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Thucydides in Afghanistan: Imperial Abstraction, Moral Displacement, and Hubris

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FRANCIS A. BEER AND ROBERT HARIMAN, SEP 6 2021

Despite twenty years and two trillion dollars, the Afghan government fell in a matter of days following the US military pullback in August 2021. The media exploded into a maelstrom of finger pointing and hand wringing; a photograph of a Chinook helicopter above the US Embassy provided a visual suture with the fall of Saigon. It's déjà vu all over again. More reflective articles strived to provide some nuance, but these and other attempts at lessons learned are swept away in the deluge. What can be better understood, however, is how the astonishment at the fall, the rush to judgment, and perhaps the mission failure itself reflect habits of imperial abstraction, moral displacement, and hubris. This article draws on Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, a canonical text in International Relations (IR), to foreground these three habits—deeply embedded in the rhetoric of classical realism, but also attributes of Western imperialism. They coalesce as part of a political discourse—a way of speaking, thinking, acting, reacting, knowing, and not-knowing—but also operate piecemeal and usually on behalf of not paying attention.

In 2020, the major US television networks devoted a total of five minutes to Afghanistan (Lobe, 2021). Whether the failure at nation building in Afghanistan was due to misguided idealism or not, and whether media commentators have been consistent in their coverage before and after the fall or not, the long acquiescence to the occupation and quick reactions at its demise reflect a shared inattentiveness that is discursively constructed. Thucydides' provides a mirror that can reflect these specific tendencies in imperial power as it manifests across a spectrum from theoretical debate to democratic public opinion.

Thucydides Today

According to some in IR, it's time to move on. More than time: As Edward Keene (2015, 366) observes, "the critical literature, for all its undoubtedly penetrating insight into the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, does not, however, seriously challenge the grip that Thucydides still exerts on the historical imagination of international relations" To the critics, Thucydides represents flawed conventions, tired pedagogy, and intellectual complacency. The world today is not the Greek (Athenian) world of the fifth century BCE, universalism is itself an imperial power move, difference and standpoint matter, and disciplinary knowledge should be decentered. We agree. Even so, attention to failure—in both politics and inquiry—cautions against scrapping resources for critical analysis. Indeed, the history of interpretation of the *History* provides an impressive review of the importance and complexity of the text (cf. Kouskouvelis, 2019; Allison, 2018; Johnson, 2015; Keene, 2015; Williams, 2013; Moylon, 2013; Montan, 2006; Clark, 1993; Welch, 2003; Strassler, 1996; Bagby, 1994; Doyle, 1990; Garst, 1989; Alker 1988).

These accounts also demonstrate how disciplinary appropriations have included both radical simplifications and nuanced theoretical arguments, so much so that Thucydides now can also be understood to be a critic of political realism (cf. Rahe, 2007; Ahrens Dorf, 1995; Forde, 1995) and one model for constructivist theory (cf. Jaffe, 2017; Zumbunnen, 2015; Lebow, 2001).

We find the critique of realism—and particularly as it is supported by scholarship in classics (e.g., Connor 1984)—to be decisive, but something else is at stake here. Whether labeled "realism," "imperialism," or something else, the *History* displays specific discursive tropes that still are deployed to rationalize power and failures of power. Unlike the

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tight composition of that text, however, these tropes are dispersed over time and throughout public culture. They become habits, not stratagems; reflexes, not decisions. And those who use them benefit from this lack of awareness. One result is that it then is easy to look past them in Thucydides' text. In what follows, we review a well-known episode to identify some contemporary habits of inattention.

The Paradigmatic Scene: Athenian Generals at Melos

Melos is the paradigmatic scene, the ideal type: the place where one can see in starkest outline the logic of self-interested domination in a state of nature, the harsh discipline of rational calculations of power, and the folly of relying instead on aspirational factors such as civic values and common moral decency. The narrative simplicity of the dialogue can be misleading, however. As Robert Connor (1984, 147-157) has demonstrated, setting the scene within the themes and narrative of the *History* shifts the implied author's perspective from that of either objective documentation or theoretical endorsement to a critical stance: we observe the Melians make the wrong decision, *and* how the Athenians are turning into tyrants. The *History* becomes a story of how the Athenians became power maximizers, and how they learned that lesson so well that they lost their national identity, their capacity to make good political decisions, and the war (cf. Connor, 1984, 156-157).

Realist valorization of the dialogue has depended on a less contextual reading. In between these two interpretations, the Melian Dialogue has still more to teach us. One reason the scene has become paradigmatic is that it so quickly transcends its historical location. The scene is geared for abstraction. Its variation from Thucydides' usual compositional techniques is the first clue—not least by anonymizing the speakers—and these stylistic changes affect a modal shift, a change in validity conditions of the sort affected by a trope. The reader is being moved into a conception of international politics that is fundamentally abstract; in doing so, it reveals some of how abstraction can become a mentality that displaces moral values and carries illicit motives. Abstraction is unavoidable, of course, but it is not innocent (Krishna, 2001; van Wingerden, 2017; Behr and Kirke, 2014). As the generals are the epitome of rationality, they also are invoking an attitude that otherwise would be Persian, the political and cultural antithesis of the Greek world (Connor 1984, 157). As they are figures of rational self-interest calculating the preponderance of power in action, they also are caught in an undercurrent of hubris.

