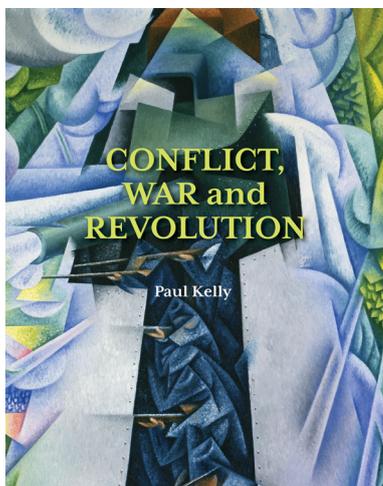


# Thucydides – The naturalness of war

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## Chapter 2 from



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## CHAPTER 2

# Thucydides

## The naturalness of war

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is one of the few foundational texts in international political thought. I introduce Thucydides' work and his influence on international relations theory and subsequent history. I consider his role as a theorist of realism and examine the nature of and basis of realism as the default perspective of international politics. Thucydides also provides an historical account of the collapse of Athenian democracy under the pressure of war, so this chapter explores the themes of democracy, strategy and leadership in wartime. Thucydides' account of a system of political communities (poleis) interacting in the absence of an overarching hegemonic power is a model of international order that continues to dominate international affairs and diplomacy. Its account of the dynamics of international politics is still thought by many to have lessons for present-day international politics and a changing world order.

Prior to the first Gulf War in 2003 it was common to find commentators and scholars framing the debate about the war or its subsequent conduct through reference to the Greek historian Thucydides. Perhaps this is not surprising from classically educated journalists or academics writing 'op-ed' pieces, but references to Thucydides also extended into the western military itself. Thucydides

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remains part of the academic education of the officer class, especially (though not exclusively) in the U.S. Many leading figures (such as General Colin Powell) quoted (or misquoted) Thucydides as part of the intellectual justification of their strategy and doctrine. For makers of foreign policy, defending or challenging a war of choice, the lessons of Thucydides are no doubt too good to ignore. This is by no means a recent phenomenon. Soldiers and politicians as well as scholars, have drawn on Thucydides' history of a relatively short period of struggle between two dominant ancient Greek poleis, under the looming influence of the nearby Persian empire (Morley 2014). Of course, many great texts in history are used for the justification, clarification and exemplification of positions, ideas and principles that could not have been intended by the author. Yet there is something peculiarly powerful about Thucydides for those interested in international political theory (Boucher 2018). It is hard to read his argument – which goes well beyond just a narrative – without seeing it as echoing contemporary events, characters and choices. A particularly pertinent example is provided by the former dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Graham Allison, with his thesis of the 'Thucydides trap' as a way of framing the challenge for the U.S. of managing the inevitable rise of China to the status of a global power (Allison 2017).

A later thinker, Machiavelli, famously encouraged the study of ancient and especially Roman history for its lessons for the politics of his times – on the grounds that human nature is fundamentally constant and so the past contains a source of illuminating and still-relevant arguments and lessons. However, few people now read Machiavelli in that way. By contrast, Thucydides does seem to offer a window into politics of successive ages including our own. For this reason alone, Thucydides' *History* remains for me one of the most penetrating and provocative texts in any canon of international political thinking and one of the few books that never exhausts restudy. This is why he seems the appropriate place to start this book, in contrast to Herodotus, with whom Ryan begins his account of political theory (Ryan 2012, pp. 5–31), because Thucydides describes many of the problems that are taken to be canonical for international theory and for the tradition of realism in international relations. Whether the claim withstands scholarly scrutiny, Thucydides is widely thought of as the first and perhaps greatest international theorist.

About Thucydides' life we know relatively little, other than what is revealed by his authorship and his role in the events that he narrates. He was born sometime between 460 and 455 bce and when the war he describes began he was in his mid- to late twenties, not much older than many modern university and military academy students. He was born into a wealthy Athenian family of distinction (despite bearing a Thracian, as opposed to an Athenian, name). His high status or social class is reflected in his birth but also in his support for Pericles (one of the key figures in his account of Athenian politics and strategy), and his hostility to other figures such as Cleon, who are associated with

populism and the vulgarity of ‘new money’. This perhaps explains Ryan’s reference to Thucydides as a conservative (Ryan 2012, p. 12) and Leo Strauss’s sympathy for him, despite his not being part of the canon of philosophers (Strauss 1978, pp. 139–241). During the early war period, he served in a number of campaigns. He was elected general in 424 and commanded the naval force in the area of Thrace and its primary Athenian colony, Amphipolis. When Amphipolis fell to the Spartan general Brasidas, Thucydides was tried and convicted of treason and exiled. It was during this period of exile that he began writing his history. He did not give the book a formal title but it has come down to us in a variety of forms as the *War between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* or in a more popular form the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Thucydides lived to see Athens’s final defeat at the hands of Sparta and the beginning of the collapse of the Athenian Empire, but he did not live to complete the work, which famously ends mid-sentence ‘He first went to Ephesus where he made a sacrifice to Artemis ...’ (Book VIII, 109).

Thucydides contrasts his enterprise with that of mythologies like Homer’s, and more recent mixed modes of writing such as Herodotus’ *History*. This effort makes his work one of the most important early exemplars of a distinctively historical style of writing. Yet, this achievement as a historian can also mislead and direct attention away from his contribution to political thinking. Without undermining his importance as an historian and contributor to the development of historiography, I chiefly consider here his contribution to thinking about international politics and political theory. Thucydides will be used to illustrate an important contention of this book, that historians are often some of the most sophisticated and important theorists (indeed philosophers) of politics and international affairs. However, Thucydides does not offer an account of the human good and the ideal political arrangements in which that can be realised, and so he does not fit with one dominant account of the task of political philosophy. This latter claim challenges the categorical distinction and hierarchical ordering of experience that preoccupies many who write about the history of political thought and international political theory (Oakeshott 1975; Boucher 2018).

Although both Herodotus and Thucydides are both widely described as the founders of history as a distinct form of enquiry, many subsequent scholars follow Thucydides’ own claims to be a distinctive and rigorous historian as opposed to storyteller. He opens his book with reflections on the activity of what we now call historical enquiry, and gives a clear and forceful statement of it:

I do not think that one will be far wrong in accepting the conclusions I have reached from the evidence which I have put forward. It is better evidence than that of the poets, who exaggerate the importance of their themes, or the prose chroniclers, who are less interested in telling the

truth than in catching the attention of their public, whose authorities cannot be checked, and whose subject matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost in unreliable streams of mythology. We may claim instead to have used only the plainest evidence and to have reached conclusions which are reasonably accurate. [Book I, 21] (Thucydides 1972, p. 47)

By ‘poets,’ Thucydides means Homer, and by ‘prose chroniclers’ he means his near-contemporary Herodotus. The commitment to facts and evidence that would be recognised by those who witnessed the events is an important basis for his claim to write a distinctively historical science. His stance has been praised by countless subsequent writers from the ancient world and early moderns such as Thomas Hobbes, to the present day. His empirical and factual approach is clearly exemplified in the detailed narrative of events, set out in a chronological sequence.

But his reliance on facts is also combined with other elements to support his claim to be the founder of history as a distinct form of literary enquiry. What counts as facts remains an important and philosophically controversial question for all historians. After all, one of the key elements of any historical narrative is to account for and justify the relevant facts. For example, 20th-century structuralist historians of the *longue durée* such as Ferdinand Braudel emphasised climate and geography as central factual evidence (almost to the exclusion of what particular actors did to each other). So, Thucydides makes much of a rationalistic naturalism in helping to determine what counts as facticity. Unlike Herodotus, he gives virtually no place to the gods or supernatural explanations. Whilst auguries (signs of what will happen in the future) are reported, neither they nor the gods are causal players in accounts of events. Similarly, the eruptions of Mount Etna are merely reported as background geological context. To his own contemporaries this was a significant point, because most would have still occupied a world that was shaped by supernatural forces. Indeed, Thucydides’ account of the desecration of the Herms prior to the Sicilian Expedition illustrates how important religion and the supernatural in politics remained for the majority of the Athenian populace. His scepticism about supernatural causes is particularly clear in his treatment of the plague that hit Athens, which is described as a social and clinical fact and not as a sign from the gods. For Thucydides, whatever causal explanations he wishes to make, it is sufficient to base these on natural facts about individuals and the facts about the political communities and institutional cultures from which they emerge.

