How Can International Relations Theorists Benefit from Reading Thucydides? by W Julian Korab-Karpowicz

Often regarded as the father of realism in international relations, Thucydides was a historian and an original political thinker, who described and analyzed social and political events that occurred during the Peloponnesian War, which broke out in 431 B.C. between Athens and Sparta. Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War is not a work of political philosophy nor a sustained theory of international relations. Much of the History consists of paired speeches by personages who argue both sides of an issue. In these speeches and in Thucydides’ own comments on the events that take place, we can have a glimpse of a theory that is implied, but nowhere fully formulated or made explicit. Although Thucydides implies that he exemplifies universal truths about human nature, civil society, and interstate relationships, he does not present explicitly his point of view and never engages with other thinkers in a debate. Nevertheless, if the History is described as the only acknowledged classical text in international relations, and if it inspires theorists from Hobbes to contemporary international relations scholars, this is because it is more than a chronicle of events, and a theoretical position can be extrapolated from it. For some, the Peloponnesian War represents an archetypal statement of power politics. Thucydides is seen as a political realist who asserts that the pursuit of moral principles does not enter the world of international affairs. For others, the book is a sad and cautionary tale about failure and degeneration resulting from a war perpetuated by the actions of men unable to practice moderation in their ambitions. Thucydides is seen as a moralist who explores the tension between the injunctions of justice and the requirements of power, and finds repugnant the way Athens disregarded moral considerations in her imperial conduct.

A Brief History of the Peloponnesian War

Ancient Greece was divided into many poleis - city-states that varied in size and had a variety of political constitutions. Athens and Sparta, former allies that earlier defeated the Persian Empire (479 B.C.) and the main adversaries in the Peloponnesian War, were among the largest. By the middle of the fifth century B.C., they were leaders of respectively the Delian League and the Peloponnesian League, two contending alliances of Greek city-states. Sparta, whose four hundred year old constitution was attributed to the legendary lawgiver Lycurgus, was a conservative land-oriented aristocracy, or rather a mixed constitution in which the distribution of power among social classes was remarkably balanced. The Spartan system of government was a model of stability. The Spartan citizens constituted a professional army, which developed as a consequence of subjecting a conquered people, the Helots, on whom they relied as agricultural workers and who greatly outnumbered them. Strict discipline prepared aristocratic youth for military service. The total population of Sparta was between 190,000-270,000, of which only about 4,000 were citizens of military age. Because of that Sparta had to rely upon its allies in the Peloponnesian League for military assistance. Further, as it was not enriched by the voluntary alliance it led, Sparta was relatively poor. Its chief source of wealth was agriculture. By contrast, Athens was a thriving commercial center. It derived its wealth mainly from trade and natural resources. Defeating
their rivals at sea, the Athenians turned the Delian League into an empire and grew rich. In exchange for keeping the Aegean Sea safe by the power of its navy, they collected payments from their allies. Moreover, the government of Athens was the paradigm of Greek democracy. The Athenian assembly and judicial service were open to all citizens. Most public officials were selected from among citizens annually by lot. Citizenship, from which women, foreigners and slaves were excluded, was accessible to a much wider class of people in Athens than in Sparta. A citizen was anyone, rich or poor, who could prove his Athenian ancestry. The total population of Athens was between 215,000-300,000, of which about 40,000 were male citizens. Half of them could afford to purchase military equipment to serve as the heavily armed infantry known as hoplites. For its fighting force Athens relied on its citizen body and on a few thousand resident aliens.