Melos, a Dorian polity in the unenviable position of being on an island midway between Athens and Sparta, had wisely opted for neutrality in the war between the two powers. Athenian predations pushed them into open alliance with the Spartans, and the Athenians then besieged the city. The negotiation regarding surrender is presented as a dialogue behind closed doors, and it concerns few specific features of the Melian situation. Instead, Melos is moved into an abstract space for purely rational analysis. Several steps effect this shift. The first is to disable any other basis for judgment by associating it with mere speech. "We on our side will use no fine phrases saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire ... or that you have never done us any harm" (Thucydides, 1972, 5.89). Two great principles of the Greek Enlightenment—reason and eloquence—are parsed, with one set over the other. All appeals to right, justice, reciprocity, or any other value then are reduced to "a great mass of words nobody would believe." Note that these other factors also would require giving more attention to the actual situation of Melos and Athens as well as other factors for prudential judgment, not least the lack of strategic necessity, recent history of provocation, and shared political values. The Athenians require another standard: "Instead, we recommend that you should try to get what it is possible for you to get, taking into consideration what we both really do think; since you know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the quality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." One can see here the standard conceptions of scene, actors, and rational decision-making that govern political realism.

Every factor in the immediate political situation has been abstracted into a single, universal, and highly reductive calculation. The only "real" consideration is calculating rational self-interest within a hierarchy of power, while setting everything else aside. To do otherwise is to be delusional. The Melians immediately see the danger and attack at precisely the key point: taking a long view of history that imagines a reversal of the Athenian fortunes, they offer a competing universal standard of "fair play and just dealing," i.e., of a sense of moral and political reciprocity that admittedly falls short of "mathematical accuracy" (Thucydides, 1972, 5.90). The Athenian reply involves a long segue

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into imperial insouciance and a perverse psychology of empire whereby the strong have to oppress the weak, along with other themes of the *History* such as the predominance of sea power (and thus some acknowledgement of the specific situation at Melos), but everything is bent back into the iron frame of abstraction.

This figural structure then acquires its most important undergirding: the claim that the Athenian decision is no decision at all but rather a law of nature. "It is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can. This is not a law we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist for ever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way" (Thucydides, 1972, 5.105). The abstraction of power is complete: it is a transhistorical phenomenon and the sure determination of human behavior—that is, the law applies to all actors in all situations in which power matters. Choice is still possible, but only to act in accord with the law or destroy oneself by willfully violating it. Thus, the Melians face two dangers: the actual preponderance of power in action, and the potential of their own rhetoric of liberty, reciprocity, and hope to delude them. Power is not inflected by history or morality, culture or personality, empire or ethnicity, or by anything else; these other factors become either subjective or epiphenomenal.

This triumph of reason over the "fine phrases" of civic eloquence is also a premier example of language being weaponized. The *History* reflects the foundational debate in the Greek Enlightenment about the relationship between language and power, with Thucydides (like Pericles) obviously having learned a great deal from the sophists. What he saw, and modern commentators typically miss, is that setting reason over speech was the most successful rhetorical strategy of them all, and that it became a premier instrument for severing power from morality, rationalizing excessive power, and justifying crimes against humanity. For that to happen, however, speech had to seem either transparent or delusional, reason had to be narrowly circumscribed, and power had to be abstract. Likewise, politics had to be imagined as a state of nature, and its structures and actors subject to laws of nature.

This statement of classical realism contains another device, however, that too often goes unnoticed. The explicit standoff between morality and self-interest (e.g., Thucydides, 1972, 5.104; 5.107) does more than identify the reasons given for Athenian brutality and the cause of Melian miscalculation. The Athenians' account has taken a strange step in the history of power: instead of exalting their position of dominance, or of taking the second spot in a divine hierarchy, they have set themselves beside a law of nature. Perhaps their aversion to monarchy played a role in this development of political reason, but not to protect anyone against tyranny. They are now exempt from responsibility for their actions. That responsibility has been transferred to the hierarchy, the instantiation of the natural law of the strong dominating the weak. (To anticipate another realist argument, the weak learning to band together against the strong only adds another source of power while reinscribing the hierarchy.) Were they exalting their power, they might be expected to exhibit magnanimity (a virtue targeted by Machiavelli, by the way); were they uniquely reflecting the favor of the gods, they might be expected to share those blessings. Instead, in the abstract space of abstract power, following a law that suffuses all of nature, they become bystanders to their own behavior.