A further element of his history that has been praised by subsequent historians is his purported impartiality in explaining events. Thucydides was both an Athenian and a participant in the war, especially in the unsuccessful defence of Amphipolis. However, he managed to avoid writing as a supporter of the Athenian cause or (in his own case) using the history as a personal vindication of his actions and against his accusers. Finally, although the history contains much

drama, it is densely written and not designed to entertain its readership. In clear contrast to Herodotus, with his interesting asides, speculations and local anecdotes, Thucydides has an almost relentless concentration on the events as they unfolded in their own terms. So much was this so that many subsequent readers took it as a failure of the work, because it limited its rhetorical and didactic usefulness as a training for future politicians. Thucydides is praised by the moderns for focusing on the events as they happened. Although he clearly thinks his *History* will have a lasting value for posterity, he writes as a scientist organising materials so as to reveal the truth.

All that said, one important feature of his enquiry has troubled subsequent modern theorists of scientific history – namely, his reliance on speeches. Approximately one-quarter of the text is comprised of direct speech, including some orations that have become the centre piece of the text for subsequent readers. If Thucydides aimed for a version of historical science, how can he place such reliance on speeches? As a contemporary and participant, Thucydides would have witnessed some of the speeches and may have even have had written texts to consult. But for many of the reported speeches he would have been relying on reports that are impossible to check, and maybe even on reconstructions after the event accomplished by collating testimony from witnesses. Some philosophers of history have criticised his method here for allowing philosophical speculation to drive the narrative, as opposed to a pure historical consciousness: hence R.G. Collingwood's preference for Herodotus over Thucydides (Collingwood 1993). Yet, even where Thucydides used speeches extensively, he was careful that these are not too didactic and that they do not distract from the narrative evidence of context. My purpose here is not historiography, or to study the development of historical enquiry, so it is ultimately irrelevant whether Thucydides provides or fails to provide a scientific history of the Second Peloponnesian War. It is sufficient that, whilst one can mount challenges to the historicity of his narrative (Kagan 2009), it is considered accurate enough for it still to be the primary evidence for the broad narrative of the Second Peloponnesian War in sources like the *Cambridge Ancient History* (1992).

Does including speeches as the systematisation of political platforms make Thucydides' narrative better as a source for political theory? Whatever else Thucydides is doing, he is not pursuing the sort of abstract philosophical enquiry one finds in Plato and Aristotle. So does that mean that Thucydides fails to be either a proper historian or a proper philosopher? The rest of this chapter argues that Thucydides' method and substantive arguments form a distinctive contribution to international theory that ranks alongside the great philosophical thinkers in the canon, but first I need to say something in general about Thucydides as a theorist.

For scholars of political theory, issues of demarcation are crucial in determining what their object of enquiry actually is. Contemporary analytical

philosophy is fairly relaxed about what it is to be a philosopher or to think philosophically. Philosophy is not a science and therefore does not have a distinct body of knowledge appropriate to it. Rather, it is a form of intellectual discipline, which for analytical philosophers is marked by logical and linguistic analysis and criticism of arguments. On the other hand, scholars of the history of political philosophy, such as followers of Leo Strauss, take a substantive view of political philosophy as focusing on the good life for humanity and the appropriate institutions in which that form of life can flourish (Strauss and Cropsey 1987). Yet, even by their own standards, that approach seems an arbitrary and circular definition, as the inclusion of a chapter on Thucydides in the third edition of their book makes clear.

For those informed by the idealist philosophical tradition, such as Oakeshott and Boucher, philosophy is not merely the application of a set of mental tools but involves the categorical distinction of the activity from other forms of human experience. Consequently, for such thinkers, distinguishing between historians, political pamphleteers and philosophers is crucial. But the distinction is not the only issue since the hierarchy of modes of experience is also important. Mapping the distinction between modes of experience is one thing but assigning a superiority to the most abstract mode of experience is another. Abstraction is merely a tool of thought largely achieved by 'bracketing' predicates in statements, and it is not obviously a superior source of wisdom. Indeed, its claim to superiority is that it can provide the broadest and most comprehensive account of human experience, fitting all other distinct modes of experience together. In this respect, philosophy is a higher-order activity that explores the presuppositions of any other mode of experience or activity. And, of course, the conditions of philosophy itself is one of the primary questions of philosophy.

As an intellectual exercise, this may well be interesting, although it rests on a number of claims that are philosophically challengeable, but when applied to the categorisation of reflective thought it begs its own questions. If the task is simply distinguishing the ways of reading a text, then pretty much anything goes in terms of establishing a hierarchy of experience and it is for the reader to determine their own interest. However, hierarchies of this kind are also prescriptive and cast doubt on the importance of ways of thinking about the world. So they are themselves open to criticism for the ways in which they can distort or prejudge understanding. For example, if history and philosophy are categorically distinct activities, then Thucydides' method is a mixed mode that combines two approaches. But, if we challenge the categorisation underlying this interpretation, then, far from being a mix of two more primary methods, his approach offers a single integrated mode of reflection on the world that is prior to and, therefore, more fundamental to ways in which we might wish to characterise the argument. The categories of history and philosophy are themselves not pre-interpreted but are theorised out of experiences that are ways of both making sense of that experience and responding to that world of experience.

A claim for the superiority of a higher philosophical perspective on this question is itself an historical and philosophical abstraction from a conditional mode of experience. All such approaches thus have a hermeneutic basis, which is itself always an historical philosophical perspective. The superiority of Thucydides' argument and approach relative to more purely abstract theorising is always perspectival, but can be defended on the grounds that his method acknowledges the irreducible interplay between action and reflection. It is precisely this quality that continues to draw adherents to Thucydides' reflections on international politics and thought despite his covering events that took place two and half millennia ago.

### Explaining the Peloponnesian War

Thucydides is not the only source of evidence about the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians in 431–405 bce or the events and characters that comprise its history. However, the significance and majesty of his book are that it largely defines the war for subsequent historians and theorists. This is not a trivial point as the account of the war spans 27 years, divided into two periods that are explicitly connected as parts of the same conflict (Book V, 5.26.1–2). It is also distinguished from an earlier period of conflict between Sparta and Athens that followed the earlier Persian War and invasion of 480–479 bce. It could be interpreted as part of a longer struggle or a series of distinct campaigns and conflicts, which are only loosely related.

During the Persian invasion of 480–479, Sparta was head of the Peloponnesian League and was also chosen by the Greek poleis that formed a coalition to be the leader of Greek opposition. (Throughout this chapter I use the term state as a translation of the Greek term polis, mindful of the significant differences between the polis and the modern nation state, which does not appear in European history for another 20 centuries.) To this extent, Sparta and Athens were allies against a greater common enemy, but Sparta was considered the leading land and naval power in Greece, or the hegemon. Sparta was a deeply conservative, militaristic and land-based power. It had a relatively small citizen body of *spartiates* (men of equal status) who were trained from an early age in tough military discipline, making them fearsome infantry warriors. This training cultivated physical strength and self-reliance, coupled with fierce loyalty. Male youths were brought up in a tough (spartan) regime that denied them comforts and sometimes food in order to cultivate self-reliance. They were also required to train in combat with adult warriors. The *spartiates* became a military aristocracy who dominated a larger helot or peasant class who sustained Spartan society. Women were even more invisible in Spartan politics than was the custom in the masculine world of Greek politics. The helot class was fiercely ruled and kept in order with periodic small-scale domestic wars. The Spartan constitution was famously attributed to Lycurgus the lawgiver and it was

fiercely defended and rarely changed. The government of the *spartiates* was complex, with a dual monarchy of elected kings, an aristocratic council of 28 members and five ephors or magistrates, whose primary responsibility was to deal with foreign policy and the conduct of war. Finally, there was an assembly of all men over the age of 30: decisions in the assembly were made by acclamation (or shouting) as opposed to debate!

At the time of the Persian War, Sparta was the leading land power in the Greek world. Yet, during the years preceding the Persian War, Athens had built up the largest navy in Greek history up to that time, and this formed the core of the Greek fleet that destroyed the Persian fleet at Salamis in 480 and then again at Mycale in 470. The defeat of the Persians at Mycale coincided with Sparta's defeat of Persia in the major land battle at Plataea and raised the spectre, for the Spartans, of a new power in the Greek world. Whilst the Spartans had defeated Persia on land and forced its withdrawal from mainland Europe, they remained indifferent to the fate of the Greek poleis around the Aegean Sea that were still under Persian rule. This created an opportunity for the Athenians to expand their influence by liberating these poleis, or by supporting those that had rebelled against the Persians. These poleis allied themselves with Athens in what became the Delian League, and subsequently the basis of a new Athenian maritime empire.