In Thucydides’ opinion, the true reason for the war was “the growth of Athenian power, which put fear into the Lacedaemonians [Spartans] and so compelled them into war” (1.23.6). Sparta was compelled to enter into war to restore the balance of power between the Greek city-states. But the war was also fueled by the ideological conflict between democracy and oligarchy that was endemic to ancient Greece. Athens aided democratic factions in neighboring cities, whereas Sparta aided oligarchic ones. The first phase of war began in 431 and lasted ten years. The second year of the war was disastrous for the Athenians. A plague broke out in the city, which was overcrowded by refugees from the farmland outside the walls. Still, the Athenians held out. Since Sparta had the superior army and Athens the superior navy, as long as they conceded land to Sparta and Sparta the sea to Athens, there was no hope on the part of either side of winning the war. A truce was declared in 421, but it was fragile and the war began again. In 416 the Athenians made war against the neutral island of Melos, a Spartan ally. The same year, immediately after the conquest of Melos, they decided to undertake a more risky venture. Moved by ambition and a desire for further expansion, they invaded Sicily, an island which had many colonies allied to Sparta. The main target was Syracuse, the largest and most powerful of Sicilian cities. This time, the Athenians badly underestimated the strength of their enemies. The result was a defeat, after which Athens never fully recovered. Many of the Athenian allies rebelled. In a period of political instability, Athenian democracy was briefly replaced by an oligarchy known as the Four Hundred. Thucydides’ History breaks off at this point, but the war continued. Following the destruction of the Athenian navy at the battle of Aegospotami in 405, the Athenians were compelled to sue for peace. They surrendered to the Spartans in 404 B.C.

**Thucydides’ Realism**

The task which Thucydides sets for himself is not just to describe the harsh events that occurred during the war “and will always happen as long as human nature remains the same” (3.82.2). As he says on its opening pages, the History is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of the immediate public, but it is meant to last forever. He is not merely interested in reconstructing historical events, using the best evidence available, but in providing their general explanation. His work is essentially a study of human and state behavior, in which a theory is implied and permanent characteristics of human affairs and international politics are revealed. Because of his pessimism about human nature, his emphasis on power, and his recognition that morality has little place in inter-state relations, he is often credited with being the first writer in the tradition of political realism.

What is realism? Realism is a view of international politics that stresses its competitive and conflicting side. The principal actors in the international arena are states which are concerned with their own security, act in pursuit of their national interests, and struggle for
power. Thucydides seems to subscribe to this view. Distinguishing between immediate and underlying causes of the Peloponnesian War, he does not see its real or underlying cause in the Athenian intervention in the conflict between Corcyra and Corinth, her siege of Potidaea, or her ban on trade with Megara - the events that occurred immediately before its outbreak. He locates the real cause of the war in the changing distribution of power between the two blocks of Greek city-states: the Delian League and the Peloponnesian League. According to him, the growth of Athenian power made the Spartans afraid for their security, and thus compelled them into war (1.23.6). What he says resonates strongly with neorealist arguments on how the anarchic structure of the international system affects the behavior of states. The realists find the absence of a ruler, literally an-archy, the defining element of international politics and primary determinant of international political outcomes. The lack of a rule-making and enforcing common authority means, they claim, that each state is responsible for its survival and is free to define its own power interests. In the words of the Athenian envoys at Melos, if there is no international government that can enforce order, “the independent states survive [only] when they are powerful” (5.97.2). International anarchy leads thus to the overriding role of power in inter-state relations and causes all states to be motivated by fear and mutual distrust. To attain security, states increase their relative power and engage in power balancing for the purpose of deterring potential aggressors. Wars are fought to prevent any competing nations from becoming militarily stronger.

