

4: THUCYDIDES AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

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While the works of Plato and Aristotle draw universal attention from students of political philosophy, Thucydides' reception has been more limited and localized. Most frequently, he is sought for his contributions to international relations theory, often accessed through a small number of set pieces such as the Melian dialogue. Whatever the reasons for this relative lack of attention, it is unfortunate, for Thucydides is an important conversation partner not only with more familiar voices within the so-called Western tradition of political philosophy but also with modern political theorists who discuss the functions and disorders of political institutions and political cultures. In this connection, Thucydides may have more to contribute to democratic political theory than is often supposed. Appreciating his contributions means taking him at his word when he writes early in Book 1 of the *History* that he has composed "a possession forever, and not a competitive entry to be heard for the moment" (1.22).² Yet the precise meaning of this very ambitious claim is unclear. Interpreting it is inseparable from coming to grips with the kind of work this is.

Assessments of the genre of Thucydides' work proliferate. He has been read as a historian who narrates and explains the most striking events of his time, as a social theorist who discovers the deepest causes of political disorder, and as a memorializer of the civic leadership

¹ I am particularly grateful to Jill Frank and Stephen Salkever for their comments and criticisms on earlier drafts. Significant portions of this chapter draw on much longer discussions in *The Civic Conversations of Thucydides and Plato: Classical Greek Political Theory and the Limits of Democracy*, State University of New York Press (2008).

² My central resources for translations of Thucydides are the editions of Lattimore 1988 and Smith 1962–88, though I have made changes when they seemed appropriate.

of Pericles. To the extent that we are convinced by one or more of these judgments, however, Thucydides' voice is heard as conclusive and monologic and the political thought that emerges from the pages of his work stands apart from the immediate context of political life. In what follows I will try to suggest that none of these interpretations fully succeeds in capturing the complexity of Thucydides' book. My goal goes beyond commenting on these other views, however. The alternative readings that I offer suggest that Thucydides' narrative should be interpreted as contributing resources for the thoughtful judgments and practices of citizens, not simply within his own immediate political cultural context but within political futures whose contours are necessarily indeterminate. I therefore read the contention that this work is a possession forever as an invitation for a reflective and critical appropriation of the text and as an acknowledgment that the outcomes of such engagements are unpredictable and risky. Consequently, Thucydides' book is not a distant and conclusive series of pronouncements but a speech act that is embedded in political interaction. As such, it stimulates a form of political thought that is critical and discursive, a way of thinking about politics that is particularly appropriate for and possible within democracies.

NARRATIVE AND TIME

Thucydides' book appears most frequently under the title *History of the Peloponnesian War*. For the classical Greeks, a *Historia* signified an investigation, a "learning by inquiry," as one of Liddell and Scott's translations puts it. Thus understood, a "history" presumes a complex, puzzling, and significant field of phenomena that can be made clearer through careful scrutiny. The professionalization of the academic disciplines, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both sharpened and narrowed this intellectual focus to construct the writing and teaching of history as we have come to know it. Consequently, a number of modern scholars read and evaluate Thucydides' work according to professional standards of historical research. Such readings have asked if Thucydides' account of the causes of the Peloponnesian War is consistent with the available evidence, if his treatments of the events he narrates and the figures he represents are objective and unbiased, and so on.³ Asking these questions can provide valuable guidance for further

³ See Kagan 1969; Hanson 1996.

historical inquiry into the period and events that occupy Thucydides. However, this perspective can be ironically anachronistic in its conception of the book's genre. Thucydides begins simply by stating that he has "written about" or "brought together by writing" (*sunegrapsē*) the events of the war, a characterization of his project that continually repeats. Construing this "writing" as a history in more familiar disciplinary terms may limit the questions we ask about the work and undercut the extent of its contributions to the ways in which we think seriously about politics.

Admittedly, Thucydides encourages readers to treat his book as an explanatory and narrative history, particularly in his methodological comments in chapter 26 of Book 5. Responding to those who contend that the Peace of Nicias interrupted the course of the war, and who thus deny that the war was a single event, Thucydides underscores the continuities linking the truce with preceding and succeeding periods of outright war and concludes that this was indeed one conflict, lasting twenty-seven years (431–404 B.C.E. from beginning to end. He writes about these events "as they each came to be in the order of summers and winters." These comments seem to imply that we should read his "writing" as a linear narrative whose order follows the sequence of events as they occurred in time.

Yet while this periodization circumscribes the core of Thucydides' narrative, it does not define it. Even casual readings make clear that there is far more to the book than a report of these events "as each of them came to be." At the outset, the structure of what later editors have organized as the first book of the *History* unsettles senses of linearity. Thucydides begins with an explanation of why he chose to write about the war. Its scope and power suggested immediately that it would be "most worthy of being spoken about" (*axiologōtaton*). He follows this claim with an account of the construction of the Hellenic culture (within a set of chapters – 1.2–19 – known as the Archeology), focusing particularly on the two principal regimes of Athens and Sparta (1.2, 6, 10, 18, 19), and then steps back once again to comment more synoptically (1.20–23) on the character of his work. These last statements include a different reason for believing that the war was an *axiologōtaton*, not sweep and energy but the suffering and dislocation that resulted (1.23). He also offers (1.23) his own belief about the "truest causes" of the war, the greatness of the Athenians and the fearfulness of the Spartans, reinforcing the sense that commentary on the character of these two very different political cultures will be central to what follows. He then begins a substantial account (1.24–88) of the events leading up to

the beginning of the war itself, the bases of the “most openly spoken accusations [against Athenian aggression]” (cf. 1.23). This is followed by an extended narrative (1.89–117, the *Pentecontaetia*) that selectively describes the fifty years between the end of the Persian Wars and the prelude to the Peloponnesian War. He then resumes (1.118) the account of the events immediately prior to the war. However, the linearity of this last narrative section is in itself interrupted by considerations (1.128–38) on the careers of the foremost Athenian (Themistocles) and Spartan (Pausanias) of that time.

Departures from linear time horizons are not confined to the first book. Perhaps most notably, in the midst of the description (in Book 6) of the events following the mutilation of the statues of Hermes and the alleged profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries that took place prior to the massive Athenian invasion of Sicily, Thucydides offers a long (6.54–59) excursus on the historically distant (514 B.C.E.) events surrounding the deaths of the famous tyrannicides, Harmodios and Aristogeiton, whose heroism is alleged to have marked the end of the Peisistratid tyranny and the beginnings of Athenian political freedom.

Though earlier commentators often read such gaps within linear history as lapses on Thucydides’ part, it is now more generally recognized that they play deliberately crafted roles in his writing. The *Pentecontaetia* closely follows a speech given by unnamed Athenians at Sparta to the members of the Peloponnesian coalition who assemble to make a decision that will move the two sides closer to war or peace. The Athenians offer an account of the beginnings of Athens’ empire following the Persian wars, ultimately attributing its creation to the influence of the compelling and conquering forces of fear, honor, and interest (1.75–76). As Thucydides’ account of the empire’s beginnings given in his own name, the *Pentecontaetia* serves as a commentary on this partisan Athenian statement. The Thucydidean account of the empire’s beginnings prompts a more direct engagement with the question of the relative influence of the three alleged compulsions (which are listed twice by the Athenians, the second giving first place to honor rather than fear), the adequacy of accepting the Athenian thesis (Clifford Orwin’s phrase⁴) that the creation of the empire was in fact compelled, and the meaning or meanings of compulsion (*anankē* and its variations) within the work generally.