Athens was the largest polis, with a citizen body of around 40,000 (compared to Sparta, with approximately 4,000 *spartiates*). Its constitution was democratic, although the citizen body excluded an even larger male population of over 200,000, which included slaves, foreign labourers (called metics) and those too poor to act as hoplites. These soldiers had to provide their own armour and weapons, and training for service was a condition of voting. Once again, women were excluded from the political class and they do not feature in Thucydides' account of Athenian democracy. Athens was a relatively open trading city, hence its large navy and focus on the Aegean and beyond, as opposed to a land empire in the Peloponnese. As a democracy, decisions were made by vote, with simple majorities determining the outcome. The 10 generals who were the chief officers of the Athenian state were elected, but most other administrative roles were chosen by lot, including membership of the Council of 500, who prepared the business for legislative decision. The assumption was that all citizens had sufficient capacity to exercise the common power of the demos and all took turns in ruling and being ruled, although inevitably some ended up serving in elected roles for successive terms.

The rise of Athens and its appearance as a second hegemonic power is seen as one of the causes of the War with Sparta and the source of the modern idea of 'the Thucydides trap', whereby the rise of a new hegemonic power will compel a war or challenge before the existing dominant power or hegemon is displaced. This idea of the struggle between rising and remaining powers is a key to understanding major structural changes in international politics according

to Allison and is currently represented by the rise of China and the remaining power of the USA. Not all instances of the 'trap' result in war, but the study of such historical instances is important if war is to be avoided (Allison 2017). Some classical scholars contest whether it makes sense to speak of a 'Thucydides trap' or to generalise from the specific circumstances of the ancient world. For the rest of this section I want to focus on the specific (as opposed to the general) causes of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians.

Spartan jealousy of the rise of the Delian league led to a series of armed quarrels that formed the First Peloponnesian War, from 460 to 445. It ended with the Thirty Years' Peace when each side recognised the other in its own sphere – Athens with its maritime empire and Sparta as the leading land power in the Peloponnese. It should be noted that the label 'Thirty Years' Peace' does not indicate how long it actually lasted but the intended length of the treaty. In fact, the peace endured over 10 years, until 431, when a series of conflicts that were considered treaty violations led to the Second Peloponnesian War or the War between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, as described by Thucydides. The events that triggered the conflict are complex and Thucydides refers to the dispute between Corcyra and Corinth and the Megarian Decree, both smaller conflicts that involved allies of the main protagonists and which eventually drew Sparta and Athens into direct conflict.

As the dominant power focusing on the Greek mainland, Sparta was not much interested in cultivating allies. Athens was predominantly a sea power so the struggle between the two was the origin of a western tradition of rivalry between land and sea powers. Corcyra was an independent state but with a substantial fleet second only to that of Athens. The third largest fleet belonged to Corinth, which was allied with Sparta. Athens was keen to establish an alliance with Corcyra that would then dominate and neutralise Corinth and hence Sparta. The rivalry between Corcyra and Corinth came to a head at Epidamnus (on the coast of modern Albania). This saw Corcyra defeat Corinth but the Corinthians regrouped and sought to expand their fleet further for a second major confrontation. With Corinth becoming the second naval power, the Corcyreans made overtures to Athens. In the Athenian Assembly, both the Corinthian and Corcyrean diplomats made their cases, with the conclusion that Athens would volunteer a small fleet as symbolic support for Corcyra. However, this was too small to effectively support Corcyra and large enough to infuriate the Corinthians, who saw it as an act of aggression.

The challenge for the Athenian leader Pericles was do nothing and risk the collapse of Athens's maritime empire and the further rise of Sparta, with Corinth providing its naval power. Yet the Spartans faced a similar challenge. If they supported Corinth against Corcyra they indicated a clear desire to become a total power on land and sea and thus to dominate Athens. Yet if they did not stand by Corinth then they risked losing their one naval power, and also possibly indicating their submission to the new rising power.

Alongside this cause was the Megarian Decree of 432, which imposed a total economic boycott on the island of Megara because it 'dishonoured' Athenian temples by sheltering runaway slaves from Athens. Again, Pericles was forced into a corner. Abandoning the boycott would have weakened his leadership position in Athens and signalled to Sparta that they could damage Athens's possessions elsewhere. If Sparta failed to pursue this course of action, then the Spartan King Archidamus II would be seen to be putting personal friendship with Pericles above the city's interests. Both leaders were compelled by their own peoples to pursue policies that they each recognised were dangerous and destabilising. For both Thucydides and modern historians such as Allen, the problems of the trap arise even when leaders are aware of the dangers but where the circumstances compel them to act in ways that are otherwise irrational and dangerous. As Thucydides reports, following a vigorous debate, the war party within Sparta triumphed and voted for war, for fear of seeing Athens's power become greater in the Greek world.

Spartan forces invaded Attica and began devastating Athenian territory and property. The Athenian strategy under its leading general, Pericles, was to withdraw within the city walls and rely on its wealth and naval power to wait out the Spartans, and to harass them through marine assaults as opposed to pitched land battles. Pericles' strategy and leadership is one of the deep underlying themes of Thucydides' narrative. Pericles' 'Funeral Oration' and subsequent speeches are a celebration of Athenian wealth, power and political wisdom and an indirect defence of his conservative policy. However, in 430 Athens was struck by a terrible plague, which devastated approximately one-third of the Athenian population (Thucydides contracted the plague but survived, no doubt adding additional significance to his discussion of this event). The plague raised questions about the wisdom of Pericles' strategy. It exposes in a dramatic way important features of Athenian political culture that we will explore later. Following the plague, Pericles was removed from office and his opponents sought terms for peace with Sparta but these were rebuffed. As a result of this failure, Pericles was re-elected to office but in 429 he died as a result of the plague.

The rest of the first part of the war, from 429 to 421, and the Peace of Nicias were characterised by the struggle amongst the Athenian factions to provide leadership in the absence of Pericles, and the search for a new war policy. In 428, the city of Mytilene on Lesbos rebelled against the Athenians, which created a fear amongst them of a general unravelling of their empire. The Mytilenian revolt was unsuccessful but gave rise to a famous debate about the punishment of the Mytilenians (discussed in detail below). This debate introduces the character of Cleon, who became the leader of the war party. Cleon was a figure whom Thucydides clearly did not respect but he nevertheless presented as a representative of a more successful aggressive strategy that led to the victory at Pylos. This aggressive strategy continued under Cleon, and on the Spartans' side with their general, Brasidas. Their fortunes come together at the Battle of

Amphipolis in 422. Brasidas had led the initial capture of Amphipolis from the Athenians, whilst Thucydides himself was the general in charge of the nearby Athenian fleet. This loss led to Thucydides' prosecution for treason and exile from Athens allowing him to write his history. Cleon led an expedition to recapture Amphipolis from Brasidas but in the course of the battle he was killed along with Brasidas, despite the Spartans' victory. With the death of the two leading protagonists on either side, who supported an aggressive policy, the peace party in Athens (led by Nicias) sued for peace and this marked the end of the first part of the war, often referred to as the Archidamian War.

Although the Peace of Nicias lasted four years, it was never stable because its terms suited neither main party, and many of Sparta's allies refused to ratify the treaty. The conflict continued with the Athenian conquest of the island of Melos, which occasioned the Melian dialogue. However, the most significant act that brought the peace to an end was Athens's launch of a major campaign against Syracuse in Sicily. The Sicilian campaign, and the debate that it launched, introduced the character of Alcibiades, a nephew of Pericles, who played a controversial role in the subsequent war, at various times with Athens, then Sparta and even Persia.

The Sicilian campaign and the attempt to relieve the first expedition were a catastrophic failure that marked the beginning of the end of the Athenian Empire. Athens lost its navy and the resources to replace it. It also lost considerable prestige. The Spartans, for their part, allied with Persia to develop their own navy and exploit Athens's weakness. Much of the rest of the history covers the factionalism and politics of Athenian decline including the oligarchic coup of the 30 tyrants in 411. Despite some successes in their struggle to fight on, the Athenians never recovered the initiative. Following the destruction of their fleet by the Spartans at Agospotami, and the embargo and siege of Athens under the Spartan general Lysander, the war came to an end with defeat of Athens and its empire.

