of the notion of 'motion' in Thucydides), it is not fleshed out consistently enough. The idea of civilisation, which, arguably, is implicit in Thucydides' 'Archaeology', and provides the context of the Peloponnesian War, is an underappreciated source of dynamism. This concern is compounded by the author's use of Aristotelian arguments, which underestimate the potent value of civilisation, and limit i) the sources of national character and motives, and ii) the impact of speech acts on national character. These considerations reflect disagreements about the dynamism we

both see in history and in Thucydides' *History*, as well as the extent of Thucydides' relevance for our turbulent world (p. 5).

Two Criticisms: on the Relation Between Civilisation and National Character

Firstly, pegging Thucydides' analysis to Aristotle is problematic due to the latter's state-centric view of the 'good' and his moral universalism, which remain dissociated from notions of civilisation. Jaffe notes that "a vision of the good in a quasi-Aristotelian sense" shapes Thucydidean 'necessity', which then pulls states towards certain ends teleologically (p. 6, 197). However, this undermines Jaffe's careful analysis to avoid presenting a deterministic view of necessity (p.12), and smacks of a less dynamic notion of the 'good' or identity. Admittedly, Jaffe holds a thinner notion of the 'good' than Aristotle's, but they both discount the impact of civilising processes on how notions of the 'good' can change across time. Theory-wise, this restricts opportunities to explore the significance of those processes that can shape national character at all levels of analysis: domestic and international as well as transnational or civilisational. It also reduces opportunities for broader historical comparisons between ancient Greece and our own world in which debates about civilisation are rising in contemporary politics. Having said that, though, exploring the links between the meaning states ascribe to their vision of the 'good', the national interest and 'necessity' is vital. It could, in fact, provide a basis for a contribution to modern classical realists' efforts to theorise war and international politics in conjunction with their increasing emphasis on motives.

Secondly, Jaffe's work, influenced by Aristotle, has an unnecessarily instrumental view of speech acts regarding the extent of their impact on national character. Aristotle here is delimiting and prevents us from exploring sources of change from both within and without the state. Jaffe rightfully cites Aristotle's notion that "human beings are political animals precisely because they are moved by speech… and are susceptible to persuasive speech' (p.15). Yet, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle focuses on persuading individuals rather than on how speech acts may shape national character. Moreover, Aristotle does not help us more fully appreciate the significance of what happened when the Greeks were debating topics linked to civilisation and war. Discourses about civilisation, and who counted as Greek or who should be excluded were part and parcel of the Peloponnesian War and the disintegration of self-restraints on violence, as described by Thucydides, like in the civil war at Corcyra. Related speech acts both shaped the course of the conflict and were also shaped by it. Ignoring this dimension of war and politics can lead to the fallacy of the state as a person by downplaying the potential of speech acts to change national character itself (but see pp. 202-206). Jaffe, in our private communication, has denied that this is his view. Yet, what is unclear are those conditions under which persuasive speech in general, and in particular about civilisation, can shape policy decisions or can help shape national character; a particularly salient concern today, given the accelerating rise of populism.

Conclusion

These academic squabbles aside, this is an excellent book. Jaffe elucidates in a jargon-free way key concerns of the discipline of international relations; war, international order, national character. Even though the book is not written with a specialised IR audience in mind, it does deal with issues that state-of-the-art work in both realism and constructivism engages with, and would be interesting to see where Jaffe's future work leads him. For instance, Jaffe's work on human nature and the character of states deals with tropes that appear in John Mearsheimer's latest offering on liberalism, nationalism and international relations, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. Jaffe's work on the development of different characterological psychologies and their impact on the development of different types of empires could also make a contribution to some of the latest constructivist works on how international orders deal with difference across boundaries; the topic, for instance, of Christian Reus-Smit's latest work.

This book is highly recommended for both specialists and students alike. Jaffe's verve makes this complex work accessible to an interested audience. His in-depth analysis of Thucydides' *History* makes for an eminent and enjoyable re-reading of a classic, and deserves a place in the bookshelves of every IR scholar. In fact, teaching Thucydides from this book as an introduction to IR would be a great idea. As Ken Booth often says, Kenneth Waltz forces us to think about the big and important questions of our world rather than shying away from them. Agree or disagree with Jaffe, this is the type of book that deals with big questions, and can only excite the imagination of even

a young undergraduate without inundating them with too much theory. It deserves a place in the IR curricula of the 21st century for it helps illuminate Thucydides' gift to humanity: a major study of war that, when carefully read, escapes from its ancient context, and becomes a 'compass' for the troubled waters of today's world.

Notes

[i] My thanks to Seth Jaffe for his comments on a draft of this review and for clarifying this point.

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