The comparative biographies of Themistocles and Pausanias can likewise be read as playing significant and complicating roles with

⁴ Orwin 1994: 44–56.

respect to portions of the work that immediately surround them. The example of Themistocles, who moves from being champion of Athenian interests (I.90–93) to traitor (I.137–38), problematizes the closely following Periclean statement (I.144) that the well-being of cities and individuals harmonizes in the pursuit of honor in the face of the greatest risks. The career of Pausanias undercuts the valorization of the Spartan culture of discipline and deference to the laws proclaimed earlier by the Spartan king Archidamus (I.84). More generally, these biographies reinforce the *History's* focus on the role of political culture in shaping individual practice. The actions of Themistocles and Pausanias are both of and not of their respective cities; both their dependence upon and challenges to their own regime's priorities are provocative reflections of the complexities of the regimes themselves. Themistocles exhibits a pursuit of individual renown that is distinctly Athenian even as it compromises Athenian interests; Pausanias gives himself over to luxury and arrogance in a way that both defies and presupposes Spartan severity. Numerous readings of Thucydides have emphasized that his treatment of political interactions focuses heavily on the influence exerted by political cultures or regimes. Some of these interpretations have gone further to argue that Thucydides' understanding of regimes is essentialist or reductive.⁵ Juxtaposing the stories of Themistocles and Pausanias with statements made by other figures in the work who do, in fact, essentialize the Athenian and Spartan regimes complicates this judgment. The Corinthians overgeneralize when they characterize (I.68–71) the Athenians as energetically public spirited and the Spartans as restrained stay-at-homes. Thucydides' broader perspective suggests that regimes need to be understood in terms not only of coherence and power but also of contradiction and contestation.

The tyrannicide excursus plays heavily into a broader treatment of how political memory functions to strengthen or disrupt forms of political action. The extended treatment of 6.54–59 is both continuation and revision of a much more compressed reference (I.20) offered as part of the synoptic methodological remarks in Book I. In the first passage, Thucydides criticizes the erroneous Athenian memory that enshrines the liberation achieved by the tyrannicides. Here memory fails to fulfill what Paul Ricoeur calls its truthful function;⁶ the Athenians did not realize that those they call the tyrannicides killed only the tyrant's brother Hipparchos, leaving the tyrant himself, Hippias,

⁵ Cf. Sahlins 2004: 46–49.

⁶ Ricoeur 2004: 88.

alive and in power. However, when, in Book 6, he considers how the tyrannicide symbol influenced reactions to the mutilations, Thucydides claims that the Athenians knew that the Peisistratids were put down “not by themselves and Harmodios but by the Spartans.” Possessing truthful memory does not, however, ensure the appropriate response. Here memory fails in the context of Ricoeur’s pragmatic function,⁷ for the anxiety stemming from a correct memory of the facts surrounding the tyranny’s overthrow leads the Athenians to reenact a politics of fear and violence. Knowing that Hippias’ rule became harsh in the end, the Athenians still fail to understand the reasons for it. In a way, the tyranny’s lapse into violence is traceable to the thoughtless daring (*alogistos tolma*) of the tyrannicides themselves (6.59.1). They were motivated not by a public-spirited love of freedom, but by more personal disputes and resentments (6.56). And it was the murder of Hipparchos that caused the onset of Hippias’ truly “tyrannical” rule (6.59). Haunted by vulnerability and a fear of new subversions prompted by the mutilations and the alleged profanations, the democracy turns to violence in a way that parallels the harshness of the last of the Peisistratids (6.60).

From this perspective, recalling the deficiencies of the tyrannicide story clarifies two ways in which political memory can contribute to healthy political activity. The first is to know the factuality of events so as to resist impulses for cultural romanticization and self-congratulation. The second is to respond to a knowledge of the facts in an appropriate way. To the degree that Thucydides’ *History* is an attempt to provide resources for both functions, it must be seen as more than simply a narrative of events as they have come to occur. It is, instead, a *historia* in its richer and more complicating sense, part of an ongoing and interactive investigation concerned with civic conduct and direction.

ACTION AND SPEECH

Thucydides’ concern to provide resources for both truthful and pragmatic memory may help to interpret his provocative comments (1.22) on how he has framed his distinctive treatments of the actions (*erga*) and the speeches (*logoi*) that together constitute his narrative. He notes that he has been as accurate as possible with respect to the *erga*, “neither crediting what I learned from the chance reporter nor what seemed to me [to be credible], but [writing only] after examining what I was involved

⁷ Ricoeur 2004: 88.

with myself and what I learned from others” (1.22). With respect to the speeches, “recalling precisely what was said was difficult”; consequently, he represents what “seemed to me each would have said [as] especially required (*ta deonta malist' eipein*) on the occasion, [yet] maintaining as much closeness as possible to the general sense (*gnōmēs*) of what was truly said” (1.22). At first blush, this distinction seems to reflect the concerns of a writer who approaches his field of investigation in a way that strives to achieve the greatest degree of factual accuracy. Josiah Ober interprets this comment as reflecting Thucydides’ suspicion of speeches that are not tested against the reality of deeds. Heard in contexts that do not allow for such verification, speeches are too susceptible to manipulation or misunderstanding to serve as adequate guides to practice. For Ober, the suspicion of unverified speech is one of the bases for Thucydides’ strong critique of democracy.⁸ Yet Thucydides’ treatment of events and speeches can be interpreted in a way that reflects a more complicated concern to provide resources for both truthful and pragmatic memory. Striving to be as accurate as possible with respect to *erga* acknowledges the importance of truthful memory, while presenting the *logoi* most required by each situation critically inscribes a variety of pragmatic efforts to respond to – to understand or to control – the order of political events within the narrative as a whole. In this respect, Thucydides’ speakers become conversation partners among themselves, with Thucydides and for an indefinite range of potential readers.

While the thematic consideration of deeds and speeches is one of the central concerns of the *History* as a whole, the possibility of establishing either a clear hierarchy or even a firm separation between them is less apparent. Thucydides himself suggests that the criteria for distinguishing between speech and action are not as definite as this preliminary methodological framework implies. The war as a whole is called an *ergon* (1.22.2) and the entire narrative that represents it is a *logos*.⁹ The collection of narrated speeches includes not only directly quoted statements but also many indirect discourses. While the choice between direct and indirect forms of representation may seem arbitrary or incidental, Thucydides’ resorting to one mode or the other seems intentional. The only speech that qualifies as a (kind of) direct speech in Book 8 – 8.53.3 – presents the language of a planned statement before

⁸ Ober 1998: 57.

⁹ On the relation between *logos* and *ergon* in Thucydides, generally, see also Parry 1981: 9; Price 2001: 74–75; and Strauss 1964: 163.

it is uttered. This speech is to be delivered in the context of attempts to persuade the Athenian *dēmos* to make the city's governance more oligarchic. Thus, one consequence of the success of this speech will be to censor the content of future speeches – “In our deliberations [we must] take less heed of the regime and more of safety.” The silencing of political speech by the temporarily ascendant oligarchy is therefore reflected in the style of the narrative itself. Some indirect speeches are significant because of their practical consequences, as when Alcibiades persuades the army on Samos not to sail against oligarchically governed Athens (8.86). Others deserve attention because of what they reveal about political cultural conditions, as when Boeotian and Athenian heralds give competing views on the relation between piety and military power in an exchange reported within the account of the Athenian defeat at Delium (4.97–99). Though the direct speeches are specifically marked as such within the text and therefore separated from deeds or actions, they must also be understood as deeds in the form of speech acts.¹⁰ The pragmatic character of these utterances is sometimes set by institutional or cultural contexts, Pericles' funeral speech, for example.¹¹ Others have more dramatic and immediate outcomes, for example, Diodotus' success in pleading for mercy toward the Mytilene democrats (3.41–49) or the Melians' fatal defiance of the Athenian demand for submission (5.84–116). However, others – the hopeless pleas of the defeated Plataeans as they attempt to escape capital punishment (3.53–59) or the formulaic exhortations of Nicias during the retreat from Syracuse (7.77) – are notable precisely because they are completely without consequence.