By way of a footnote, it is worth noting that the decline of the Athenian empire coincided with the growth and development of its mature philosophical culture. Plato's Socrates was involved in the struggle against the 30 tyrants, as was the historical character of Thrasymachus (who plays such an important role in the drama of Plato's *Republic*). Plato and his political thinking were thus also shaped by the legacy of Thucydides' War between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians.

This brief outline sets the context for the wider significance of Thucydides' book. Most discussions of Thucydides turn to the explanation of the war and draw heavily on his primary concepts of fear, honour and interest, and consequently whether Pericles or other actors in the narrative made the right decisions. In what follows I focus on a different line of argument and what I take to be the two most important lessons from Thucydides: his reflections on democracy at war and his apparent contribution to the development of realism in politics and international relations.

## Periclean liberalism

Pericles plays a central role in Thucydides' text, and in many ways he is more important than any other character in its pantheon, because of what he represents as much as what he allegedly did in the narrative. Often described as the first citizen of Athens, he was the dominant political figure and leader of the democratic faction from 460 bce to his death from plague in 431 bce. During that time Athens rose to its role as a maritime empire that threatened the military dominance of Sparta.

Pericles is the source of three important speeches: the response to the Spartan ultimatum in Book I, 140–145; the Funeral Oration in Book II, 35–46; and the third speech, in Book II, 60–64, in which he defends his strategy to the Athenians following the plague (I defer the discussion of this speech until the final section). Throughout these speeches we are presented with a strategic leader who is central to holding the Athenian demos to its true nature, which is set out carefully in the Funeral Oration. Thucydides gives us more than an account of an actor whose conduct of events can be judged as successful or not from the point of view of the challenges he faces. Pericles is also presented as an ideal of leadership that completes the institutional structure of Athenian democracy and thus saves it from its tendency to collapse into populist rivalry and disorder. Many of the lessons from the Athenian conduct of the war in Thucydides history are about the central role of leadership and the way in which that manifests itself in a clear strategy, backed by a vision or ideology that can sustain a nation at war and justify the privations that war brings. That ideology, which following Athens's defeat is detached from its connection to democracy, becomes an important source of constitutional liberal ideas. For subsequent centuries until the late 19th century, democracy and liberalism remained in competition.

The first speech, in Book I, 140–145, is the Athenian acceptance of war with Sparta, following Pericles' rejection of the request to revoke the Megarian Decree, which imposed economic sanctions and a blockade against this ally of Sparta. In defending this response, he outlines the Athenians' strategy in terms of its long-term or overall aim or (to use Clausewitz's definition) 'the use of engagements for the object of the war' (Clausewitz 1976, p. 128). Pericles sets out what the Athenians want to achieve and how he, as the leading general, proposes to achieve that through conduct of war. The full account of that strategy relies on the vision of Athenian democracy set out in the Funeral Oration, so I will devote most attention to that speech, but the first speech does tell us something important about Athenians' strategic ambitions.

In accepting the challenge of war with Sparta, Pericles emphasises the maritime nature of the Athenian Empire and its outward and commercial character. Sparta is acknowledged as the dominant land power in Greece and therefore Pericles argues for a strategy of avoiding set-piece land battles or engagements,

instead relying on its naval power to harass the Peloponnesian League and to ensure the safety of supply of Athens. In this way, Athens can frustrate Spartan power by denying it access to the field in which it is dominant. And, although this will involve costs to Athens, Pericles argues that these are easily absorbed given Athens's commercial wealth and power. As an agrarian power, Sparta has little surplus to spend on the war and every day campaigning in Attica is costly. The Athenians are not after territorial conquest in the Peloponnese, and have more than enough territory in the islands of its maritime empire. So their goal is achieved by securing their empire and the rising position in Greece, whilst allowing Sparta and the Peloponnesian League to exhaust itself financially and seek new terms.

Despite the subsequent narrative of events, not least the plague that follows from the concentration of the population behind the Athens city walls and the depopulation of its agricultural territory in Attica, Pericles' strategy is a coherent one. It sets out a clear goal for the war and consequent measures of success. It also emphasises Athens's peculiar strengths and advantages as a maritime power with the capacity to reach deep into the Greek world of its island colonies, as opposed to the narrow confines of a land-based power. Whether appropriate or not, similar arguments were made by Winston Churchill about Great Britain in 1940 following the collapse of France – they were no doubt deliberately intended to appeal to the classical political imagination of an American elite audience. Pericles claimed that damage to Athens's land territory would have little long-term effect on its power and ability to sustain conflict and secure its goals. At worst they would lose land and property, whereas life and liberty are most important. Alongside this, Pericles made the very important – and, in the context of subsequent events, poignant – remark 'what I fear is not the enemy's strategy, but our own mistakes' (Book I, 144). For a strategy to work it needs to be adhered to once in place. Although subsequent military theorists like Clausewitz warn of the need to adapt plans once the friction of engagement with an enemy is experienced, it is equally important at the highest level of strategic policymaking to take the long view and not change everything at the perception of damage and harm. Indeed, it is precisely democracy's tendency to do this that Thucydides is most concerned about.

Clausewitz's greatest teacher, Gerd von Scharnhorst, is reported to have spent much time puzzling over how the French had managed to turn their revolutionary armies from an undisciplined rabble into the extraordinary fighting force they became under Napoleon. Much was due to doctrine and organisation but he emphasised the transformation of the society that lay behind this with the emergence of a French nation (Howard 2002, p. 7). The idea of a nation is a modern one and will be explored in later chapters. However, in setting out Pericles' account of Athenian strategy it is difficult not to see the celebration of Athens in the Funeral Oration as anything other than its liberal ideological underpinning, especially as this vision is the explanation and justification for

the heroic actions of those being celebrated in the oration, and the explanation of the love and patriotism that inspires Athens.

One needs to be careful of anachronism in representing Greek ideas, but there is a clear sense in which Pericles suggests the war is not just a clash of interests but is rather an ideological struggle between an open and liberal democracy and a closed conservative autocracy. Pericles says 'I declare that our city is an Education to Greece' (Book II, 41). He is not just celebrating how the Athenians feel about themselves but advocating the best form of government and defending the Athenian Empire's ideological presuppositions against other members of the Delian League, who were frustrated at what we would call the imperialistic ambitions of the Athenians in transforming the regimes of its allies. Just as contemporary liberals are unapologetic about the universal value of their political order, so it appears is Pericles with respect to the Greeks.

The Funeral Oration remains one of the great statements of a liberal constitutional order and it sets out principles and values that are peculiarly contemporary for 21st-century western readers:

Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other ... We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. [Book II, 37–38] (Thucydides 1972, p. 145)

In this passage we see democracy tempered by the rule of law, meritocracy (or access to offices based on ability) and social tolerance. These fundamental liberal values are then coupled with a celebration of wide (global) trade, openness, public wealth and economic responsibility. This economic and social theory of liberal constitutionalism is in its turn the source of creativity, culture and civilisation. The text does not provide a philosophical defence of these values, but Pericles does offer some justification for the Athenian way of doing things in terms of the material benefits that flow from this constitutional and economic order. In so far as trade allows not only for beauty and civilisation but also for an economic surplus that supports Athens's strategy in its struggle with Sparta, we can see a utilitarian cost–benefit analysis that again prefigures modern arguments from international political economy about the benefits of free trade and liberal constitutions.

Whilst Thucydides allows Pericles to offer one of the most striking depictions of the ideal of a liberal constitutional order, it is by no means clear that he endorses the claims offered or the idea that liberal democratic imperialism is the best way of conducting international relations. To this extent, he presents an account of the defects of liberalism in international affairs that could be endorsed by contemporary realists such as John J. Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer 2018). Mearsheimer's argument is about contemporary U.S. foreign policy since 1989, but it precisely echoes Thucydides' narrative in acknowledging that, for all of its attractiveness as a domestic social order, the projection of liberal democratisation is a profoundly destabilising policy. In both cases, the challenge is imposing liberal democratic values on non-liberal democratic regimes. As the discussion of the Mytilenian debate below shows, the transformation of status from a treaty ally to a tributary unit was particularly important in raising the challenge to Athens. What started as a league became an opportunity for the Athenians to impose a political order and identity, just as western liberal democracies are seen as imposing the correct form of political society on non-democratic and non-liberal regimes in the 21st century. There may be arguments in favour of liberal democratic values, but the consequence of a right set of values or a correct political order is that those who differ from them are seen to be in the wrong or be an enemy, whereas the problem for the liberal democrats or the Athenians is that, if they simply concede that they are one amongst many equal regimes, they risk damaging the legitimacy of their own form of rule. Pericles says, 'our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbours. It is more the case of our being a model to others' (Book II, 37). Athenian democracy is not simply one amongst many but is a model for others; this makes it a fighting creed, in contrast to the Spartan model, which is neither particularly attractive nor even something that the Spartans think should apply to anyone but themselves. The challenge that Thucydides leaves us with in the account of Pericles' strategy is the challenge that faces liberal democratic regimes in international affairs, namely how they reconcile their values with peace and order? As Thucydides shows, it is by no means clear that the domestic virtues of liberal democratic order are appropriate to the international realm and achieving peace: a thesis that adds to Thucydides' reputation as a founder or source of realism in international political thought.