The negative side of this emphasis on power is the realists’ skepticism regarding the applicability of universal ethical norms to relations among states. National politics is the realm of authority and law, whereas international politics, unrestrained by any higher moral laws, is a sphere without justice characterized by active or potential conflict between states. A strong confirmation of this position can be found in the “Melian Dialogue” (5.85-113). The dialogue relates to the events of 416 B.C. when Athens invaded the neutral island of Melos. The Athenian envoys present the Melians with a choice between destruction or surrender, and from the outset ask them not to appeal to justice, but to think about their survival. They say: “We both know that the decisions about justice are made in human discussions only when both sides are under equal compulsion, but when one side is stronger, it gets as much as it can, and the weak must accept that” (5.89). To be “under equal compulsion” means to be subjected to a common authority. Since such an authority above states does not exist, the Athenians argue that the only right in the world of anarchy is the right of the stronger to dominate the weaker. They explicitly equate right with might, and exclude considerations of justice from foreign affairs. Further, the right of the stronger to dominate is for them a natural law. “Nature always compels gods (we believe) and men (we are certain) to rule over anyone they can control” (5.105.2). Hence, in the Athenian speech there is implied not only a denial of international morals, but also a certain view of humankind that is essential for the realist view of international politics. International anarchy would not lead to conflict between nations if they were all populated by altruistic angels. Whether explicitly, as in classical realism, or implicitly, as in neorealism, the realistic theory is rooted in a conception of egoistic human nature. Human beings are perceived as self-seeking and power-seeking, moved by the drive to dominate others, with no compassion alternating the course of their action nor any moral rules over them.

Realism is not implied in the statements of the Athenian envoys at Melos and in the way Thucydides explains the cause of the Peloponnesian War. Moreover, the same outlook of international politics is expressed in the very first speech given by the Athenians in the History, namely, at the debate at Sparta, just before the outbreak of the war. The Athenians refer to three motives that have led them to obtain and keep their empire: fear, honor, and
self-interest (1.75.3; 1.76.2). A similar motivational triad can be found in Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and in twentieth-century realists. Nearly all realists place fear at the core of state motivation. Fear is a defensive motive, based on the desire for self-preservation; however, honor and self-interest, desires for recognition and gain, are fundamentally competitive and acquisitive. These three motives are paralleled in Pericles’ “Last Speech” as safety, glory, and wealth (2.63-64). Athenian imperialism is thus justified on the grounds of security concerns, recognition, and expediency, but not on moral grounds. Further, the Athenians affirm the priority of power over justice in international relations and provide justification for this. They argue that morality cannot be put ahead of power because as a rule “the weaker are held by the stronger” (1.76.2). No one who can obtain something by power will be deterred not to use it. To believe otherwise, they suggest, would be to mislead oneself about the nature of international politics. The Athenians give then strong support to a realist position. The question is, however, to what extent do the Athenian realist views coincide with Thucydides’ viewpoint. Is his realism the same as the realism of the Athenian envoys at Melos and of the Athenians at the debate at Sparta? Is he a realist at all? Thucydides’ *History* provides an account of debates between groups and individuals, holding often opposite views. The political discourse that he describes is plural, not single. Although fragments of the “Melian Dialogue” and other parts of the *Peloponnesian War* support a realistic reading, Thucydides’ realism cannot be deduced from selected fragments but must be assessed on the basis of the wider context of his book. The “Melian Dialogue” itself provides us with a plurality of contending perspectives.

**Realism Versus Idealism in the Melian Dialogue**

Political realism is usually contrasted with idealism or liberalism, a theoretical perspective that puts stress on international norms, interdependence between states, and international cooperation. The “Melian Dialogue,” which is one of the most frequently commented upon parts of Thucydides’ *History*, presents the classic dilemma between idealist and realist thinking: Can international politics be based on a moral order derived from the principles of peace and justice or will it remain the playground of conflicting national interests and power?