Another reason to question sharp distinctions between speeches and actions within the narrative is Thucydides' statement that much of what he learned about the war's *erga* depended on reports provided by others.¹² As reports, such speeches are indeed susceptible to error and misrepresentation. Yet this is more than a methodological problem for a serious historian. It seems to be a clear recognition that no facts can ever speak for themselves. However, on some occasions Thucydides seems to say quite clearly that they can, particularly (at 1.1 and 1.23) when they decisively show the war's importance, as a coherent series of deeds worthy of speech. While this might not eliminate the need for the historian, as Ober speculates, it may reinforce Connor's observation

¹⁰ On the varieties of speech acts, see for example Butler 1997: 44.

¹¹ See for example, Loraux 1986: 180–93.

¹² Noted by Ober 1998: 59–60; cf. Saxonhouse 2004: 64–65.

that the historian's primary role is to make the facts plainly visible to the readers.¹³

As suggested above, however, in these two passages the facts "say" very different things. In his first statement, Thucydides indicates that he began writing about the war because he believed that it would be "great and more worthy of being spoken about than any previous war." In this connection, he emphasizes the war's power and scope. "For this was the greatest motion (*kinēsis . . . megistē*) that had come to be among Greeks and even [among] portions of the barbarians, indeed one may speak of [the involvement of] most of humanity" (*pleiston anthrōpōn*) (1.1.2). This war is thus truly worthy of being spoken about because of its spectacular displays. Yet this contention itself presupposes a valorization of particular criteria of worth, scope, motion, and energy, all of which would be prized within an Athens that the Corinthians describe (1.70) as obsessed with daring, even reckless, motion. These same evaluative standards are given pride of place by Pericles in the funeral speech where the fact of greatness itself makes linguistic representations of greatness unnecessary. "With the great display and asserting power that has not gone unwitnessed, we will be the wonder of both those now living and those who follow, needing no Homer to praise us nor any other whose phrases might please for the moment, but whose claims the truth of [our] deeds (*ergōn . . . hē alētheia*) will destroy" (2.41.4). This statement extends to his broader characterization of Athens as a city remarkable for deeds, not words. It uses all of its resources "more for critically timed action (*ergou mallon kairō*) than [for] boastful speech" (2.40.1). Yet in spite of Pericles' express contentions, Athens' deeds do in fact require more than a simple perception of their power. Their inspirational significance depends upon Pericles' ability to persuade the Athenians about the criteria that should be applied within any exercise of civic judgment.

In appealing (1.1) to energy and motion as signs of the war's importance, Thucydides appears to validate a Periclean sense of what makes deeds or practices notable. Yet those criteria are challenged within Thucydides' second explanation of the reasons behind the war's importance. At 1.23, the facts communicate not only energy and daring

but also such sufferings as came to afflict Hellas unlike those [experienced] in any [length of] time. For never had there been so many cities seized and abandoned, some by

¹³ Ober 1998: 56; Connor 1984: 29.

barbarians and others by the Hellenes warring against each other (and some even changed population after they were overpowered), nor were there so many human beings dislocated or slaughtered, both on account of the war itself and because of factional fighting.

These ugly sufferings and hatreds are consistently concealed or diminished in Pericles' own direct speeches (2.43–44, 64). What he represents as most important for human beings is a love of honor that is fulfilled by the anticipation of an eternal remembrance for one's name (2.64.5). In underscoring the sufferings caused by the war, Thucydides reinstates criteria of significance that Pericles' *logos* had effectively diminished. Thus, the facts cannot simply speak for themselves. They are given very different significances, first by the Periclean affirmation of daring and reputation, and then by the challenging and problematizing narrative of Thucydides. Consequently, one could read these claims that the facts speak for themselves as introducing a question that recurs within the narrative as a whole: What truly makes events most worthy of being spoken about (*axiologōtaton*)?¹⁴

Since facts speak only through *logoi* that may signify and evaluate *erga* very differently, what does Thucydides mean when he claims to have represented the speeches as they were “especially required in the given situation”? Against this more complicated backdrop, it is unlikely that the narrated speeches provide reliably verified reports of what was factually stated on the various occasions. However, Thucydides certainly has not replaced the voices of the speakers with his own, correcting their statements with an authorial version of what they should have said if they were him. I believe that representations of these speeches within the narrative reveal how the speakers in question (individuals or regimes) would have articulated their responses to political dilemmas if they were to speak completely in character, in ways consistent with their most fundamental identities or firmest commitments. As such, the speeches of the various participants are embedded in psychological and cultural networks of calculation and desire, ambition and fear. To this extent, the narrated *logoi* offer a body of pragmatic responses to the war's *erga*. By including these speeches within the encompassing *logos* of the *History* as a whole, Thucydides both takes them seriously and subjects them to potential criticisms, inviting his readers to consider the values and limitations of the forms of political thought and practice that they reveal.

¹⁴ The importance of this question is implied also by Forde 1989: 4–5.

What, then, is the character of Thucydides' own *logos*? Two interpretations are particularly pronounced within the scholarly literature. The first sees Thucydides as a social theorist who maps the dynamics of power relations as they occur within and among regimes.¹⁵ The second treats his writing as an appreciative recognition of the leadership of Pericles.¹⁶ Initially, these two views seem to extend in different, even opposite, directions. Seeing Thucydides as a general theorist of power elevates his perspective above that of particular regimes or individuals, while interpreting his *logos* as homage to Pericles situates it within the political debates of a single political culture. Moreover, synoptic theorizing would expose the Periclean encomium to renown as limited and self-deceptive, while affirming the Periclean ethic would reveal the inadequacies of reductive theoretical categories that pretend to be guideposts to the heart of human aspiration. For all of their differences, however, both interpretations imply that Thucydides' *logos* is conclusive and directive in tone. To this extent, both tend to diminish the importance of political thought as a discursive and interactive enterprise, the one view deferring to the penetrating insights of theory, the other to the effective exhortations of political leadership. Yet while Thucydides dramatizes both synoptic and rhetorical modes of political intelligence in his narrative, I believe that neither represents his own position and that neither of these assessments does justice to Thucydides' work, understood as a possession forever. Critical scrutiny of these interpretations suggests that Thucydides' practice of political thought acknowledges more ambiguity and requires more discursive and more critical interaction.

THE IMPERATIVES AND RESTRAINTS OF POWER

A number of Thucydides' speakers certainly offer generalized visions of how power relations play out, allegedly according to nature. In different ways, the Athenians at Sparta (1.76.2–4), the Syracusan statesman Hermocrates (4.61.5–7), the Athenian envoys to the Melians (5.105.2), and the Athenian negotiator at Camarina in Sicily, Euphemos (6.85.1–2, 87.4–5), all acknowledge the universal imperative that the strong control the weak. This dynamic can be expressed in different

¹⁵ See, for example, Crane 1998: 146–47.