### Thucydidean realism

Realism is often described as the default theory of international relations since the emergence of the modern discipline studying the subject since World War II. Yet it is a notoriously slippery concept involving a variety of dimensions that are both analytical and normative. At its minimal analytical level, it comprises two main assertions, namely that states pursue their own interests (however conceived) and that the international domain is non-hierarchical, with no over-

arching power imposing order on the interactions of states or political communities. Of course, this leaves open the idea that a state might see its interest in collaborative or alliance terms, or that there might be an incomplete normative international order, with norms or law-like rules winning some acceptance but without any sanctioning power. This raises important normative questions about the nature of law and authority. Analytical realism, therefore, is compatible with the idea of an international normative realm or incomplete order but acknowledging the absence of a dominant power.

Yet, influenced by Hobbes, many modern realists make the negative normative claims that national interests are inherently conflictual, so that a law without sanction is ‘merely words’ and the non-hierarchical international realm is not only anarchic but without any morality or law. Whether these are conceptual points or historical and empirical claims is one of the fundamental questions of international political theory and explains the centrality of Thucydides to those debates, whether it is strictly appropriate to describe him as a realist or not. Much international relations theory concerns distinguishing or collapsing analytical and sceptical normative realism and adding ever more refined accounts of why realism provides the best empirical account of international affairs. Whilst modern realism draws on many thinkers’ ideas, Thucydides is seen as an early pioneer of this approach to international affairs, and all who construct a tradition or canon of international ‘theory’ begin with him. In the rest of this section I examine three sources of Thucydidean realism, alongside its supposed most significant lesson.

### *The plague*

The discussion of the plague follows immediately upon Pericles’ Funeral Oration in Book II, 47–55, and it clearly fascinated Thucydides, who contracted the unidentified disease but survived. Much of the discussion provides a detailed description of the symptoms and speculation about the origins of the disease in Ethiopia. Following so close on the account for the Funeral Oration, the plague is seen as an unfortunate consequence of Pericles’ policy of gathering the population in the city and leaving the countryside to the Spartans, whilst relying on naval power and trade for supply from Athens’s imperial possessions. Although Thucydides mentions that the plague caused people to remember old oracles, his own discussion is surprisingly free of appeals to supernatural causes or explanations. The most important part of the plague narrative, for the purposes of the discussion of realism, concerns its impact on morality and lawfulness. Thucydides writes:

people now began openly to venture on acts of self-indulgence which before then they used to keep dark ... As for what is called honour,

no one showed himself willing to abide by its laws, so doubtful was it whether one would survive to enjoy the name for it. It was generally agreed that what was both honourable and valuable was the pleasure of the moment and everything that might conceivably contribute to that pleasure. No fear of god or law of man had a restraining influence. As for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshipped them or not ... As for offences against human law, no one expected to live long enough to be brought to trial and punished. [Book II, 53–54] (Thucydides 1972, p. 155)

Thucydides describes how morality and lawfulness break down in the proximity and shadow of unpredictable mortality. The unleashing of repressed urges is a common story in accounts of wartime privation or siege. But, more importantly, this section provides evidence for thinking about how moral and legal norms work and the important Greek distinction between *physis*, or nature, and *nomos*, or conventional law. The contrast between these two important Greek philosophical concepts was a major concern of sophists and philosophers because it raised questions about the nature and authority of morality, law and convention. This has a bearing on the scope and limits of laws or norms and therefore the question of whether there can be an authoritative normative system that extends beyond the local practices of morality. Thucydides does not offer a philosophical speculation on the authority of morality but shows how it is fragile and how easily it collapses under the pressure of mortality in wartime and the catastrophe of the plague. The norms of honour are ignored and people are liberated to bring hidden things into the open: he is certainly referring to the social norms that regulate respect for the dead and sexual propriety. But this is not merely the concern of a conservative moralist facing the disruption of social norms. Thucydides is also contrasting the breakdown of norms with the liberation of nature and its pursuit of pleasure and gratification. Morality and law (*nomos*) are concerned with disciplining nature (*physis*) and rendering possible the character of Athenians. Once those norms and conventions are weakened, the character of Athenians is also weakened and the high-minded motivations celebrated in the Funeral Oration are overcome by a much more fickle and unmanageable raw nature of immediate satisfaction. National character is fragile and a vulnerable achievement that shapes and gives specific form to an otherwise fickle nature. The unleashing of crude individualism undermines community and its power to create and sustain character and social conventions (something that we will see later in Hobbes). Although Thucydides does not make the argument explicitly, much of his account of the treatment of the Mytilenians, the Melians, the character of Cleon and the new men of Athens suggests a loss of character and a submission to short-term and baser instincts in the conduct of war and of policy as a consequence of plague.

Although Thucydides is not making a philosophical point, his account of the consequences of the plague supports the two main elements of analytical realism. Firstly, the account of liberated nature and immediate gratification lends support to the idea of egoistic interest being in an important and perhaps irreducible sense both fundamental and natural, and not just amongst Athenians. In a world without the conventions and social practices that discipline brute nature to support character and the virtues, we have an assertive and conflictual source of egoistic interest. Of course, we need to extend this argument from individuals to groups to get a conception of conflictual national interest. But, if human nature is appetitive and only disciplined by social norms, we have some reason to assume in the absence of those norms that groups manifest the characteristics of brute, human nature.

The second, and important, lesson that is illustrated in the Mytilenian debate and the Melian dialogue is that there is no international normative order that disciplines individual nature and interest and creates a conception of international obligation. Thucydides' *History* gives many examples of a putative international order with 'laws of war' such as those governing the treatment of the dead, armistices, declarations of combat and triumphs marking victory, as well as diplomatic treaties, embassies and other such rituals of an apparent international (inter-polis) order. Yet, it is equally clear that these are often observed more in the breach or at the convenience of stronger parties. Also, and most importantly, they exist in a realm without an authoritative power to sanction breaches. The weakness of the Greek international order is simply an extension of the insight that Thucydides identifies in the loosening of social order in Athens following the plague. His clear lesson is that law and moral norms only have authority in normal times and amongst people who recognise their authority because they share a common destiny and accept subjection to sanctions. Morality and normativity are local, and the further we depart from the conventions that support and discipline our brute natures, the less their authority holds and ceases altogether.

### *The Mytilenian debate*

Book III, 1–50 opens with an account of the revolt of Mytilene followed by the Mytilenian debate in Athens, one of the most famous and controversial episodes in Thucydides' *History*. Mytilene was the most significant city on the island of Lesbos and a tributary of the Athenians as part of the Delian League. The revolt occurred when the Mytilenians took the opportunity of the opening of the campaigning season in Attica to both abandon their allegiance to Athens and to assert dominance over the whole island of Lesbos. A delegation was sent to Sparta to plead their case for admission into the Peloponnesian League and seek the promise of military support. The Athenians received prior warning and, fearful of the damage that a secession of one of their tributaries

could encourage, they sent an expedition to frustrate the Mytilenians. However, when the Athenians' siege proved successful and the Spartans failed to send an expedition to support the revolt, the Mytilenian leadership planned a direct confrontation with the Athenian forces. But, when the Mytilenian people understood this plan, they, in turn, revolted against the authorities and sought terms with the Athenian general Paches. These terms allowed the Athenians to do as they saw fit to the Mytilenians and for the Athenian troops to enter the city. However, the Mytilenians were accorded the opportunity to send delegates to Athens to plead their case, with the guarantee from Paches that the population would not be enslaved, imprisoned or killed until the representatives returned.