The sleight of hand works in part because of how close it seems to an ethical intelligence: one is detached rather than egocentric, observing one's actions from a separate, dispassionate standpoint, and not claiming special powers or privilege beyond what nature provides. However, Thucydides seems at pains to show that the bystander trope is a figure of hubris. Only the powerful claim to have this special knowledge, or at least to accept its discipline and benefits.

This seeming rationality is also an algorithm for overextension. The Athenians neither respect tradition nor learn from history, and they are repeatedly portrayed as bold: behavior that, via the rhetorical figure of *paradiastole* (the reframing of vice as virtue), also can be described as rash. Most important, as the Athenians speak of their power, the signs of their destruction already are evident. Their hubris and collective delusion will become paramount as they decide to invade Sicily, just as their rationality and rhetorical skill would be undone by an almost comic sequence of events in the public debate to authorize the invasion. What also is necessary, however, is the blindness already in place at Melos; indeed, the placement of this otherwise inconsequential scene immediately prior to the Syracuse invasion narrative will not have been an accident (Connor, 1984, 150, 154-155). Contemporary critiques converge on this point: the fatal flaw in the Athenian conception of power is a lack of self-restraint (Nation 2012; Korab-Karpowicz,

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2006; Monoson and Loriaux 1998; Ahrens Dorf 1995; Forde 1995). Once power is abstract, universal, and grounded in a state of nature, it becomes incapable of internal moderation. Becoming a bystander of one's own conduct confirms the shift: power now operates autonomously. At that point, hubris dominates the field.

By contrast, the morality that the Athenians jettisoned at the beginning of the dialogue (among the “mass of words nobody would believe”) was not power's opposite, but its only basis for becoming self-limiting. (Thucydides considers self-interest as a means of self-restraint there and at Mytilene, but it proves susceptible to hubris.) Ironically, the Athenians, like imperialists everywhere, were happy to advise others on the need to accept constraint. By placing the Melian Dialogue in the larger, tragic story, Thucydides reveals how the realist definition of reality is a strategic blunder. The lesson is not that the strong should rule others, but that unless the strong rule themselves, they will become the authors of their own destruction.

Kabul and Lessons Not Learned

Perhaps the realists among the Afghans got out early, rather than trusting in luck, hope, or the Americans. Soon the media will turn elsewhere, the Afghan women will be ignored again, and other events will lead to other interventions. The loss of Afghanistan is a catastrophe for many Afghans, but collateral damage for the US, only another example of lives and treasure unnecessarily lost.

The uproar across the political spectrum of the past few weeks is the flip side of a persistent amnesia, a systematic form of “non-knowing” that is typical of imperial power and not incidentally embedded deeply within political realism (cf. Mills 2007). More specifically, that ignorance is a side-effect of *abstraction, moral displacement, and hubris*: discursive tropes that have become imperial habits. It should not be easy to drop two trillion dollars in a twenty-year war, but it was almost effortless politically in the aftermath of 9/11. An attack on American soil justified a military response and the vast mission creep that followed. Now we will be told again that it is important to pay attention to what was happening on the ground, to take culture seriously, to negotiate rather than dictate terms, to have an exit strategy. These lessons will be re-learned, and then forgotten, again (cf. Rose, 2011). Were they remembered, there would be less reason to read Thucydides.

Following Timothy Ruback's (2015) account of the “Thucydides function,” we recognize how, for better or worse, the text continues to be used as a discourse for disciplinary legitimization. That reach extends even to what Ruback (following Jacques Derrida) labels “the discipline to come,” or how a yearning for the future discipline can shape—and limit—the present configuration. That aspiration is widely shared today, and perhaps comfort can be taken in numbers; obviously, a great deal of work is being done to reset the human sciences more explicitly on the right side of history. Even so, new schools remain formally proximate to old schools, not least in how abstract conceptions of power are essential constructs within a transdisciplinary critical apparatus. Rhetorical self-reflection might include attention to how relying on abstractions can reinscribe habits of inattention.

Thucydides can be instructive in helping us to see that realism can be turned inside out: instead of declaring a severe normative hierarchy to be a state of nature, human nature is revealed to be that and more—both inevitable competition and a capacity for restraint on behalf of mutual advantage. What was hidden within the abstract conception of power as natural domination—national character, moral choice, and the value of sharing power—can be reworked to become a strategy for mutually beneficial co-existence. “Power” suppresses what would limit it; the paradox is that survival requires restraint, whether external or internal.

Stated otherwise, “non-knowing” is essential for imperial overreach, while restraint and a recognition of limits can be a path for transforming ignorance into knowledge and prudence (Beer and Hariman, 2013). Any capacity for reliable, reasonable, internal constraint will come from engagement with the social world that had been abstracted out of the realist political calculus. By fusing abstraction, moral displacement, and hubris, discourse leads toward a future of domination and self-destruction. By paying attention to these tropes, one can recognize what had been ignored or forgotten, again and again.

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