¹⁶ For example, Edmunds 1975: 193, 211; Farrar 1988: 163; Parry 1981: 188; Wohl 2002: 71; Yunis 1996: 79–80.

ways. It can arise from a calculated (Euphemos) or anxious (the Athenian envoys on Melos) pursuit of interest, or it may simply be what human beings do (the Athenians at Sparta, Hermocrates) when opportunities arise. Those speakers implicated in the most violent action (the envoys to the Melians) give what seems to be the deepest and most structured account. What they know about gods and human beings (and thus about the cosmos, generally) tells them that the strong are naturally compelled (*anankaias*) by a kind of law (*ton nomon*) to rule when they are empowered.¹⁷ All of these cases lead Jacqueline de Romilly to see this position as that of Thucydides as well. “In the final analysis Athenian imperialism is the only perfect example of a common experience whose nature is governed by universal laws.”¹⁸

Yet it is hardly obvious that the speeches of Thucydides’ characters are simply intended to transmit his own beliefs.¹⁹ All of those who affirm the universality of a supposed law of nature validating domination speak from positions within powerful regimes. Consequently, all may represent cultural priorities or advantages as confirming natural imperatives. Thucydides’ own statement on nature seems to communicate a very different set of conclusions. In his commentary in Book 3 on the significance of the devastating civil war (*stasis*) in the city of Corcyra, he represents nature not as order but as turbulence. Within this turbulence, it is no longer clear what the categories of strength and weakness mean.²⁰

The meaner in intellect were more often the survivors; out of fear of their own deficiencies and their enemies’ intelligence, that they might not be overcome in words (*logois*) and become the first victims of plots issuing from the others’ intelligent deceptions, they daringly embraced deeds (*erga*). And those who contemptuously believed they would know all in advance, and that they need not seize by deed what would come to them by intelligence, were taken off their guard and perished in greater numbers. (3.83.3–4)

From this perspective, a generalizing theory asserting the universal control of the weaker by the stronger should now be understood as a discourse emerging out of a particular kind of political culture. Insofar

¹⁷ Compare with Plato’s *Gorgias* 484a–c.

¹⁸ de Romilly 1963: 312.

¹⁹ As Price 2001: 197, warns as well.

²⁰ See also Price 2001: 47, 57.

as it is treated as a mandate for practice, it is shown in the *History* to be illusory and self-defeating. Thucydides must be read, then, as separating himself from that culture and offering a critical perspective, though hardly an impartial one, on its content. I believe that this conclusion emerges within the portion of the *History* that is often read as making the strongest case for a universal theory of power, the Melian dialogue.

The occasion is Athens' attempt to coerce the independent island city of Melos into subjection during a period of supposed peace between the warring sides. Earlier, the Athenian general Nicias (after whom the peace is named) had led an unsuccessful expedition to Melos for the same imperial purpose (3.91.1–3). Athens presses the agenda again in part because of the hollowness of the negotiated peace (5.25–26, 69–74) and in part because of growing ambitions toward Sicily (6.1). The episode ends with Melos' destruction; the men are killed and the women and children enslaved (5.116). As horrible as this act is, however, it is no different from the punishment imposed on the defecting Chalchidean city of Scione after the peace agreement (5.32.1–2) or from the first decision about the fate of rebellious Mytilene (3.36.1–3). What is unique in the Melian episode is what is said,²¹ the “dialogue” between representatives of Athens and Melos’ “leaders and the few” (5.84.3).

This is hardly a dialogue, of course, if dialogue means a discursively open conversation that is settled by what Jurgen Habermas calls the forceless force of the stronger argument.²² Any rational interchange is distorted at the outset by two expressions of power, the first by the Melian leadership's exclusion of the city's populace from the conversation (5.85), the second by the Athenian exploitation of the military imbalance between the two cities. Consequently, the Athenians demand that the conversation be limited to a consideration of the issues they themselves raise and that the Melian contribution be confined to responses. This will also exclude appeals to justice as pointless (“for just things are only decided through human speech [when directed by] equal compulsions – *isēs anankēs* – [consequently] the powerful do what they can, while the weak give way to them” [5.89]) and will focus the discussion squarely on questions of advantage. The Athenians treat the interchange as a narrow form of bargaining, urging the Melians to purchase safety with submission.

²¹ Cf. Connor 1984: 150.

²² Cf. Habermas 1996: 541 n. 58.

Resisting these constraints, the Melians do not see the terms of the exchange as settled because of their continued attachments to certain beliefs about the structure of the political cosmos they inhabit. The Athenians dismiss the Melians' assessments as wishful thinking, grounded in hopes in things inscrutable or invisible (*ta aphanē*) (5.103, 113). They represent themselves, on the other hand, as quintessential realists, taking their bearing from "things right before their eyes" (*tōn horōmenōn*) (5.113). Echoing de Romilly, a number of commentators have read the Athenian position as stating Thucydides' own.²³ However, this conclusion ignores the extent to which the Athenians are also driven by highly problematic beliefs in invisible things, a perspective that we might call a certain political imagination.

The Melian leadership retains hope for their city's independence because of the unpredictability of war and especially because they anticipate assistance from both the gods and the Spartans. "We trust that, regarding fortune, through the influence of the divine, we shall not suffer, since we stand as pious men against those who are unjust, and regarding power, that the Lacedaemonians our allies will necessarily provide us with resources, if for no other reason than out of kinship and respect (*aischunē*)" (5.104). The Melians continue to rely on a kind of justice not simply because the desperateness of their situation leaves no other recourse, but also because their vision of the world as ordered by patterns of lawfulness and reciprocity seems to obligate the Spartans and even the gods to come to their aid. Calling this coherent picture a kind of imagination need not dismiss it as illusory. It seems rather to be an interpretation of experience that is testable against and to a degree verifiable by practical outcomes. The continuing care of the gods or fortune can be inferred by the city's long-standing independence (5.112). Trust in Sparta is reinforced by the Lacedaemonians' reputation as enemies of tyranny, shown most recently by Brasidas' apparent (though badly misunderstood) liberationist expedition in the north (5.110). Precisely because the political cosmos is envisaged as a stable order, the Melians remain attached to conventional beliefs about shame and nobility (5.100) and they insist that they be accorded a recognition equal to that which Athens demands from them (5.92).

However, for all its supposed clear-sightedness, Athens, too, proceeds on the basis of a distinctive political imagination rooted in beliefs

²³ Other commentators who have read Thucydides as accepting the validity of claims that the rule of the strong reflects a certain kind of natural standard or order include Ostwald 1988: 38, 55, and Pouncey 1980: 104.

in things that are also in a way invisible. Its demands presume an image of Athens as a powerful, yet vulnerable, imperial city within an unforgivingly competitive cosmos. The envoys say they can accept nothing short of complete submission from the Melians because anything less will be seen as Athenian weakness, particularly by those cities that are currently their subjects. “[A]side from extending our rule, you would offer us security by being subdued, especially since as islanders, and weaker than the others, you should not have prevailed over the masters of the sea” (5.97). While this vision of the cosmos seems altogether different from the order structured by justice and piety that the Melians imagine, it also supposes a coherent frame of reference where those strong enough to rule do so and where the continuation of both strength and rule must run in parallel.