The initial Athenian decision was swift and brutal. Despite previous undertakings, the Mytilenian leader, Salaethus, was immediately put to death and not only did the authorities condemn to death the other prisoners but they decided that all the adult male population should be killed and all the women and children were to be enslaved. A ship (trireme) was immediately dispatched to inform Paches of the decision. The debate proper begins the following day as the Athenians have second thoughts about the harshness of their original decision and the authorities agree to debate the matter again. The debate is interesting in that we are presented with two named characters, the demagogue Cleon and his opponent Diodotus. Cleon was an advocate of the original decision and Thucydides introduces him, saying:

It was he who was responsible for passing the original motion for putting the Mytilenians to death. He was remarkable among the Athenians for the violence of his character, and at this time he exercised far the greatest influence over the people. [Book III, 36–37] (Thucydides 1972, p. 212)

Cleon's forceful argument has three main elements: the justice of the original death sentence; the demands of empire; and the failings of democratic deliberation. I will return to this last issue, of the failings of democracy, at the end of the chapter and instead focus on the first and second elements, which have the closest bearing on the emergence of Thucydidean realism.

Cleon forcefully argues that the death sentences are the just response to the egregious crime that the Mytilenians perpetrated in conspiring with Sparta. This is an unprompted treason and an assault on the Athenians that they should not ignore; though the original sentence is harsh, he claims that it was just and, as such, it should be carried out. By appealing to justice, Cleon is invoking a normative consideration but he is also clearly not appealing to a norm of justice beyond that of the interest of the Athenians. Again, whilst Cleon is not developing an ethical theory – and, given his hostility to philosophical deliberation over strict compliance with the conventional law, that would be unlikely – he is asserting the convergence of justice and interest. It is for the Athenian assembly as a court

to do justice for Athens (and against Mytilene) and apply the law. In this way, Cleon provides a very stark assertion of a realist view that justice is whatever is in the interest of the state. There is no higher principle or standard that state law must comply with in order to be just: there is no question of whether a state should measure its actions against a higher or external moral standard.

Indeed, Cleon explicitly rejects the idea that the Athenians should be compassionate and qualify their actions by minimising the violence of punishment, because this would actually be unfair to other allies and tributaries. In this respect, Cleon's argument advances the Thucydidean depiction of realism by going beyond the scepticism about the scope and extent of moral norms in the international environment that is prefigured in the account of the plague. Instead, we are presented with a clear realist ethic for international affairs that identifies the obligations of empire. According to this ethic, states will pursue their own interests so that nature and obligation, interest and duty become the same thing. But Cleon also reveals a further dimension of this ethic by claiming that empires have to act in peculiar ways that require the projection of force and the deployment of exemplary violence. Because the nature of imperial relations is marked by distance – and, in Athens's case as a maritime empire, often by long distances – the sanctions of obligation need to be clear and compelling. After all, Cleon argues starkly, 'your empire is a tyranny exercised over subjects who do not like it' [Book III, 37] (Thucydides 1972, p. 213). Either this tyranny is just, in Athens's terms as following from its national interest, or, as Cleon points out, it is unjust, in which case the Athenians deserved to face rebellion and should be punished for their unjust empire. Athens is offered a stark choice in the logic of its position. It can either be an empire, but then it must act like one, or it can abandon its imperial ambitions and limit its aspirations. If it is to be an empire, it needs to project force, and the harsh punishment for Mytilenian treason is part of that imperial ethic. Athenian freedom, in terms of being free from the domination of other Greek states or external powers such as Persia, requires it to be assertively individualistic. This is a normative position, but a realist one because it does not recognise the equal ethical claims of any other state.

The Mytilenian debate is a debate with another interlocutor, namely Diodotus, who challenges Cleon. Diodotus argues for less harsh punishment and his style is much less ferocious than Cleon's. However, in many ways he supplements Cleon's argument with a more explicitly realist argument. Firstly, he rejects the idea that the assembly should be acting as a court; instead, it should be a political assembly and deliberate politically in terms of the balance of Athenian interests as an imperial power. Whilst acknowledging the apparent injustice of imposing the death penalty on the whole male population of Mytilene, and thus on the democratic class there who were not involved in the revolt, his real argument concerns what is in the interest of maintaining Athens's imperial power and possessions. The real measure of action should be a careful consideration of the balance of benefits to Athenian national interest

and not justice or compassion. Although the assembly accepts Diodotus' argument and dispatches another boat to countermand the original decision for the destruction and enslavement of the Mytilenian population, his argument is a colder and more calculating assertion of national interest as the overriding principle of action. This is a political decision only, rather than one of justice, principle or law. This goes to the heart of the claim that, by highlighting this episode, Thucydides presents a realist vision of politics and international relations: the only criterion for judging a state's actions is in terms of what suits its long-term and considered interest.

### *The Melian dialogue*

The Melian dialogue occurs in Book V, 85–113 following the collapse of the Peace of Nicias and it serves as a prelude to the Sicilian Expedition, where the Athenian ethic of empire is tested to destruction. Although chronologically and politically separate from the Mytilenian debate, the Melian dialogue continues to clarify the realist ethic of empire that is pursued by the Athenians. Melos was an island to the south-east of Attica populated by a colony originally from Sparta, but which had asserted its neutrality in the conflict before being forced to respond to Athenian attacks. When the Athenian expedition arrived in 416, they sent representatives to the Melians to seek terms for capitulation. The Melian leadership chose not to discuss the matter publicly but only in front of the governing body. This might explain why Thucydides presents the dialogue as between 'the Athenians' and 'the Melians' rather than as a debate between named characters.

The Athenians are brusque and instrumental in their argument. They want to save themselves from battle but equally are uninterested in 'fine phrases' about their right to empire or the justice of their claim. Instead, they make perhaps one of the most famous statements of a realist position in international politics:

when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends upon the equality 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. [Book V, 89] (Thucydides 1972, p. 402)

In this terse statement, Thucydides has the Athenians assert that justice at best can be a principle of mutual advantage amongst equal powers. And, as the specific example suggests, in the international realm, whilst there are imperial powers there is no such equality amongst all states and therefore the idea of justice does not apply. But, even amongst major powers, that equality is precarious and rare, as indeed the rise of Athens suggests. The Thucydides trap suggests strong structural reasons within international relations, for justice as mutual advantage to be rare (Allison 2017).

The claim that justice is at best the mutual advantage of equal powers is, however, not the most important part of the claim. That is the point reinforced in Book V, 105 (Thucydides 1972, p. 404), where the Athenians say, 'Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can.' So, not only can the powerful pursue their interest over the weak; they also have a natural inclination to dominate where they can. When this is coupled with the claim that justice is the mutual advantage of the strong, we have a statement of the fundamental elements of a realist vision of international politics:

1. States are motivated to pursue their interests.
2. In doing so, states are motivated to exploit their power and dominate the weak when they can.
3. The international condition is one without an overarching power that imposes order or with a permanent dominant power.
4. Consequently, order is the exception and the natural condition of international affairs is one of conflict or war.

It is precisely this argument that the Athenians make against the Melians, suggesting that, for all their appeals to honour and justice, they would behave in exactly the same way if they were in Athens's position. Indeed, the argument is almost mechanical (although one needs to be careful in not overinterpreting what Thucydides is implying with the idea of a 'necessary law of nature') because the Athenians reject the argument that they should avoid exploiting advantage in case circumstances should change and they might need justice, which is precisely what happens in Book VIII during the failed Sicilian Expedition. The dialogue ends with the Melians failing to persuade the Athenians to treat them justly, the Melians heroically refusing to submit to the Athenians, and the start of a siege. In the end, Melos falls to the Athenians, who execute all men of military age and sell into slavery all the women and children: dialogue and discussion are defeated by power. This is a forceful moral for politics, to be contrasted with theories that assert the primacy of the moral good and the power of reasoned speech and the best argument.

The narrative of the plague, the Mytilenian debate and the Melian dialogue provide a clear and forceful account of the elements of a normative realist ethic and an explanatory account of a realist interpretation of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians. Thucydides clearly emerges as the 'father' of realism and the founder of international theory. However, it would be incorrect to go on and claim that Thucydides explicitly endorses a realist ethic. It is also clear that he has very little sympathy for the demagogue Cleon or much sympathy for the wisdom of the Athenian's behaviour with respect to the Melians. Consequently, whilst Thucydides offers us many lessons, his realism is more appropriately confined to the explanatory context of interstate action, as opposed to asserting the expansionist ethic of imperialism that follows from Cleon's contribution to the Mytilenian debate and to the Melian dialogue.

Realism might well provide a good explanation of the conduct of international affairs but it provides a much less sure platform for states to decide how they should act in a world in which realist premises hold: it is one thing knowing that states will pursue what they perceive to be their interests but it is much less clear what a state's interest actually is in the wider historical context. Whilst realism might provide the best account of the circumstances of interstate conflict and the limits of norms, Thucydides does not offer realism as a normative account of how states (*poleis*) should act. His real message with respect to realism is that judging a states' interest requires cool and considered judgement, precisely what Pericles provided and what democracy tends not to provide.

### Democracy, war and *stasis*

The third major theme for international political theory in Thucydides' *History* is the issue of democracy, in particular the thesis that democracies are unstable and tend to dissolve from the inside: what the Greeks called *stasis* or the tendency to civil strife. Thucydides' *History* was one of the primary sources for the hostility to democracy within the western tradition of political thought until the late 19th century and the emergence of representative democracies. His negative view is particularly interesting in light of the 'democratic peace' thesis, to which I turn next.

### *The 'democratic peace' thesis*

The democratic peace thesis (sometimes also the liberal peace thesis) claims that democracies do not go to war with each other, so that the extension of democracy would tend towards a more pacific world order. It has been advanced by a number of scholars but most significantly in the work of Doyle (1983) in two important papers. These focus on liberal democratic regimes and in particular the ideas of the late 18th-century German political philosopher Immanuel Kant in the context of the balance of power' thesis. There are significant differences between Kant's world and that of Pericles and Thucydides, let alone the modern liberal order of contemporary politics. Nevertheless, in light of the vision of liberal constitutionalism in Pericles' Funeral Oration, as well as other features of Athenian political practice, it is worth briefly outlining the thesis as a point of reference for the discussion of Thucydides on democracy and war. I do not evaluate here whether it holds as a generalisation in international politics and history, or whether Thucydides' history provides a disconfirmation of the thesis.

The thesis emerges most clearly in Kant's *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795), where he argues that, in order for there to be a duty to seek peace in the international realm, there has to be the possibility of international

peace. He attempts to show this with a speculative history that shows tendencies towards global pacifism. This speculative history has been taken up by contemporary political scientists to test whether the undoubted growth in democracies has led to more pacific international relations. The conclusion is that liberal democracies tend not to go to war with one another but that they are willing to go to war with non-liberal democratic regimes. This claim is subject to considerable scholarly contention, both in terms of whether it actually holds and whether (if it does) this is the result of something that can be described as democracy, rather some other variable that might be doing the causal work. It is the preference for peace with similar regime types that is then used as a further normative case for advancing democratic regime change: the more democracies there are, the less there will be interstate war.

The reasons why democracies are unlikely to go to war with other democracies depends upon fundamental shared features of liberal democratic regimes. The most obvious of these is that democratic leaders are accountable to their people in a way that authoritarian leaders are not. When wars go well, this means there is glory and credit. But, because wars are complex, protracted and precarious ventures, democratic leaders are liable to being held responsible for the consequences of the war. A simple 21st-century example is that of the British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his decision to support the U.S. in the second Gulf War. Blair was a popular and generally trusted prime minister before the Iraq War and so had majority popular support for an intervention backing the U.S. and removing an externally loathed Iraqi leader (Saddam Hussein). Despite the immediate success in toppling the Iraqi regime, the long-term occupation of Iraq proved intractable and public support evaporated. The war was contested by critics at the time, and has gone into popular memory as an expensive diplomatic failure that has coloured Blair's subsequent reputation. A similar story could be told about President George W. Bush and the USA's fortunes in the same conflict, despite their initial overwhelming military victory.

The lesson from such examples is that public opinion is often fickle and that the populace is often unwilling to accept the consequences of their choices, instead placing all the culpability on leaders. In this near-contemporary example, the war was fought by liberal democratic states against an authoritarian dictatorship, a case that the thesis acknowledges is not ruled out by the institutional structure of a liberal democratic regime. However, the general point about leadership culpability is intended as a constraint on waging war in both elements of the thesis. Where liberal democratic states confront one another, the thesis asserts that they are more likely to rely on diplomatic institutions to settle disputes, for the same reasons that they rely on law and dialogue to settle internal political disputes between parties and regions within a state. The claim is that liberal democratic regimes prefer to replace violence and confrontation with discourse and deliberative politics. So they are likely to conceive of international disputes in diplomatic terms as normal politics beyond borders, rather than something that replaces normal politics (Ikenberry 2020). The task of

politics and deliberation is to marginalise conflict and violence. When two regimes are structured to do this, as liberal democratic regimes are, then the tendency will be to see the interstate realm as one that can continue that marginalisation of conflict and violence. This is further demonstrated by the tendency of liberal democratic regimes to favour international law, mediation, arbitration and alliances – to the extent that Kant and his followers saw history as tending towards global pacifism and a world federation.

Because liberal democratic states are structured to discipline war, violence and conflict internally, and to rely on diplomacy externally, so with respect to the substance of politics they are unlikely to see matters of policy or doctrine as the basis of conflict and violence. The thesis contrasts the politics of non-liberal democratic regimes with their focus on aggrandisement, awe and expansion with the technical problem-solving welfare focus of liberal democratic politics. Different liberal democratic regimes might seek different policy solutions to similar sorts of problems in terms of fiscal policy, welfare provision and trade, but these technical differences do not create the circumstances for conflict and violence. No liberal democratic state will go to war with another such state on the grounds of differences over welfare policy or industrial policy, because these matters are not politically threatening. Even in the vexed case of trade disputes, liberal democratic regimes tend to rely on international institutions, adjudication and diplomacy, as economic competition is not categorised as threatening behaviour by their similar approaches to political economy.

A feature of liberal democratic regimes, given the greatest emphasis in the thesis, is that such states tend to be relatively wealthy and have a political culture that is focused on the accumulation of wealth and its secure enjoyment, precisely the things most vulnerable to war and conflict. This echoes the contrast between Sparta, and its focus on preparedness for war and martial virtue, and Athens, with its celebration of the benefits of trade, wealth and display celebrated by Pericles in the Funeral Oration. The potential threat that war and conflict pose to the accumulation and enjoyment of wealth raises the cost of war in any analysis. But it also draws attention to the fundamental character of liberal democratic societies, where economy, trade, culture and civilisation are the primary activities of human life – and those most disrupted by military campaigns that both threaten those activities. In addition, those people who carry the burdens of fighting are going to be diverted from their normal lives and this will weigh heavily on their own decisions to support conflict over peace. As this calculation takes place on both sides in a potential war between liberal democracies, the tendency, according to the thesis, is towards some other form of settlement. When it happens on only one side, there is likely to be a strong but not overwhelming case against war, hence the pacific tendency of democratic peace thesis only holds between similar types of states.

If these considerations do hold and are causally effective when taken together, they support the idea that the more regimes become liberal and democratic, the more there will be a pacific world order and war will be marginalised. The

challenge for the thesis is threefold: does it indeed hold; if it holds, what are the causal mechanisms as to why; and, finally, does this provide an argument for a global campaign to extend democracy across all regimes? Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this chapter and even of this book – it is the challenge of contemporary international, diplomatic and military strategy – but it does frame the discussion of some of the challenges that Thucydides identifies in the democratic practice of Athens and the Delian League.

### *Thucydides on democracy*

As with the previous issues that we have extracted from Thucydides' narrative, it is important to avoid anachronism and recognise the peculiarities of Athenian democracy and its differences from modern liberal representative democracies. That said, we also need to avoid defining away the possibility of comparisons and contrasts. Whilst Periclean Athens is very different in size and scale and institutional culture to the contemporary United States, the United Kingdom or France, it would be a peculiar definition of democracy that excluded Athens as described by Thucydides or as idealised by Pericles in the Funeral Oration. Indeed, if we follow the five basic criteria set out by Robert Dahl, one of the foremost post-war theorists of democracy, we can see that with a generous interpretation Athenian democracy meets four of the five. It fails on the inclusion of all adults because of slavery and the exclusion of women. Similar problems in liberal constitutional states have only recently disappeared with the emancipation of slavery during the United States Civil War, and full granting of civil rights to Australia's Aboriginal people in 1967. Similarly, the enfranchisement of women was delayed to as late as the middle of the 20th century in France (Dahl 2015, p. 38) and 1971 in Switzerland. The other criteria are effective participation, equality in voting, enlightened deliberation and control of the agenda, and on all of these a case can be made for the democratic qualities of Athenian practices, not just the Periclean ideal. Thucydides is an important source for thinking about democracy both because he provides an ideal account, namely that of the Funeral Oration, and because he is equally concerned to show how democratic politics worked in practice, thus providing something for both the political philosophers and the political scientists. The linking concept in both perspectives is the problem of equality.