For the Melians, who employ idealistic arguments, the choice is between war and subjection (5.86). They do not wish to lose their freedom, and in spite of the fact that they are militarily weaker than the Athenians, they are prepared to defend themselves (5.100; 5.112). They base their arguments on an appeal to justice (5.86), and refuse to concede that justice is a mere matter of expediency, but understand it as a universal moral principle. They associate justice with fairness, and regard the Athenians as unjust (5.90; 5.104). Also, they put their trust in alliances and hope for military assistance from their ally, Sparta. They respect the gods and believe in honor, saying that their weakness will be made up by the aid of the gods supporting their just cause and the help of the Spartans, whom they hold to be honorable (5.104; 5.112). Hence, in the speech of the Melians one can identify such elements of the idealistic or liberal world view as the beliefs that nations have the right to exercise political independence, states have mutual obligations to one another that they will carry out, and a war of aggression is unjust. The Athenian response is based on such key realist concepts as security and power, and is informed not by what the world should be but what it is. The Athenians urge the Melians to look at the facts, namely to recognize their military inferiority, to consider the potential consequences of their decision, and to think about their own survival (5.87; 5.101). They exclude consideration of justice from their discussion and appeal to the identity of interests. (5.89; 5.91). They are concerned about their security and express fear
that the independent Melos may endanger them (5.99). They argue that it will be better for both sides if Melos gives in. The Melians will save themselves from ruin and the Athenians will reap profits from them (5.93). Melos will add to the empire and no longer be a potential security threat (5.97). Further, the Athenians describe the honor and justice of the Spartans, to which the Melians refer, as mere hypocrisy that masks the Spartan interests. Considering the Athenian power and the risk of military action, it is foolish to believe, they claim, that Sparta will ever come to help and fight for Melos (5.105; 5.109). They advise the Melians not to be distracted by a false notion of honor, which in the absence of strength can only bring them disaster and the dishonor of defeat, or to depend on mere hopes, but to think only about their own country and how to survive in the present circumstances (5.111).

In spite of these realist arguments, the Melians refuse to submit and decide to fight for their independence. After some initial successes on their part, the Athenian siege succeeds. The Melians pay the highest price for their choice. Melian men of military age are killed. Women and children are sold into slavery. Melos loses statehood after seven hundred years of her history. The island is repopulated by Athenian colonists. This tragic story shows that in the end a theory of international relations “involves the ultimate experience of life and death, national existence and national extinction” (Wight 33). It is a practical theory, the theory of survival. In the first recorded debate between idealism and realism, realism is the winner, if not by the strength of arguments, then clearly by the force of the Athenian army. There are, nevertheless, reasons to believe that Thucydides does not accept the “radical realism” advocated by the Athenians at Melos. The Athenians do not act as his mouthpiece. Equally, he does not identify his position with the “utopian idealism” represented by the Melians. Both positions reveal serious theoretical weaknesses.

The Melians put high value on courage and honor, and love their country. They have a sense of justice and respect alliances. They are thus in a sense virtuous people. Some of their values resemble those of the Athenians from the earlier period. In one of his speeches, Pericles, the Athenian leader, who dies in the early stage of the War, says that for the people who have a choice, to go to war is always a folly. Yet when the choice is either to submit to neighbors or to take on dangers to preserve independence, it is better to fight (2.61.1). Contending that not to resist subjugation would be cowardly and shameful, the Melians make the same choice that Pericles suggests and that the Athenians once made themselves when, displaying great courage, they stood alone against the overwhelming might of Persia (1.73-74). The element that they, nevertheless, lack and that does not allow them to be victorious is what Pericles describes as a “strategy based on reality which affords predictable results” (2.62.5). Although they are courageous, the Melians lack resources and foresight. They are guided more by their hopes than by the evidence at hand and prudent calculations. They appeal to justice, which is not listened to, and call for help from outside, which cannot be obtained. Ultimately, they are good, and courageous but politically naive. The kind of utopian idealism that they display leads, because of their lack of good judgment, foresight, and intelligent planning, to martyrdom: the death of combatants and the extreme suffering of civilians, and in the end to the destruction of their political community. Idealism of those who are unable to survive is for Thucydides of no use and is reported by him solely as a warning against any future political wishful thinking. All noble aspirations of the Melians are ruined because they do not take into consideration the actual practice of states and do not make provision for their own security.