For of the gods we hold the belief and of human beings we know, that by a necessity of their nature, where they are stronger, they rule. And since we neither laid down this law, nor, when it was in place, were the first to use it, we found it in existence and expect to leave it in existence forever, so we make use of it, knowing that both you and others, taking on the same power we have, would do the same. (5.105.2)

Athens is therefore conceived as playing its own necessary role in an ordered world. They must comply with imperatives set not by reciprocity but by power. Consequently, the Athenians seem as constrained by their surrounding cosmos as the Melians are by theirs. While the remarkable political success of the empire may be reassuring evidence of the reality of such an order, the accompanying pressure demands that the Athenians work ceaselessly to maintain their position of advantage. Within this world, the only alternative to continuously active political energy is servitude or disintegration (5.91, 99).

The Athenian political imagination is said to reflect the nature of things. The envoys’ reliance on what they call the natural law as a validation of the stronger’s rule (5.105) assumes that there are obvious and unambiguous measures of strength and weakness that can determine political relationships in clearly accessible ways, the manifest power of the Athenians as opposed to the “invisible things” that reassure the Melians. From this perspective, different forms of political imagination could be comparatively tested against the demanding but definite natural standard. Understanding the content and implications of this

standard would thus constitute the truest political wisdom. Yet while this may be the envoys' position, for reasons I have indicated it is not at all obvious that it is Thucydides'. The Athenians' own language thus collapses differences between natural standards and political or cultural constructions. Their appeals to natural necessity are elaborated by references to decision and legislation. Yet if this allegedly natural law is one that has been, so to speak, laid down (*keimenōi*), it is not clear that it has been in place, as they say, forever (*aiei*). When the Athenians' infer beliefs (*doxē*) about the gods from what is known clearly (*saphōs*) about human beings, they rely on a kind of political wisdom or political imagination that constructs rather than defers to natural imperatives.²⁴

If conceptions of the cosmos or nature can be traced to forms of political imagination, such conceptions should therefore be subject to criticism and revision as alternative images arise. However, because both the Athenians and the Melians maintain allegiances to dogmatic extra-political foundations, whether theological or anthropological, they reject alternative formulations as unintelligible. The Melians willfully resist Athenian pressure because they do not envisage a political order wherein justice disappears. The Athenians contemptuously dismiss the Melians as suicidal fools because the envoys reject any measure of regime strength beyond the exercise of material power. When challenges are encountered from whatever quarter, some dogmatic belief in "things invisible" silences.

While these powerful beliefs are treated by their advocates as both sources of political strength and conditions for political rationality, in the end they foster irrationalities and disasters. Melos' disaster comes first. Yet this seeming validation of Athenian realism is followed by Athens' own disaster in Sicily, the sources for which are the same political imaginaries that underlie the campaign against Melos (6.1.1–2). The catastrophic end of the Sicilian campaign is marked by the reappearance of the voices discounted by the envoys as the defeated Athenian general Nicias, who was ironically the leader of the first assault against Melos (3.91.1–3), irrationally hopes for assistance from the gods and the Spartans (7.77.1–4, 85.1–2).²⁵ And the invasion creates the very crisis that it was allegedly initiated to prevent, the frightening prospect of Athens' domination by others (6.18.3; 8.1–2).

²⁴ Thus, Palmer's 1992: 70, comment: "What the Athenians believe they know about men determines what they believe about the gods."

²⁵ Cf. Connor 1984: 155.

Thus interpreted, the statement that nature requires the strong to rule and the weak to submit emerges within Thucydides' narrative not as a penetrating insight but as a dangerous illusion. Its dangers are caused by two deficiencies that are intimately connected with attempts at conclusive and synoptic theorizing more generally. First, framing priorities are specified so rigidly as to eliminate challenges or alternatives before the fact. Second, beliefs that these forms of political imagination are founded on cosmic standards of necessity mask their political-cultural origins and frustrate possibilities of rational critique and pragmatic change. These observations may begin to provide a clue as to *one* meaning of *anankē* as represented in Thucydides' claims (1.23; 5.25) that the Athenians and Spartans were compelled to wage war. Here, *anankē* may point to the presence of what might be called unexamined obsessions that demand even as they resist the scrutiny of a more critical political thought. In pairing Melian and Athenian obsessions, Thucydides does not proclaim the necessity of domination, but instead displays the need for critically examining synoptic pretensions of whatever sort.

PERICLEAN LEADERSHIP AND THE VALORIZATION OF THE NOBLE

Pericles' project seems very different from the envoys' recognition of sweeping cosmic imperatives. He consistently appeals not to a universal and compelling nature but to the distinctiveness and agency of Athens. Far from rising to the heights of a theory that stands above individual regimes, Pericles practices a culturally embedded political judgment, expressed through pragmatic speech and sensitive to changing circumstances. Moreover, Periclean aspirations ennoble the exercise of power not as confirming natural law but as marking an excellence that will achieve lasting renown for those daring enough to run the required risks. This passion for the noble is extended into a vision of civic well-being, where the concern to foster the name of one's city becomes a guiding priority. All of the three direct Periclean speeches presented by Thucydides inspirationally urge a harmonization of private well-being and the common good (1.144; 2.43; 2.60, 64). For these reasons, many commentators read Pericles' speeches as attempts to foster public spirit and thoughtful judgment among the Athenians and interpret Thucydides as preserving and valorizing the Periclean example as the proper response to political challenges, a prudent blending of speech and action

that strives to create better citizens.²⁶ Perhaps the most compelling textual support for the validity of this reading is Thucydides' encomium to Pericles' leadership and harsh condemnation of those who competed for preeminence after his death.

Whenever he perceived that [the people] were arrogantly bold against what the times warranted, he confounded them into fearfulness by his speaking, and again, when they were irrationally afraid, he restored them to confidence. And what was said to be a democracy was in fact a rule by the first man (*protos anēr*). Those who came in later, in contrast, since they were much more like one another and each was extending himself to become first, [they] gave over the affairs [of the city] to the pleasure of the *dēmos*. (2.65.9–10)

Yet read within the broader context of the *History* there are aspects of Pericles' leadership that Thucydides himself seems to criticize.²⁷ For all of his appeals to the common good, Pericles is consistently guided by priorities informed by his own singular vision of human well-being. This vision is most forcefully revealed in his final speech (2.60–64) in which an anticipation of how Athens will be remembered takes pride of place. Though it is in the fate of all things to be diminished (*ellassousthai*), what is to be valued most is reputation or the great name (*onoma megiston*) that is won by daring action and competitive achievement. Though Athens' constant motion may well end with the diminution of its material accomplishments and perhaps even the disappearance of its political existence under the ravages of time (cf. 1.10.2–3) and while it will also certainly encounter the hatred of rivals and subjects, “hatred does not persist for long, but the brilliance of the instant and repute (*doxa*) thereafter remain in eternal memory (*aieimnēstos*)” (2.64.5). In affirming this conception of political success, Pericles thus disregards the crass material ambitions for profit and status that motivate cities such as Corcyra (cf. 1.33–36). In reality, such achievements are simply signs of the truly valuable psycho-cultural resources of energy and virtue that Athens uniquely and continuously replenishes. Pericles' Athens is therefore driven to pursue the enduring reputation that defeats death. This

²⁶ Note especially Farrar 1988: 163.

²⁷ For those who read Thucydides as also offering a critique of Pericles, see the different presentations of (for example) Monoson and Loriaux 1998: 285–97; Orwin 1994: 25–28; Strauss 1964: 193–94; Balot 2001: 148–49.

ambition further extends the funeral speech's anticipation (2.43.3–4) of the boundless fame that awaits those conspicuous individuals who have the whole earth as their monument into a vision of civic glory, unbounded by space or time. While this vision seems to integrate the individual love of reputation with the city's achievements, therefore opposing those who would treat the city's good as simply instrumental to selfish purposes,²⁸ it also represents Athens as a civic image of the conspicuous man, valorizing the agenda of the daring individual as the good of the political community as a whole.

For these reasons, the Periclean visions of the human good and thus of Athens' political well-being are represented by Thucydides in ways that underscore their political contestability. Pericles' explanation for why Athens will eternally possess its shining reputation is that "we as Hellenes ruled over the most Hellenes, sustained the greatest wars against them, both individually and united, and lived in a city that was in all ways best provided for and greatest" (2.64.3). This praise of Athens' boundless energy and imperial sweep encounters opposition from a variety of voices, ranging from families of the fallen (2.44–45) to those opposing this project in the name of either their own political integrity (1.143.5) or a different version of Athenian interest (2.64.4–5). Periclean rhetoric combats such dissent at every turn. In his first speech, he preemptively absorbs all conceptions of individual well-being within an expansive and controversial vision of the public good. "[O]ut of the greatest dangers (*megistōn kindunōn*) emerge the greatest honors (*megistai timai*) for both city and individual" (1.144.3), as if the promise of the greatest honors would induce every individual to run the greatest risks. When the funeral speech exhorts all citizens to "really pay regard (*theōmenous*) each day to the power of the city and become her lovers (*erastas*)" (2.43.1), it simultaneously recognizes and rejects as useless (*achreia*) any attachments to private goods that might challenge or dilute enthusiastic citizenship (2.40, 44.4). Though his final speech begins with an acknowledgment of the city's crucial role in ensuring personal security, it ends, as previously noted, with an eloquence that praises Athens' power and brilliance precisely because of the magnitude of the sacrifices that it demands from its citizens (2.64.4–5).

Pericles' commitment to strengthening those bases of Athens' eternal reputation significantly affects his treatment of what *logos* and democracy mean within Athenian political culture. In the funeral speech, he links his appreciation of Athens' unique blending of speech

²⁸ A position some commentators (Forde 1989; Palmer 1992) ascribe to Alcibiades.

and action with his characterization of the city as a democracy (2.37.1, 40.1–3). Yet speech eventually plays its most important role as handmaid or witness to the power of Athens' deeds (*erga* [2.41.1–3]). The exhorted response to the city's accomplishments is a sense of amazement (cf. 7.28.3) that displaces any serious attention to the contributions of the poets or culture, generally (2.41.4). The appropriate sensory response to Athens' accomplishments is, therefore, sight ("pay regard [*theōmenous*] each day to the power of the city and become her lovers" [2.43.1]), rather than speech or listening ("we use wealth for critical action not for boastful speech" [2.40.1]). While the influence of Athens' deeds certainly depends on the rhetorical success of Periclean speech (*logos*), without which the fact (*ergon*) of power would be hidden, the *logos* is itself a speech act, a powerful *ergon* whose character is measured by its success in forging emotional unity among the individual citizens. From this perspective, Pericles' rhetoric seems intended not to develop judgment (*gnōmē*) as a democratic good but to elicit participation in the project of creating a political identity that will live (forever – *aiet*) in memory, which construes the selective development of civic judgment as instrumental. Similarly, the funeral oration's characterization of the democratic culture as the establishment of equality before the law quickly gives way to the praise of democracy as the regime that gives individual excellence the opportunity to shine (2.37.2). Thucydides' own contention that Periclean Athens was a democracy in name, while being in fact the rule of the first man (2.65.9–10), is anticipated in the representation of Periclean rhetoric in the narrative.

We might detect reservations about Periclean leadership even within Thucydides' apparently explicit statement of praise. In spite of the dramatically different judgments about Pericles and his successors, there is an unsettling continuity between Pericles' being the city's "first man" and the politically destructive competition among those who followed. When Thucydides assesses the regime of the five thousand as the "Athenians' . . . best government at least in my lifetime" (8.97.2) he may not be imagining an institutional approximation to Periclean leadership,²⁹ but instead offering an implicit comment on the limitations of Periclean brilliance. As described by Thucydides, the regime of the five thousand is no democracy in name, but it is also far from the rule of a single *protos anēr*. It is, strangely, a regime whose distinction lies in its moderation (8.97). Finally, notwithstanding the appreciation of Pericles' foresight in opposing expansion of the empire in wartime, the eulogy

²⁹ As in Farrar 1988: 186.

ends with the implication that Pericles' own prediction about Athens' success in the war may have been radically distorted by impressions that he himself helped to create. "So great were the resources Pericles had at that time, enabling his own forecast that the city would easily prevail in the war over the Peloponnesians alone" (2.65.13).³⁰ In offering the basis of an appreciative but critical assessment of Pericles, Thucydides performs an exercise in political thought that is less directive and more discursive; indeed, one that is potentially more democratic.

DIODOTUS AND THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF AGENCY

Thucydides' implicit criticisms of the leadership of Pericles have led some scholars to suggest that traces of Thucydides' own voice are more pronounced within the speech of the character Diodotus, the Athenian citizen who succeeds in persuading the assembly to reverse its own previous harshness toward the democrats of the city of Mytilene (3.35–50).³¹ In the fourth year of the war Mytilene's oligarchs have led an unsuccessful revolt against Athens. The rebellion has been suppressed with the aid of the Mytilene *dēmos*. Incensed, the assembly first decides to kill all of the adult males, including the democrats. Once their anger softens, the citizens opt for a reconsideration. The demagogue Cleon (the orchestrator of the previous day's decision) argues again for the severest punishment. Diodotus opposes him and the relatively more merciful course of action prevails, though only by a small majority (3.49). Diodotus appears nowhere else in the *History* or any other known classical source.³² Arguably, his speech is the most complex of all of those represented by Thucydides. The speech is given with a view to an immediate political decision that must be confronted by the democratic assembly. Yet it is also surrounded by a broader reflection on the contributions of political speech in a democracy and by an

³⁰ Moreover, Thucydides is provocatively silent about how success against the Peloponnesians would have affected the quality of the Athenian regime thereafter.

³¹ I agree with Strauss's 1964: 231, assessment that "Diodotus' speech reveals more of Thucydides himself than does any other speech." See also Orwin 1994: 204–6; Saxonhouse 2006: 214. My view of exactly what is revealed differs somewhat from Strauss's and Orwin's and is closest to Saxonhouse's.

³² Leading some commentators (Forde 1989: 40 n. 34; Palmer 1992: 125 n. 22; Saxonhouse 1996: 75) to suggest that Diodotus is a product of Thucydides' literary imagination.

even deeper psychological assessment of human motives and human educability. As such, the speech is informed by the structure of a certain kind of political philosophy. However, Diodotus treats none of these questions straightforwardly.

In opposition to Cleon, who has attacked logos as trivializing whimsy and dangerous obscurantism, Diodotus contends that logos and the thoughtfulness behind it are the most important resources for political communities (3.41). Yet as much as Athens needs rational and interactive political speech, its institutions discourage it by creating a hostile and distorting environment for honest speakers. Consequently, any proposal offered to the assembly must deceive to succeed (3.43). These criticisms are followed by a case for leniency toward the Mytilene *dēmos* that is framed exclusively in terms of Athenian interest (3.44), and some commentators have on this basis assailed Diodotus for stripping all considerations of justice from public deliberation.³³ Yet since this appeal to interest has been preceded by an acknowledgment of the necessarily deceptive nature of political speeches, it is questionable whether it is really all there is to Diodotus' case. Some scholars have in fact traced a parallel justice-based argument for leniency in Diodotus' presentation.³⁴ Yet if this is valid, his speech has immediate success only by continuing and reinforcing the structural pathologies that distort democratic political speeches altogether.³⁵ This dire outcome is, however, softened by the fact that Diodotus had already warned his audience to be alert for such distortions. He therefore can be read as arguing for a kind of thoughtful care on the part of democratic citizens, especially when deciding issues of the highest moment. If so, he attempts to foster the democratic political good of thoughtfulness through a rhetorical deception made regrettably necessary by the damaging aspects of democracy itself. In so doing, Diodotus complicates the sort of judgment that is so prevalent among modern democratic theorists that the cure for the ills of democracy is simply more democracy.³⁶ Instead, he prompts a more critical attention to both the strengths and the dangers of democratic regimes.

Yet these more positive implications seem to be overridden by Diodotus' highly depressing assessments of human motivations. Part

³³ As in, for example, Johnson 1993: 107–10, 135; White 1984: 75.

³⁴ See, for example, Straus 1964: 233; Orwin 1994: 152–53; Mara 2001: 825–32; Saxonhouse 2006: 160–63.

³⁵ The criticism of Euben 1990: 182, and Ober 1998: 102–3.

³⁶ Good statements of this position can be found in Warren 2001: ch. 7, and Young 1997: 402–4.

of his argument for sensible leniency hinges on the powerlessness of capital punishment in the face of the passions. The suggestion that the Mytilenes cannot really be blamed for their revolt is grounded in a deeper diagnosis of what seems to be an inevitable human inclination to overreach. “[E]ither poverty, which brings about boldness through compulsion; abundance, which brings about ambition through insolence and pride; or other circumstances because of human passion . . . will lead human beings to run risks” (3.45.4). No matter how dangerous or destructive the enterprise, *erōs* leads and hope (*elpis*) follows (3.45.5). But this pessimistic conclusion is also softened by Diodotus’ own practice. Because the harshest punishments have failed to prevent the commission of crimes, he infers the general impotence of punishment as a strategy for moderating the passions (3.45.4–7). Yet he does not expressly deny the possibility of educating the passions through a cultural reliance on *logos*. In fact, the practical futility of capital punishment becomes a part of his case for the rationality of moderation. Thus, while the express content of Diodotus’ speech acknowledges the overwhelming power of passions, his speech act performatively legitimates the possibility of education and therefore the pragmatic value of a kind of rationality.³⁷

Nonetheless, Diodotus’ success in saving the Mytilene democrats has a more ambiguous pragmatic position within the *History*’s succeeding narrative. In the context of Diodotus’ own speech, we have found that his complex rhetoric turns (so to speak) back on itself in two ways. The first of these turnings occurs when his claim to focus only on Athens’ interests is complicated by the earlier statement that successful proposals to the assembly must deceive. The second happens when his seemingly damaging reliance on deception is offset by its contribution to the democratic good of critical *logos*. However, a third, and much darker, turn occurs when an appeal to interests overwhelms both justice and *logos* in the speech of the envoys to Melos. Through connections to a range of previous Athenian speakers, including Diodotus, the envoys’ speech displays the problematic complexities of Athens’ political culture. The envoys’ insistence that the parties attend only to their interests dismisses the relevance of a justice that only holds when equal powers confront one another (5.89.1). However, tracing the abuses of the envoys’ speech to Diodotus would, in my view, be a

³⁷ In a way, this sort of effect can be described as a performative contradiction (Butler 1997: 83–84), though the effect of the contradiction is not to create conditions for contestation but to prompt further inquiry by showing the limits of summary judgments on the human condition.

misreading.³⁸ A different insight is that the path from Diodotus' speech to that of the envoys reveals the impossibility of assuring that political actions justifiable on one occasion will not be misused or perverted on another. While Diodotus may invite one reconsideration of the good of the Athenian empire (If Athens should concern itself with guarding against the defections of the subject cities, what good is such rule for a city with Athens' ambitions?), the envoys' speech presumes a different reassessment of the empire's condition, one that retains the ambition behind the Sicilian invasion while confessing the fear of a reputation for weakness. Diodotus' speech can no more control the speeches and practices of the Athenians with regard to Melos than it can prevent the killing of the Mytilene oligarchs at the instigation of Cleon (3.50). In spite of his careful sensitivity to political circumstance, Diodotus as political agent cannot eliminate the unpredictabilities and risks of political practice.

POLITICAL THOUGHT AND POLITICS

Thus interpreted, Diodotus' political speech may be an important clue to the character of Thucydides' *History* as a whole. Thucydides, too, points repeatedly to the characteristics of human beings that overwhelm thought and turn expressions of political energy and innovation into the greatest suffering and bloodshed. This darker sense of the human prospect has led numerous commentators to conclude that Thucydides' vision of politics is overwhelmingly bleak, diagnosing the inevitable paths of political disintegration and destroying any expectations for improvement. His characterization of the devastating *stasis* in Corcyra seems key.

And there fell upon the cities many hardships on account of *stasis*, events that take place and will recur always as long as human beings have the same nature, worse or gentler in their types (looks), depending on the changes presenting themselves in each instance. In times of peace and goodness, cities and individuals are better disposed because they are not overthrown by the constraints of necessity. But war, depriving [human beings] of daily resources is a violent teacher, making the dispositions of most like that [harsh] condition. (3.82.2)

³⁸ As, for example, in Johnson 1993: 135.

Building on this statement, Jonathan Price has argued that the dynamics of internal war constitute the frame of reference for the *History* as a whole.³⁹

That this projection of the looming catastrophe of political *stasis* is validated in a great deal of the *History* cannot be questioned. Yet, like Diodotus, Thucydides often softens the impact of his speech with the speech act that is within the *History* itself. In this sense, the *logos* of Thucydides is also an *ergon* whose pragmatic presupposition is not the amusement stimulated by a competition piece for the moment, but the kind of education that can be provided by a possession forever. As practiced through the *History*, this education is not didactic but interactive and indeterminate. This means that the value of this possession is contingent on its being used well, an outcome that Thucydides as author cannot simply control. The *History* can only fulfill the promise that Thucydides sets for it if the events narrated are understood in ways the text, through eliciting and engaging thoughtfulness among its readers, itself tries to encourage. Yet readings of Thucydides have more often presented him as the quintessential political realist, the first systematic theorizer of the dynamics of political power, or the most sobering political pessimist.⁴⁰ Like Diodotus' speech, Thucydides' *History* can invite an engagement with its insights only if it accepts possibilities that they will be misunderstood or misused. In this respect, Thucydides' treatment of his own *logos* is a reverse image of his presentation of the speeches of his characters. While he respects the importance of these speeches by representing them in ways most appropriate to speaker and circumstance, he tempers any sense of deference – or neutrality – by inscribing them within a larger critical narrative. Conversely, the magisterial character of Thucydides' education as a possession forever⁴¹ is offset by the vulnerabilities and risks that it accepts. In its parallel gestures of respect and challenge, confidence and vulnerability, the tone of Thucydides' political thought reflects characteristics that mark democratic speech and

³⁹ Price 2001: 11–19.

⁴⁰ See for example, Crane 1996: 208, 1998: 99–100; de Romilly 1963: 336–37, 357; Price 2001: 11–22. There are of course important exceptions, see especially Euben 1990; Saxonhouse 1996, 2006; and several commentaries (Forde 1989, Orwin 1994, Palmer 1992) informed by the interpretations of Strauss 1964, but they have been exceptions.

⁴¹ Underscored in the interpretations of Strauss 1964: 229–30; Bruell 1974: 17; and Orwin 1994: 204–5.

Thucydides becomes a potential partner in a certain kind of democratic conversation.⁴²

For these reasons, I am not convinced by arguments that Thucydides' regime preference lies with the disciplined restraint and moderation of the Spartans.⁴³ As Sparta displays its practice of moderation in the narrative, we find a regime that relies heavily on forms of social coercion that discourage the sort of critical *logos* that is more endemic to democracies. Ultimately, this deficiency compromises even the virtues that allegedly lie at the heart of the Spartan ethic. In the trial of the defeated Plataeans that is narrated in close proximity (3.52–68) to the Mytilene debate, the Spartan regard for justice is exposed as formal and manipulative. What is valorized as justice (3.52) is simply the execution of the Plataeans as justified by their inability to respond adequately to a question whose damning answer is altogether obvious. The executions are ordered to placate Plataea's long-standing enemy Thebes, whose support is seen as vital to the Spartan cause. This misuse of justice is paralleled by a refusal to take *logos* seriously. The extended speeches of the Plataean and Theban representatives (covering more chapters than the Mytilene debate) are pointless exercises in the shadow of a sentence already passed (3.68). Though democratic speech is clearly vulnerable to distortion and abuse, democracy remains the realistically achievable regime in which *logos* and judgment have the best chances of being taken seriously. It is Athens and not Sparta that is the appropriate home of political thought and of the political action that may be so informed.

The indeterminacy and thus the politicality of the *History* are reinforced if we entertain the *possibility* that the text we possess is, as understood by the author, essentially complete.⁴⁴ As partial evidence one could emphasize that the outcome of the war is both narrated (5.26) and explained (2.65) within the text as we have it. The last portion of the work (organized as Book 8) includes a large number of claims made in Thucydides' own name on matters of fundamental import. The virtual absence in Book 8 of any direct discourse ascribed to the *History*'s characters suggests, among other things, that this last part of the *History*

⁴² For an interpretation that discovers democratic elements in Thucydides' treatment of the *erga*, rather than the *logoi* of the war, see Saxonhouse 2006: 149–51.

⁴³ For a good statement and defense of this position see Orwin 1994: 183, 204.

⁴⁴ A possibility suggested as well by Strauss 1964: 227 n. 89, and Forde 1989: 171–72 n. 53, though on somewhat different grounds and with different implications. Forde's comments are particularly valuable because they suggest that “completeness” can be understood in a variety of ways.

might be read, more than any other portion of the work, as the direct speech of Thucydides. The principal claims within this speech include an account of the hollowness of the Athenian empire's claim to good order (*eunomia*) (8.64), the praise of Alcibiades' most distinctive service to the city on the basis of his serving as a peacemaker (8.86), the statement that Athens' success in the war (already read against its eventual defeat) depended significantly on the good fortune of having the cautious Spartans as opponents (8.96), and the judgment that the rule of the five thousand constituted the best Athenian regime of Thucydides' time (8.97).

In spite of what seem to be decisive tones, however, none of these statements is simply conclusive. All prompt further reflections that enrich and deepen the indeterminacy of the *History* as a whole. Calling the Athenian regime's *eunomia* hollow suggests that the discourse enabled by Athenian power (as in 1.76) can be turned against the ways in which that power is exercised. The praise of Alcibiades as peacemaker valorizes distinctiveness on grounds different from Periclean daring and energy. Yet Alcibiades' restraining influence also connects his most distinctive action with Pericles' ability to tame the *dēmos* (2.65), potentially prompting a deeper examination of how Pericles and Alcibiades might be both similar and different. The criticisms of Spartan dilatoriness implicitly challenge the validity of Athens' reputation for greatness (cf. 7.27). The endorsement of the regime of the five thousand has more than a tinge of irony, since that regime's effective existence and certainly its duration over time are matters of serious question.⁴⁵

If the *History* is in fact Thucydides' completed text, it also urges rethinking of how and why time horizons are constructed, a problem that is continuous with both the writing of history and the pragmatics of agency. Thought as *historia* and politics as *praxis* must order and cohere. The war lasted twenty-seven years and had a beginning, middle, and end. Yet Thucydides may well offer, from his point of view, a complete *historia* of the war without narrating its final six years in the order of summers and winters. In this connection, it is also worth noting that the text of the *History* recognizes a variety of periodizations that open different apertures on the narrative. While this conflict lasted nearly twenty-seven years, its patterns of violence can also be mapped by tracing the events spanning its first beginning (2.1) and its second (8.5), when Athens shows remarkable resolve in the face of the Sicilian disaster. Here, the shape of the war is not linear but circular; yet the

⁴⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens* 41.

(different) closures of linearity and circularity are interrupted by the abrupt ending of the *History* as we have it. The text also frames the beginning and (temporary) end of Athens' democratic governance, from the expulsion of the Peisistratids (6.53–59) to the oligarchy of the Four Hundred (8.68). The construction of the league and the empire, blurred almost to indistinguishability in 1.97, ends as the subject cities rebel or defect (2.65). And Thucydides tracks how the Hellenic defeat of the Persians (1.89) spawns a Hellenic war that reinvolves the Persians (8.6). The last event narrated in the *History*, that the Persian satrap Tissaphernes sacrificed to Artemis at Ephesus, not only signals the return of the Persians, but also reaffirms the constructed and blurred character of cultures, problematizing, as in the Archeology (1.5–6), any permanent distinction between Greeks and barbarians and thus refocusing on a more expanded and complicating vision of the human.⁴⁶ All of this is offered within the encompassing horizon of eternity, extending the text indefinitely in space and time.

If this is a plausible interpretation, the work's authorial completeness is offset by deeper incompleteness, a recognition that attempts to impose closure on how we understand and cope with human events are, while needful, inevitably unstable and fleeting. If this is in fact the Thucydidean view, it sharply departs from the stance of Pericles within his final speech (2.64). Though everything naturally diminishes, Athens' name is projected to live in "eternal memory" (*aiemnēstos*), honored according to criteria that remain – oddly – permanent. Within a realm that demands immediate attention even as it offers constant reminders of its own transience, Thucydides neither deludes himself about the prospect of providing some sort of final lawlike judgment on the dynamics of political action nor surrenders his intelligence to the turbulence of uncontrollable *stasis*. Instead, his *History*, understood as narrative and practice, *logos* and *ergon*, is a form of political thought that both engages and reflects the permanent qualities of political life.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ For a further treatment of Thucydides' engagement with the cultural distinction between Greeks and barbarians see Mara 2003.

⁴⁷ In this respect, Thucydides' response to political turbulence differs significantly from those of two of his greatest modern admirers within the tradition of Western political philosophy. Unlike his eloquent translator Hobbes, Thucydides does not envisage an institutional context that would respond to political disorder by managing hubris into submission (*Leviathan*, ch. 28). And unlike his passionate advocate Nietzsche (*Twilight of the Idols*, "What I Owe to the Ancients," 2), he does not simply confront the world disclosed by that harshest teacher, war, with a redoubled energy aimed at overcoming.

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