As an institutional form, democracy presupposes the equal distribution of political power and this is particularly true in the case of Athens, but only as long as one ignores women and slaves. The male populace decided policy and served in public office, being drawn by lot from a pool including all electors for most offices. Even the most senior officers of state, such as the generals like Pericles, were elected. Pericles had no standing army with a right to command; instead, that right was given by the people and expected to be exercised

through the power of rhetoric and personality. The latter is illustrated in all three of his great speeches in Books I and II. But it is equally clear that there is a tension between political equality and economic equality. Athens was not a society of economic equals, as is illustrated by the characters of Pericles, who was from an established aristocratic family, Cleon, who was a parvenu, from new money, but equally was not simply one of the people, and Alcibiades, who was another internationally connected aristocrat. All three were representatives of money and wealth, who used that to mobilise the democratic party amongst the Athenian populace. These divisions raise the challenge of what we now call populism as a modification of democratic rule, where factions use the language of majorities to capture power in the interest of a numerical minority. This situation is most common where the majority is simply that of the largest faction – what in terms of U.S. democratic politics would be called a plurality. A large enough faction can be ‘the majority’ if all other factions are unable to collaborate as a single alternative. Alongside this hidden class division within Athenian democracy there were clearly oligarchic forces who rejected democratic rule and who mounted a coup following the defeat of Athens during the Sicilian campaign. The narrative of Books VII and VIII is devoted to exploring the unravelling of Athenian democracy through a failure of dominant leadership and the unleashing of factional pressures in response to the significant turn of events. These divisions within regimes are also apparent in the members of the Delian League, where the struggle between the oligarchic forces and the democratic or popular forces was one of the underlying issues behind the Mytilenian revolt and the hostility of the Melians.

Throughout the *History* we see the challenges of democratic action and rule illustrated in the turn of events and, when read carefully, we see democracy through the prism of not merely values but temporality, where the key issues are progress, change and stability. How are states able to maintain stable rule in the face of internal dynamics of change, such as the contest for power amongst factions and groups, as well as maintain order and stability in the face of the external dynamics of politics including changing boundaries, alliances and configurations of power? The central challenge of democratic politics, then and now, is the character of leadership that can hold the demos together into a single unified body that pursues a coherent set of interests and a stable populace. These are the persistent themes of Thucydides’ *History* and central to his concern about the challenge of empire to a democratic polity. In Book II, immediately following the incident of the plague, he presents Pericles’ defence of his policy against the anger of the populace, which blames, censures and fines him for their misfortune. But then Thucydides writes, ‘Not long afterwards, however, as is the way with crowds, they re-elected him to the generalship and put all their affairs into his hands’ [Book II, 65] (Thucydides 1972, p. 163). The passage goes on to link the fickleness of the people and their failure to accept a considered strategy to the eventual defeat of Athens.

This theme is central to the arguments around the Sicilian campaign in Book VI and the account of its conduct in Book VII. Here we see the characters of Alcibiades and Nicias, both successors to Pericles as generals and leaders, yet neither of them able to manifest the character or power of personality needed to sustain a coherent strategy. The Athenians are persuaded to join the Sicilian campaign by one city there, the Egestaeans (who seek an alliance against another city, the Selinuntines), with the promise of riches and financial support for the cost of the campaign. Alcibiades, who is depicted as an unscrupulous opportunist, supports this case as a ground for enhancing his own power. Nicias, on the other hand, tries to discourage the expedition by arguing that it will be complex and costly and require a much greater commitment from the Athenians. However, this argument has the perverse effect of providing greater enthusiasm for the campaign and for Nicias's role as one of the generals assigned to lead it.

Despite his success in persuading the Athenians to support the expedition, Alcibiades was subsequently implicated in the 'desecration of the herms'. These were statues comprising a block of stone topped with a carved head and sometimes carved genitals that were used to mark boundaries and were often placed outside houses to ward off evil. Prior to the departure of the Athenian expedition, all the herms were damaged and this act of desecration was seen as an attempt to undermine the expedition and weaken the Athenians' confidence. Alcibiades was charged with complicity in this act but his trial was postponed so as not to delay the expedition. He was subsequently recalled, but absconded and defected to Sparta. Whether or not Alcibiades was involved in this curious act, the way the incident was used by his opponents further illustrates how factions permeated the Athenian demos and the precariousness of stable leadership.

With the failure of the Athenian expedition to Sicily, and the subsequent involvement of the Persians in latter stages of the war, we also see Alcibiades supporting the oligarchic coup against the democracy. The coup is ultimately unsuccessful as the oligarchy is itself deposed. But again, in a detailed discussion of the internal workings of Athens's politics, Thucydides provides evidence of the tension between populism as the temporary will of the majority and a principled commitment to an ideal of democracy. Both reality and ideal come into conflict, in the absence of principled and strong leadership that can unite the many factional and individual interests into a common people.

The precariousness of democracy is clearly linked to economic inequality and the concern of the wealthy to protect their interests against populist policies that squander or risk their wealth, just as the poorer classes see conquest and empire as an opportunity for personal enrichment and advancement. Yet there is another aspect to the weakness of democracy as a vehicle for effective international policy. This is illustrated by Cleon's critique of democracy in the Mytilenian debate. Alongside an argument for the lawfulness of harsh punishment, he spends much of his speech assailing the way in which artful and

clever rhetoric can persuade the demos to change its mind and act against its own interest. Effective policy, as in the case of Pericles' strategy, requires commitment and not constant revision in light of shifts in the balance of events. What might prove a virtue in some matters of domestic policy risks undermining strategy and the cool pursuit of national interest. Ironically, Cleon is presented in a critical light for his impatience, forcefulness and vulgarity, but at least in this respect he voices a concern that is repeated throughout the account of post-Periclean Athenian strategy.

In the end, Thucydides suggests that democracy is neither well suited to war and international affairs, or the management of an empire. Indeed, we can also infer that the tendency to empire exacerbates factionalism and expedites the undermining of democracy. This might not seem such a problem now, assuming that the democratic peace thesis holds, but we should remember that Thucydides does give examples of democracies attacking other democracies and the thesis is complicated by the presence of imperial democracies such as Athens and possibly contemporary hegemonic states. If we try to refute Thucydides by alluding to the triumph of modern democracies in 'good' wars (Roosevelt and Churchill in World War II), we also see his point that democratic success depends as much on the character of leaders as on the primacy of social and economic equality. And even in those near-contemporary examples we can see how quickly the demos can change and how important it is to be led wisely. This moral is particularly compelling in light of the recent rise of populism within the established western democracies and the 21st-century challenges to the post-World War II international order. Contemporary democracies, particularly liberal or representative democracies, tend to resolve the problem of the simultaneous importance and elusiveness of wise leadership with careful institutional design, such as the balance of powers within a constitution, or periodic elections to change parties or ruling elites. Yet, even this turn to institutions depends upon the character and virtues of political leaders, since no political order can be a free-standing mechanism independent of the motives of its moving parts, whether these be individual leaders, social classes and factions or (in the international domain) relations between peoples or nations. At the very least, democracy assumes that leaders are motivated by the threat of shame or dishonour. When a leader turns out to be genuinely shameless, it is difficult to tame the exercise of executive power without a political balance.

I argued earlier that, although Thucydides is an historian, we can nevertheless find in his history contribution to international political thinking that is as relevant today as in his own time, about the importance of history as a test for theories and hypotheses. Although Thucydides tends to identify problems that have become central to subsequent debates, as opposed to offering theories that resolve them, in so doing he provides perhaps the greatest service to subsequent theorising about the international realm. It would be invidious to reduce his nuanced and subtle history into a series of perennial problems for

later students. Yet it is nevertheless the case that it is the open and complex questions raised by great thinkers, as opposed to clever answers, that make a great text just that. Every epoch and generation must try to answer its own political questions, but the really great texts are those that continuously inform those challenges. The philosopher A.N. Whitehead wrote that '[t]he safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato' (Whitehead 1929, p. 39). In the context of international theory anywhere, it is no exaggeration to make the bolder claim for Thucydides (and remove the regional qualification also).

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*Suggestion for finding open access versions of Thucydides' texts*

[https://openlibrary.org/books/OL5471702M/History\\_of\\_the\\_Peloponnesian\\_War](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL5471702M/History_of_the_Peloponnesian_War)

This is the same edition that Professor Kelly recommends:

Thucydides. (1972). *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans R. Warner ed. M.I. Finley. UK: Penguin.