The Athenians at Melos reveal themselves as models of rational self-interested agents. They use available means to realize the objectives that they set out. There is a seemingly powerful realist logic behind the Athenian arguments. Their position, based on security
concerns and expediency, possesses rationality, intelligence, and foresight. However, upon a close examination their logic contains serious flaws. Melos, a relatively weak state, does not pose any real security threat to them. The slaughter of the Melians is only regretful. The destruction of Melos does not change the course of the Peloponnesian War, which is lost by Athens a few years later. The Athenians argue that the international world, imperfect as it is, is ruled by the law that the weaker are dominated by the stronger, and therefore, moral values cannot be applied to it. They do not only acknowledge the lack of justice in interstate relations, but provide justification for this. Consequently, they do not only describe interstate relations, but also prescribe to states the way of domination. Their radical realism is not merely descriptive and defensive but normative and offensive, and can be better termed as realpolitik. On the grounds of the purported lack of universal moral standards in international politics and selfishness of states, the Athenians glorify war and conquest, and act accordingly. They replace moral norms with raison d’état, state’s expediency, as the highest norm. However, they do not recognize that self-interest and the rules of might alone cannot provide sufficient basis for a practical theory of international politics. In the History, Thucydides shows that if it is unrestrained by moderation and a sense of justice, power brings about the uncontrolled desire for more power. There are no logical limits to the size of an empire. Drunk with the prospect of glory and gain, subsequently after they conquer Melos, the Athenians engage in the war against Sicily. They do not pay attention to the Melian argument that considerations of justice are useful to all in the longer run (5.90). As they overestimate their strength and finally lose the war, their self-interested logic is indeed very short sighted.

It is utopian to ignore the selfishness of states and the element of power in international relations, but it is equally blind to rely on power alone. Thucydides would support neither utopian idealism nor realpolitik. If he can still be regarded as a political realist, his realism is neither realpolitik, in which international morality is denied, nor neorealism, in which moral questions are largely ignored. His realism is neither immoral nor amoral. In his realism, selfishness is recognized, but is not exalted and presented as a value. Moderation and a sense of justice should keep states from becoming too opportunistic in defining and pursuing their interests. Thucydides’ realism can be compared to that of Raymond Aron, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Hans Morgentau, the twentieth-century classic realists, who, although sensible to the demands of power and national interest, would not deny that political actors on the international scene come under moral judgment. He is profoundly engaged in reflecting on ethical issues in domestic and international politics.

Thucydides History as “Lasting Possession”

Thucydides’ History was meant by him to be a “lasting possession.” It would be erroneous, however, to identify that what he wanted to convey to posterity was a narrow realist theory of international relations. His realism refuses to be confined to the narrow realm of security and power, but takes into account the whole political reality with its ideas, passions, and follies (Aron 599). He neither denies international morals nor ignores moral issues in the name of pretended scientific objectivity. On the contrary, in the Peloponnesian War, unlike the writings of most of today’s realists, we can find a deep reflection on ethics in its relation to politics. In much the same way as a physician who pronounces his diagnosis, Thucydides examines the causes of political disorder and studies the ways in which ethical characteristics of a state, or their lack, affect its condition. Like other ancient Greek writers before and after him, such as Hesiod, Solon, Aeschylus, as well as Plato and Aristotle, he considers the lack of morals to be a serious disease of the polis. In this way he is a part of the Hellenic moral tradition in which Western political philosophy is deeply rooted.
One of the main issues that Thucydides considers is the effect of power when it is not kept within the bounds of moderation and justice in both domestic and international politics. Although he never precisely defines justice, it is clear that this and other ethical concepts are for him neither culturally nor historically relative. The absence of justice as a universal moral value is always lamentable. A society that leaves no room for justice and moderation, that knows no law and no limit, Thucydides concludes, is doomed to fail. Humans are rational actors only in a superficial way. At a deeper level, lacking a sense of justice and moderation, they become fundamentally irrational and their irrationality often destroys their understanding of what is expedient for them. The Athenians finally lose the war because, moved by the love of power alone, they overestimate their strength, develop poor policies, and choose wrong leaders. As numerous other examples from world history can show, no power is ever immune to such miscalculation.

This text is an abbreviated version of the chapter “Thucydides: War and the Polis” of my forthcoming book On the History of Political Philosophy.

Suggested Readings

Recommended Translations of Thucydides’ Work:


Other Suggested Readings:


