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War and Democracy
A Comparative Study of the Korean War and the Peloponnesian War
David McCann and Barry S. Strauss editors

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Thucydides intended his account of the Athenian-Peloponnesian War to be a “possession for all time” (ktēma es aiei: 1.22.4); not just a record of past events, but an education in the realities of power and human relations that would help a future reader to understand his own situation. The success of Thucydides’ ambitious undertaking can be measured by the eagerness with which subsequent generations of readers have gone about the project of assimilating their diverse theoretical agendas to his history—and vice versa. For several decades after the Second World War, Thucydides was read by many American opinion-makers (and by those academics who taught them) as a prototypical cold war policy analyst. Jennifer Roberts discusses this cold war reading of Thucydides and offers a particularly vivid Korean War era example:

In the 1950s *Life* magazine ran a series of articles cautioning Americans about the disasters that might attend on ignoring the lessons of the Greek past. Robert Campbell’s piece “How a Democracy Died” was designed for high drama, beginning with an account of deadly powers facing one another across the 38th parallel, only to reveal a bit later on that the author is describing fifth-century Greece and not the endangered universe of his own era.¹

The ancient historian’s depiction of the operations of raw state power within a polarized international environment seemingly justified a foreign policy predicated on the brutal and simplistic logic of hegemonic rivalry—a logic that left little room for liberal scruples about morality or interstate justice. This cold war reading was implicitly predicated on the authority of a univocal authorial voice.
The job of the reader of Thucydides was to grasp the author's lesson, and the combination of wise author and astute reader assured that the "right" lesson was transmitted. Thucydides' wisdom was generally seen as unimpeachable—he was a grand exemplar of Western political thought. Although it would certainly be foolish to suppose that the Korean War, or any modern conflict, was the product of a particular approach to reading Thucydides, he was then—and remains—a living presence in American thinking about international relations. Thucydides, however, offers his readers much more than an abstract theory of state power. His text presents us with a noteworthy example of a shrewd and subjective historical intelligence attempting to make narrative sense of extraordinarily complex events on the basis of fragmentary documentation and the ideologically slanted accounts of participants (1.22.1–2). Moreover, he inaugurates the tradition of presenting his narrative as a rigorously scientific, objective record of events and their causes. Thucydides defines not only a starting point for the Western tradition of political thought, but also for the tradition of writing history that is, ab initio, didactic, argumentative, self-consciously skeptical of its own sources, and yet confident of its own authority and veracity. Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War may help us to make sense of the events of the Korean War by offering a better understanding of the complex interrelationship between domestic policy, concerns about national security, and the clash of great hegemonies through minor-power proxies. Moreover, reading Thucydides' ostensibly "objective" narrative as policy analysis and as critical history may offer the outsider some perspective on the issues at stake in the highly contested field of Korean War studies, where the problems of fragmentary sources, biased accounts by participants, ideologically loaded interpretations, and attempts to monopolize the high ground of objective historical truth by silencing hostile critics appear to be so prominent and so potentially problematic. That Thucydides remains a significant presence in the construction (and defense) of theories of international relations is clear enough from a spate of recent work. Michael Doyle summarizes much of this scholarship and argues with great cogency that Thucydides can fairly be adopted by the contemporary Realist school of international relations theory as an intellectual ancestor, a Realist avant la lettre. Realist models take states as quasi-individuals, as primary actors in the international arena that tend to mimic the behavior of rationally self-interested, profit-maximizing, risk-managing individuals in the marketplace—that is, in crude terms, as individuals as they are understood by modern market-centered economic theories. Thucydides obviously had no access to the psychological or behavioral theories employed by modern economists. But that does not preclude his thinking in similar terms. Doyle succeeds in showing that a reading of Thucydides as a "minimalist" Realist—one who focuses on states as primary actors in an environment of international anarchy in which no general restraint is sufficient to eliminate conflicts or to guarantee their nonviolent resolution—need not be tendentious or two-dimensional. Moreover, the text seems, at first, to provide the basis for developing a considerably stronger Realist theory of interstate behavior, a theory that will focus on the rationally self-interested behavior of state-actors in seeking to accumulate the resources that will allow them to successfully deploy power in pursuit of hegemonic ends and self-defense in a world composed of similarly rational, self-interested, and power-hungry state-actors.

Granted that Thucydides' account of states and power supports the development of some sort of Realist international relations theory, the question I would like to pose is whether reading Thucydides as a strong Realist will do justice to the complex text that is Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War. My eventual conclusion, like Doyle's, is no. I will suggest that Thucydides the "strong Realist" theorist is indeed a centrally important presence in the text. But the careful reader eventually finds Thucydides the theorist of state power (hereafter Thucydides Theoretikos) challenged and even confuted by another of the text's central authors: Thucydides the historian (hereafter: Thucydides Histor). The initial theoretical premise of the war as a conflict between unitary and rationally self-interested state-actors pursuing hegemonic ends—a premise that seems to be securely established in book 1 and the first part of book 2—is demonstrated by the narrative of events in the rest of the (incomplete) history to be a dangerous oversimplification. Theory proves incapable, in and of itself, of predicting or explaining the actual behavior of states, groups, or individuals under the pressure of a protracted and violent power struggle. This does not mean that we should regard Thucydides' work to be anti-theoretical. Rather, Thucydides reminds us that any proper theory of power must be grounded in a close analysis of human behavior in actual circumstances. Theory, by its nature, seeks to be transhistorical. Thucydides' text, however, suggests to the system-builder that the best theorizing will be informed and chastened by the same attention to the complexities and contingency that characterizes the best historical narratives.

**Thucydides Theoretikos**

Book 1 and the first part of book 2 of Thucydides' history certainly encourage the reader to develop something very much like a strong Realist theory of international relations. Thucydides makes it clear that the primary actors in his story will be poleis. Whether he refers to a polis by its given name ("Athens") or by the name of its citizenry ("the Athenians"), he seems to regard the polis as a "quasi-person"—an entity capable of making decisions and acting in an environment inhabited by similar "quasi-person" entities. Moreover, he regards the key aspects of the environment in which these entities operate to be what we would, nowadays, not hesitate to describe as economic factors: the human and material resources sought and fought over by states. The antithetical structure of the Greek language allows Thucydides to contrast these sorts of "real" factors and the willful efforts of poleis to acquire them with superstructural, epiphenomenal, or merely ideological factors that sometimes disguise or mask the motivations of state-actors.
theoretical use of the terms ergon (fact, deed, action) and logos (speech, account, story): when the author claims that in logos (according to what people said) factor A was in play, but in ergon (according to the underlying facts of the matter) it was factor B, he makes it clear to his readers that B was the true issue and more worthy of their serious attention. By extrapolation, state policy that was predicated on an understanding of the relevant erga is likely to be rational; policy that is based primarily on logos is likely to be irrational. Thus Thucydides Theoretikos, as a good (proto-)Realist, establishes the ideal norm of rational state-actors making policy on the basis of a more or less thorough understanding of the relevant data. Of course, in practice states may be inadequately informed about certain important, but complex or cryptic, realia or they may be misinformed about them. Under these conditions, the states in question will be likely to make policy errors and their mistakes may have a profound effect on the international order. But the like­

Primary among these is likely to be rational; policy that is based extend political by mistakes may have a through which a strong state-actor is reason­

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(14)

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power is internal division—that is, the failure of the society in question to coalesce
into an integrally coordinated state-actor. This lack of coherence is attributed
variously to extreme economic differentiation among the inhabitants of naturally
fertile districts (1.2) and to the selfish individualism typical of dynastic tyrants
(1.17). Thus a measure of social unity adequate to the maintenance of political
unity is established as a necessary precondition to the growth of state power. The
polis of Sparta provides Thucydides with his prime example of the advantages of
unity: due to their early adoption of a set of social norms that emphasized simple-

ity and moderation (and thus deemphasized distinctions between social classes),
the Spartans were able to become united and strong, and to extend their control
over other states (1.6 with 1.18). But Spartan power, is, the reader soon realizes,
limited because it does not accommodate the major material factors that make
possible the unconstrained growth of dunamis and arkhe. Primary among these
material factors are strong city walls, a "modern" navy of large oared warships
(triremes), and significant state treasure (khremata). After the social unity issue
had been (at least provisionally) settled, it is the triad of (1) walls for security, (2)
ships as a mobile striking force, and (3) the capital reserves that allow advance
planning and the survival of reverses that undergirds Thucydides' analysis of the
growth of state power.

The developmental scheme laid out in Thucydides' Archaeology subtly inter­
twines the three elements of the "material triad." In the earliest period, we are told,
before Greek towns were walled, the populations of the peninsula simply wan­
dered from one area to the other, pushed here and there by unstable coalitions of
strongmen. There were no capital reserves, no way of protecting accumulated capi­

tal, and no organized military presence on the seas (1.2). Settlements without walls
were especially vulnerable to the surprise attacks of sea pirates and thus early
towns tended to be built inland (1.5, 7–8). We come to realize that the material
impoveryishment of this early period was based on a vicious circle: walls were
expensive to build (1.8), and given their lack of access to the sea, the early settle­
ments were incapable of engaging in lucrative overseas commerce. The reduction
of piracy by force was thus a precondition to the growth of wealth, which was in
turn a precondition to the building of walls. Enter King Minos of Crete. According
to Thucydides (1.4, 8) Minos was the first to build a great navy and "it is reasonable
able to suppose" that he attempted to suppress piracy in order to secure his own
revenues. Because of Minos' suppression of the pirates, maritime commerce flour­
ished and capital reserves were soon accumulated by various parties. This meant
that walled settlements could be built on the coasts (1.7–8) and once walled, these
places were secure from piracy—presumably even after the end of Minos' thalassocracy.
Communities that invested their capital in walls (and, at least in the
case of Minos, in ships) became strong. The remaining, weaker, communities in
turn recognized that their own material interests would be furthered by submission
and thus they willingly accepted the hegemony of the stronger (1.8). Both strong
and weak communities evidently made their decisions on rational grounds, as state-
actors, and thus an "international" regime came into being. This was, we are told,
the condition of Greece before the Trojan War.

Agamemnon's Mycenae (despite its inland location) is clearly intended by
Thucydides as an early Greek example of a strong, hegemonic state. Thucydides
spends some time in demonstrating that Agamemnon had the most powerful navy
of his day and that he used it to control a considerable arkhe (1.9). Considerable,
that is, by the relatively paltry standards of the time. As it turns out, in comparison
to the standards of Thucydides' day, the force against Troy was unimpressive in
total size and the Greek commanders at Troy were incapable of concentrating their forces. The Hellenic expedition’s failure to use power effectively to achieve its policy goals (we might say, its low “dunamis rating”) was, according to Thucydides’ analysis, the effect of insufficient capital funds. Without the cash reserves to victual and pay the soldiers, too much effort was dispersed in supply-gathering raids; thus the war dragged on despite the overwhelming manpower superiority of the invaders (1.11-12).

The Thucydidean power equation is clear: walls + ships - capital = limited dunamis. Thus each of the Greek hegemonic confederations (arkhai) in the “premodern” period (that is, in the period before the rise of the Athenian empire) was similarly limited in scope and effectiveness. But these imperfect early examples nonetheless demonstrated the fundamental importance of the “material triad” of walls/ships/ treasure in the formulation of the comparable “conceptual triad” of defensive security/dunamis/arkhe (see Figure 1). And Thucydides’ account of early Greek political development allows, even invites, the presumption that the power equation was capable of being perfected. A big, powerful navy would always be a source of considerable strength (1.15.1). That naval force could be used to defend against the depredations of pirates, to encourage trade, and thus to gain capital resources. Those resources could then be employed in constructing a system of walls capable of ensuring adequate defensive security against the relatively meager military forces that could be brought overland by one state against another (1.15.2).

With its walls built and thus its defensive security ensured, the successful Thucydidean city-state could use its naval power more aggressively in consolidating and extending its arkhe. As that arkhe expanded, weaker states would recognize that their own interests lay in voluntary submission. As these subject, tributary states contributed to the treasure of the hegemon, the hegemon’s treasury would grow accordingly. With deeper reserves came a corresponding ability to increase and focus its growing dunamis upon appropriate objects and a concomitant potential for engaging in the sorts of ambitious, high-stakes imperial enterprises that would be avoided as too risky by less secure states with shallower capital reserves. Because wealth and naval power encouraged enterprise, while secure walls limited risk, the upward cycle of power seemed, on the face of it, potentially unlimited. The only significant external obstacle would be the presence of another comparable or superior hegemonic power that would see continued growth of a rival power as a threat to its own security or ambitions (e.g., 1.16: example of Ionian power stymied by the rise of imperial Persia).

The Archaeology, with its explicit focus on the development of the Greek poleis, reveals that Thucydides’ model of international relations is intended to apply specifically to Greece. This is significant in that before the mid- to late fifth century, the tendency among the Greeks had been to associate large-scale, hegemonic imperial structures with the East—first with Lydia and then with Persia. Athenian naval forces had been a key factor in the Greek victory over Persia in 480-478 B.C., and it was Athens, not Sparta, that was determined to pursue the anti-Persian crusade after the defeat of the Eastern invaders. In the decades after the Persian Wars, some Greek writers, notably Aeschylus and Herodotus, had begun hinting that the dramatic growth of Athenian power might have a darker side; perhaps Athens risked self-corruption as a result of having assimilated the dangerous “Eastern” passion for creating overseas empires. Thucydides’ Archaeology, by contrast, gives hegemony a firmly Greek prehistory.

The post-Persian War activities of the polis of Athens provided Thucydides with his real-world test of the model of imperial power developed by Thucydides Theoretikos in book 1. But by the same token the longue durée survey of the Archaeology demonstrates that the Athenian empire of the mid-fifth century B.C. was not merely a contingent result of unique and irreproducible circumstances; it was not to be attributed to Athenian exceptionalism, not the result of a distinctive and innate Athenian national character (ethos). The impulse of strong states to self-aggrandizement, their tendency to seek power and to deploy dunamis in pursuit of arkhe, is shown in the Archaeology to be a constant and predictable factor in Greek interstate relations. Rather than focusing on Athens’ peculiar national character, Thucydides’ implication is that Athens, under the fortuitously prescient leadership first of Themistocles and then of Pericles, was the polis that perfected (or seemed to have perfected) the symmetrical arrangement of the same triad of material factors that had been operative since the beginning of settled, civi-
lized Greek life. Those factors had led to the power of Agamemnon's Mycenaean but their imperfect alignment had placed limits on Mycenaean power. It remained to be seen whether the Athenian arkhé had actually solved the geometric equation of interlocking the material and conceptual triads (Figure 1) and had thereby achieved the strong Realist's grail: a secure hegemony with a potentially limitless capacity to extend its power.

Another set of questions remained: If Athens' behavior in building its arkhé was, in hindsight, predictable in light of Thucydides' "proto-Realist" model, could the behavior and performance of Athens as a polis in the course of the Peloponnesian War also be successfully predicted and understood in terms of that model's assumption that poleis could be treated as rationally self-interested state-actors? Or would Greek behavior under the stress of war actually prove to diverge from that of the ideal-type "state-actor"? If there were significant deviations from the predicted patterns of behavior, how are those deviations from rationality to be explained? At what level of deviation would the strong Realist model have to be significantly modified or even abandoned? What sort of additional theories might be developed to explain major deviations from the Realist scheme? If Athens' rise to power could be explained without recourse to Athens' distinctive "national ethos," might appeal to that ethos help explain its subsequent failure to act rationally? Or might that failure be explained in terms of the distinctive structural properties of Athens' internal political regime—the démokratia?

To anticipate the argument: Thucydides' narrative encourages his reader to suppose that after the death of Pericles Athens did indeed deviate from the patterns of behavior appropriate to the strongly Realist state-actor; Athenian policy lost its coherence and became at least sporadically "irrational." The reader is led to suppose that the breakdown of orderly and rational policymaking is the result of the failure of the domestic Athenian political system to resolve conflicts among rival politicians and among politically and sociologically defined groups within the Athenian citizen body. In spite of Pericles' optimistic claims in the Funeral Oration, the democratic government is depicted as being unable to negotiate between the demands of freedom and equality; of state, group, and individual interests; of public and private orientations; of logos and ergon. The reader is taught that the practice of democracy at Athens ultimately provided a fertile ground for the growth of parochial individual and factional self-interest, for destructive competitions among would-be leaders for popular favor, for the willful dissemination and reception of tendentious misinformation, and for the instantiation of highly dubious models of human behavior as the foundation for policy formation. These domestic issues eventually had a profound effect on the conduct of international policy. The ultimate outcome is Athens' failure in the Peloponnesian War—a failure that belies the confident assessment of Athens' resources and chances in books 1 and 21.1–64.

The expectations initially generated by the reader's close attention to Thucydides Theoretikos are confounded by Thucydides Histor's detailed narrative of events at home and abroad. History as erga fatally complicates theory as logos, and the reader is left sadder but wiser.19 By the time she arrives at the abrupt end of the narrative, Thucydides' reader has been taught to be less arrogant about the human ability to understand group behavior on the basis of generalizations and abstractions. She is taught that under the pressure of events, even the best and most sophisticated of political systems can fail in its rational policy goals and come to betray its moral and cultural ideals. But she has also come to understand the cryptic comment of 1.22.4: Thucydides' history is a "possession for all time" because of its simultaneous attention to the explanatory abstractions by which humans try to organize the world about them and to the much more complex reality of the lived experience of individuals, groups, and states. In the ashes of theory and idealism, the text itself remains. And thus each weary, chastened generation of readers crowns its author, who stands victorious and without rival in the games his text inaugurated. Or so, I suppose, Thucydides imagined it. Thus, far from lending unconditional support to a strong Realist view of the world, reading Thucydides' history should invite opinion-makers and policymakers to think twice—to take into account history, sociology, politics, and the diversity of ideological commitments—before making the move from abstract Realist regime theory to foreign policy.

Pericles and Athens

Pursing Thucydides' account of the Pentecontaetia—the half-century between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars (ca. 478–431 B.C.: 1.89–117)—the reader quickly realizes that in fifth-century Athens the three material factors essential to the development of national strength and hegemonic authority were abundantly present. Moreover, she learns that the importance of walls, ships, and treasure, their relationship to one another, and their relationship to the conceptual triad of security/dunamis/arkhé were well understood by Athens' outstanding post-Persian War political leaders, Themistocles and Pericles. In close conformity to the behavior of weaker states after the establishment of Minos' thalassocracy, the various Greek states of the Aegean assume that their material interests will be furthered by submission to the authority of the hegemon—and thus, looking to their immediate material advantage rather than concerning themselves with ideological notions like "autonomy," they willingly pay Athens to undertake the burden of ongoing naval operations against Persia (1.97–99, esp. 1.99.3). Thucydides also presents his reader with a detailed account of the building programs that resulted in the fortification walls of mid-fifth-century Athens—the Pireaean circuit (begun in the archonship of Themistocles before the Persian Wars and completed after the Persian Wars by his encouragement), the city circuit (built immediately after the Persian Wars at Themistocles' urging, despite the opposition of the Spartans), and the Long Walls that connected the city with Pireaean (the product of the leadership of Pericles).20 Various narrative passages discuss the size and efficiency of the Athenian navy and the extent of Athenian financial reserves.21 But it is in
considering the two Assembly speeches delivered by Pericles to the Athenian Assembly, one just before the outbreak of the war and the other in the war’s second year, that Thucydides’ reader is most fully and explicitly apprised of the tight fit between the model of state power developed in the Archaeology and imperial Athens under the leadership of Pericles. These speeches are particularly revealing when read in the context of other speeches, including the Funeral Oration. In his first Assembly speech (1.140–44), Pericles begins by asserting that his policy recommendations have been consistent over time and that he would now simply reiterate the advice he had previously given his fellows citizens. After explaining that accommodation with a hostile Sparta was truly dangerous to Athens and that the main Spartan demand (rescinding the so-called Megarian Decree) was therefore unacceptable, Pericles lays out the resources available to the two opposing sides. The Peloponnesians, he bluntly explains, have no financial reserves and no significant naval forces. Thus they will fight the war at a severe disadvantage. They were used to fighting only short, simple wars among themselves—the sort of contests typical of impoverished people (1.141.1–3; cf. Archaeology: 1.15). This lack of the essential resources that (as we have seen) undergirded dunamis is exacerbated by the diffuse Peloponnesian alliance structure; the alliance was incapable of acting as a single entity and thus, divided in their councils, the Peloponnesians fritter away their opportunities (1.141.6). Pericles assures the Athenians that they need not be concerned for their security in the face of Peloponnesian invasions of Attica: the invaders will not be able to construct fortifications capable of threatening Athens’ own fortified city-harbor complex (1.142.2–3).

The bulk of the speech expands on these central themes. Pericles argues that, having begun the war with inadequate reserves, the Peloponnesians will not easily be able to acquire capital surplus nor will they easily develop a credible sea power. He explains that the Athenians will be completely secure as long as they preserve intact their citizen manpower and the empire that is protected by the deployment of that manpower through the instrumentalities of Athenian treasure and sea power. This entailed withdrawing Athens’ population from rural Attica (Athens’ home territory) behind Athens’ impregnable walls and refusing to meet the Peloponnesian invaders in open battle since a major land battle in Attica would put Athenian manpower resources at risk (esp. 1.143.5).

In the ensuing narrative, the reader learns that despite the psychological and material suffering that this austere policy inflicted on those citizens (a majority of the total) with holdings outside the city walls, the Athenians went along with Pericles’ recommendations. They refused the Spartan ultimatum and declined to meet the Peloponnesians in battle when the latter invaded Attica in the summer of 431. The invaders left after a couple of weeks, having accomplished nothing of substance other than demonstrating their incompetence at siegecraft by a failure to capture the fortified town of Oinoe. After the first, ineffectual Peloponnesian invasion, the war seemed to be going according to Pericles’ strategic plan and Pericles was chosen by his fellow citizens to deliver the traditional oration over the war dead.

The Funeral Oration (1.34–46), in which Pericles praises the polis of Athens and the unequaled dunamis that Athenian activity abroad had brought about, originally appears to be a monument to his vision of Athens at this optimistic high point of successful, strong Realist policymaking. But on closer inspection, when read in the context of the rest of the history, the Funeral Oration also reveals the fragile social and political bases of Athens’ standing as a unitary state actor. The contrast between logos and ergon is reiterated throughout the oration. Two passages, which concern the substantiality of Athenian dunamis, are particularly noteworthy.

Furthermore, the power (dunamis) of the polis itself, [a power] established by those [Athens’] very qualities, demonstrates (semainet) that this [Pericles’ statement regarding Athenian excellence] is the truth (aletheia)—and not a product of words (logoi) produced for the present occasion rather than [a product] of fact (erga). (2.41.2)

Here, Athenian dunamis is presented as a fact, an ergon that is capable of demonstrating the truth of words, logoi, that might otherwise be suspect given their location in a public speech of praise. By appealing to Athenian dunamis as an exterior reality, Pericles calls the rest of his speech into question: he tacitly admits that since his speech was (by definition) merely a construct of words, and was prepared for an honorific occasion, it might not be true. But, he claims, the self-evident power of the city, a “fact” rather than a product of words, will establish the truth of Athens’ greatness. A similar sentiment, reprising the terminology of power, proof, truth, word, and deed, is expressed a few lines later:

Our power (dunamis) is not without the witness of great proofs (megalon semeion) and we will be the source of wonder for those yet to come, as we are for our contemporaries. Furthermore, we have no need of a Homer to sing our praises, or of any suchlike whose fine verses please only for the moment, since the truth (aletheia) will show that in comparison with the facts (erga) [the verbal depiction] is an underestimate. (2.41.4)

Again, the contrast is between the potentially misleading verbal praise and the trustworthy evidence of facts. It is through the witness of great proofs, megala semeia, that future generations will be amazed at Athens. What are these proofs that will survive the current generation to convince “those yet to come”? In light of the rejection of Homer, the proofs in question can hardly be in the form of words; we must imagine seemingly permanent, material monuments of some sort. The audience is, I would suggest, being put in mind not only of victory monuments established in enemy lands (implied at 2.41.4) but also of the city’s new public buildings, and perhaps especially of the great fortification walls of the city. The public cemetery in which the Funeral Oration was delivered stood just outside the city walls and the mighty walls themselves would have provided the speaker’s backdrop.

We modern readers know that Pericles was right to suggest that future genera-
tions will be amazed at the great fifth-century architectural monuments to Athenian power. But does our amazement reflect an accurate assessment of Athens’ actual power? Not if we are to judge by Thucydides’ earlier comment, in the Archaeology (1.10.1-2). There he specifically states that to criticize Homer’s logos on the Trojan War on the basis of the proof (sèmeion) of the small size of the existing town of Mycenae (the imperfect, proto-Athens of the Archaeology), would be improper method. In this same passage Thucydides points out that if future generations were to judge by the physical magnificence of the city alone, the dunamis of Athens would appear twice as great as it was in fact. Read in light of this earlier, “archaeological” passage, Pericles’ rejection of Athens’ need for a Homer because the great proofs, the megalà sèmeia, will impress future generations with the truth about Athenian dunamis, seems an empty boast.

In a key passage of the Funeral Oration Pericles describes the structure of Athens’ internal government:

and it [our politeia] is called by the name (onomà) dèmokratia because government (to oikein) is not oriented toward the few (es oligus) but toward the majority (es pleionas). However, in regard to access to the law for resolving disputes all are equal. Yet again in regard to acknowledged worth, it is a matter of individual reputation; the nature of a man’s public contribution is not decided in advance on the basis of class (ook apo merous), but rather on the basis of excellence. And if someone is worthy and can do something worthwhile for the polis, he is not excluded by poverty, nor because of his obscurity [of birth]. (2.37.1)

In the first clause of this passage we learn that dèmokratia is the name used for the “the politeia [internal regime] of Athens” because government (to oikein) is oriented toward the majority (es pleionas) rather than toward the few (es oligus). This is a somewhat ambiguous statement, when viewed from the perspective of power and self-interest. Pericles does not go so far as to say that dèmokratia is the rule of the many in their own self-interest over and against the interests of the few, but neither does he suggest that it is the unified policy apparatus of a rational state-actor. Pericles hints that Athens is divided into two interest groups: the few and the many, and the politeia is called a democracy because it tilts toward one group rather than the other.27

The next two clauses of the passage, which should explain and clarify the politeia, are spectacularly antithetical. The clause “but in regard to access to the law for resolving disputes all are equal,” does not explain the term dèmokratia, but contrasts to it (onomà men . . . metesti de). Thus, the equality in regard to the law is grammatically opposed to the government favorable to the majority, and therefore terms for “many” cannot stand for “all citizens” (as they did in democratic ideology, see 6.39.1). The third clause, “but in regard to acknowledged worth, it is a matter of individual reputation,” contrasts the individual citizen to the grouping of the citizenry into “few” and “majority” in the first clause, as well as contrasting the citizen’s individual worth to the generalized equality of “all” in the second clause. What happens if there is a conflict between the perceived interests of the groups, or between the equality of all and the merit of individuals? Can a political balance based on such a complex set of contrasts hold up under the stressful circumstances of a long, hard war?

One other key passage in the Funeral Oration deals explicitly with the functioning of the Athenian polity:

and we [Athenians] ourselves can [collectively] judge rightly regarding affairs, even if [each of us] does not [individually] originate the arguments; we do not consider words (logoi) to be an impediment to actions (erga), but rather [regard it as] essential to be previously instructed (prodidachthénai) by speech (logói) before embarking on necessary actions (ergói). We are peculiar also in that we hold that we are simultaneously persons who are daring and who debate what they will put their hands to. Among other men ignorance (amathía) leads to rashness, while reasoned debate (logísmos) just bogs them down. (2.40.2-3)

This passage helps to clarify the contrast between group-interest oriented government and individual merit, alluded to in the earlier passage. The Athenians recognize that not everyone is equally capable of coming up with plans (this will be the job of the individual political leader), but the many can and do participate in making the decision (as assemblymen). This division of labor is presented as nonproblematic, as is the way Athenians move from speech to action. Here, however, Pericles must appeal to Athenian uniqueness. “Other men” either act hastily out of ignorance or find that debate renders them incapable of efficient action. What, the reader may ask, renders the Athenians different from other people? What is the secret of their ability to avoid the common problems involved in moving from deliberation about policy to its implementation? The requirement that the Athenians be substantively different from other people in this important regard seemingly threatens the value of the general theory of power established in the Archaeology, which was predicated on a generally applicable understanding of human (or Greek) nature. The Archaeology had, we remember, demonstrated the need for a state to transcend internal conflict arising from social differentiation if it were to achieve (and maintain) the status of unitary state-actor. The Funeral Oration underlines the complexity and diversity of the government and the society that constituted the Athenian state-actor. Is this complex form of government—which necessarily draws members of diverse social groups, with their diverse interests and talents, into the process of policy formation—capable of weathering the stresses of war? Thucydides Histor sets out to answer that question.

After Pericles’ Funeral Oration, in the second year of the war, came the second Spartan invasion, a devastating plague (described in vivid and clinical detail by Thucydides, who tells us that he himself survived an attack of the disease), a crisis in Athenian confidence, and the second (and last) of Pericles’ Assembly speeches recorded in Thucydides’ history (2.60–64). In this speech, Pericles focuses less than before on the material trial and emphasizes instead the conceptual trial of defensive security/dunamis/arkhë.
Pericles begins the speech by asserting that he had accurately predicted the downturn in the Athenian mood—the reader is led to suppose that very pronounced shifts in the national climate of opinion were factored into Pericles' planning and thus that mood swings within the electorate could be accommodated by Pericles' political calculus. He boldly reasserts the priority of the unified public interests of the state over the diverse private interests of each individual Athenian (2.60.2-4). In the Funeral Oration we became aware of the tension between public and private, between the self-identity of the Athenian as a citizen and as a private person or a member of a social subgroup. Now Pericles bluntly underlines the essential precondition of the Realist's focus on the unitary state-as-actor: the individual's identification with the state must take priority over all other loyalties or allegiances. Pericles then claims that he will let his audience in on a secret that lay at the heart of Athenian policy: the special character of Athenian sea power. He describes sea power in quasi-mystical terms as the control of one of two earthly spheres and as a power completely unlike anything produced on land: as it stands, because of their command of the seas, there is no power on earth, not even the king of Persia, who can stop the Athenians from going where they might choose (2.62.2-3; contrast Archaeology 1.16: Ionians stymied by Persia).

This passage in Pericles' second Assembly speech stands as a particularly evocative attempt to define the mysterious essence of Athenian dunamis: sea power is a latent strength: the ships can lie motionless in their sheds until needed. So too were Athenian reserve capital and manpower latent sources of strength: Capital lay dormant, most strikingly in the form of the cult statue of Athena Polias, with its removable golden drapery. Athenian men remained passive behind their walls while the enemy invaded Attica. But at the moment a need arose, capital could be conjointed with men and ships to produce extraordinary levels of deployed power and virtually limitless freedom of action. The Athenians could go where they wished, do as they liked because Athens' latent strength could be almost instantaneously materialized as the mobilized fleet cutting through the waves of the Aegean to effect Athens' will upon any object identified by the policymaker. Pericles describes this as a secret, because when regarded from the set of traditional notions about the sort of power produced and delivered by land armies, sea power was nearly incomprehensible. The rapidity and precision with which power could be deployed by the state commanding superior naval forces collapsed conventional assumptions about the sort of power produced and delivered by land armies, sea power was nearly incomprehensible. The rapidity and precision with which power could be deployed by the state commanding superior naval forces collapsed conventional assumptions about the relationship between power, time, and space—just as, in the United States of the 1950s, new technology (notably atomic weapons and jet power) conjoined with the dynamism of postwar capitalism to encourage a sense of limitless opportunities. Athenian sea power narrowed to the disappearing point the gap between desire and fact, between the wish of the state actor that something should occur and the accomplishment of that wish in the material world.

Pericles reminds his listeners is "now like a tyranny" (2.63.2). Pericles is at pains to explain to the Athenians that the possession of the empire entailed grave security risks—but only if they were foolish enough to suppose that their freedom of action was a freedom from imperial responsibilities. The entirely unrealistic and pseudo-altruistic policy advocated by certain apathetic and useless Athenians who wanted to give up the empire would, according to Pericles, put Athens in grave danger (2.63). Pericles does not need to spell out the equation in detail; its outlines are clear enough from what had gone before: without the empire Athens would lose the revenues that had provided for the fortified security of the city and that maintained the navy. This was especially problematic in light of the anticipated reaction of Athens' subjects to a condition in which Athens had stripped itself of imperial possessions. The weight of Athenian tribute and the rigor of Athenian punishment of recalcitrant subjects had eventually brought home the real meaning of lost autonomy to the states of the empire. Tribute and punishment had made their original, self-serving decision to pay Athens to maintain Aegean security appear shortsighted. Resentment at their own past folly led to hatred of Athens (2.63.1, 2.64.5), and this meant that other state-actors would take the Athenian attempt to drop imperial responsibilities as an opportunity to seek revenge against the one-time hegemon. Deprived of the resources by which the conjointed material and conceptual triads were supported, Athens would become weak in fact and would suffer the consequences of the rationally self-serving policies that had created and that maintained her current strength. The realistic policy that led Athens to a position of hegemonic authority carried with it burdens that could not lightly be shed. As twentieth-century leaders have often reminded their own citizens, a great power cannot, in its own interest, afford to shirk its duties in the international arena.

Pericles and Athens in Context

Thucydides' reader is presented with Pericles' two Assembly speeches, with their complementary (material and conceptual) analyses of Athenian power, in the context of other public speakers' attempts to define the nature of power and the structural relations between states. Some of these speeches, delivered by Athens' enemies, make light of Athenian power, whereas others seem to share the Realist assumptions adumbrated by the Archaeology and elucidated by Pericles. The Corecyrean envoys in book 1 (1.32-36), addressing the Athenian Assembly, take a strong Realist line in explaining their state's policy, past and present, and they closely mirror Pericles' and the Archaeology's focus on the essential distinction between sea and land power. By contrast, the Corinthians, in their address to the Athenians opposing the Corecyrean proposal for an Athenian alliance (1.37-43), concentrate on international justice. That is to say, they are unrealistic in supposing that there is (or could be) some general constraint among nations capable of ensuring the non-violent resolution of conflicts. The Corinthians fail to persuade the Athenian audience and the alliance is struck. This was, we are told (1.22.5, 1.55.2), among the key incidents that sparked the war.
Corinthian speech makers return to the fray when they attempt, this time successfully, to persuade the Spartans to lead a war effort against Athens (1.68–71). They point to a key "triadic" material factor, alluding to Sparta's error in allowing the Athenians to refortify their city after the Persian Wars and to build the long walls connecting the city with the harbor complex at Piraeus (1.69.1). But at the heart of the Corinthian argument is a claim that the Athenians are by nature fundamentally unlike the Spartans. The former are ambitious, restless, eager to take risks, and endlessly active; the latter are overcautious, slow to act, and tend to ignore danger even when it is nearby. The Corinthian account of Athenian activity meshes well with Pericles' evocation of Athenian exceptionalism in the Funeral Oration and with his emphasis on the unique quality of sea power in the second Assembly speech. But the Corinthians seem to miss the point by attributing the Athenians' hyperactivity solely to their national character, rather than to their rational pursuit of a Realist policy over time. This approach casts the war into the moralistic terms of a conflict between national characters, and blurs the focus on state-actors and their respective sources of power. The strong Realist will simply scoff at the Corinthians' "error"—but what if Corinthians and other Greeks actually acted upon their moral convictions?

The Corinthian position is quickly challenged by the Athenian envoys who happened to be in Sparta on other business and were allowed (in Thucydides' text, anyway) to respond to the Corinthians' charges (1.73–78). Thucydides states that the Athenian envoys were concerned to explain to the assembled Peloponnesians the extent of Athenian dunameis (1.72.1) in hopes of preventing a hasty decision for war. The speech itself is a model of strong Realist analysis. The envoys claim that when states aggrandize themselves and seek arke they are simply acting according to human nature. Nor is the Athenian empire anything new or surprising: it is simply a manifestation of the well-known principle that the weak must submit to the strong—that is, the general principle established in the Archaeology. If Athens is occasionally high-handed in its dealings with its allies, this is to be expected; what people forget is that Athens is more scrupulous in its relations with imperial subjects than it needs to be (in light of the power inequity) and indeed more scrupulous than are other imperial powers toward those they control.

The language of human nature and the inevitability of the rule of the strong over the weak dramatically foreshadows the language used by another set of Athenian envoys much later in Thucydides' history: the anonymous speakers who carry on a policy dialogue with the hapless rulers of the Melians. This helps explain why the Athenians must set such narrow rules on the debate: the weaker state's self-interest is no longer transparently compatible with that of the imperial power. The Melians cannot come up with a Realist reply to the Athenians, but the level of Melian physical resistance to annexation (quite considerable as it turns out: 5.114–116) is the limiting factor to the Athenians' ability to freely extend their own power. Melian resistance to Athens in word and deed points directly to the difficulties Athens can expect to experience when it comes to attempting to annex the much larger and more distant island of Sicily (books 6–7).

To return to the debate at Sparta: the Peloponnesians reject the realistic policies advocated by the Athenian envoys at Sparta and vote for war. A somewhat different Realist argument is subsequently made by King Archidamus in addressing the Spartan citizen Assembly (1.80–85). Like Pericles, Archidamus focuses on the difficulties the Spartans will encounter in conducting the war due to their lack of material resources. Rejecting realistic Archidamus, the Spartans embrace a decision to confront Athens head on. The Peloponnesian and Spartan decisions seem to be precipitated on the one hand by the Corinthian reading of Athenian anti-Peloponnesian activity as an outgrowth of their innate natural character, and on the other by the Spartan ephor Sthenelaides' laconic speech to the effect that the Athenians must be punished as international wrongdoers (1.86). Much more may be going on behind the scenes, of course—we might choose to put less emphasis on Corinthian rhetoric about national character and considerably more weight on the thinly disguised Corinthian threat to secede from the Peloponnesian League and join Athens (1.71.4). In this case we could make the Spartan decision for hot war an outcome of a realistic assessment that their alliance (and thus the basis of their military superiority) could not survive an extended cold war.

On the whole, however, it seems to me that 1.1–2.64 Thucydides leads his reader to draw a sharp contrast between Athens, a consummately powerful unitary state-actor guided by the clear realistic vision and power-centered foreign policy of Pericles, and the ill-prepared Peloponnesian confederation, which lacked both the material prerequisites of true power and the stable leadership capable of identifying those resources in the first place. According to the premises established by Thucydides Theoretikos, Athens was set to win the war. But then comes section
2.65: a laudatory summary of Periclean policy, the announcement that Athens in fact had lost the war, and the statement of Thucydides' opinion that Athens lost the war because Pericles' inferior successors did not stick to his policy with regard to sea power and empire, and that they gave away Athenian chances by looking to a good state. Section 2.65 is, in their private good rather than to the common good of the state. Section 2.65 is, in the reading I offer here, the watershed, the point at which the theses developed by Theoretikos are summed up and the long period of Athenian decline from the Periclean acme traced by Histor is first anticipated.

At the beginning of 2.65, having explained that Pericles' second Assembly speech was meant to staunch the Athenians' anger at Pericles and to turn their thoughts away from their present miseries, Thucydides makes a particularly telling comment. With respect to state policy (demosiai), the Athenians accepted Pericles' words: they did not send a peace embassy to Sparta and they began to prosecute the war with renewed vigor. But with respect to their interests as private individuals (idiai) they still felt aggrieved (2.65.1). Taken as individuals, "they" are further broken out by Thucydides into classes: the ordinary people, the demos, were angry since they had lost what little they had; the powerful elite (dunatoi) had lost their landed estates in the country. Thus the potentially dangerous internal divisions signaled in the Funeral Oration have come back to haunt us. Yet as long as Pericles lived, this tendency of the Athenians to fragment into private interest-oriented classes was restrained or at least masked. This is underlined by the resumed narrative: Pericles was reelected general because the Athenians knew he was the best man in the polis for dealing with state interests (2.65.2-4). In this general Athenian opinion our author heartily concurs: Under Pericles and during the post-Periclean leaders as the explanation of what went wrong and why Athens eventually lost. But I do not think that Thucydides' text would have its enduring value if this rather simplistic explanation for Athenian failure really undergirded the subsequent historical narrative. Nor does 2.65 actually anticipate the rest of the post-Periclean leaders. Theoretikos' confident prediction of victory on the basis of Pericles' Realist approach meshes well with Histor's explanation of divisive selfishness among the Athenians as a whole against the backdrop of books 6 and 7. At 2.65, we have been pointed out by more than one commentator that Thucydides' description at 2.65 of what went wrong in Sicily (i.e., a failure by the Athenians back home to adequately reinforce their expeditionary forces rather than a misestimation of the nature of the opposition they would face in Sicily [2.65.11-12]) is not borne out by the narrative of books 6 and 7. At 2.65, we might say, Histor concedes too much ground to Theoretikos.

Moreover, upon reflection, the unstinting praise of Pericles at 2.65 seems somewhat misplaced. The Funeral Oration shows that Pericles understood the complexity of the Athenian social and governmental situation. One might therefore suggest that, for a man repeatedly lauded for his insight and his forethought, Pericles was remarkably blind to the conjoint factors of the structure of internal Athenian politics and his own mortality. If "a Pericles" was the indispensable precondition for rational policymaking because Athens was a crypto-monarchy, why did its leader make no provision for his own successor? The reader begins to suspect that either (1) Pericles was inadequately insightful about the importance of his own role, or (2) he was selfishly uninterested in Athens' fate after his death, or (3) the description of Athens as a crypto-monarchy is overdrawn.

Happily for Thucydides' reputation, the value of his work is not actually summed
up by section 2.65. Rather than simply aberrant selfishness on the part of a few bad leaders, the long narrative following 2.65 suggests that there were deep structural problems associated with decision-making (and thus policy formation) in the Athenian demokratia. Pericles' unique leadership qualities may have successfully masked those structural problems for a time. But a Realist analysis that requires Periclean-style leadership as a dependable norm, as a predictable constant of the policy environment, will be worse than useless in the real world in which Pericles is mortal and unable to designate a successor. Rather than simply playing out the results of an unexpected selfishness on the part of a few bad men, Histot's narrative demonstrates the weakness of any theory of power that focuses uniquely on unitary state-actors and ignores internal social forces, the complexities of domestic politics, and "irrational" attachment to a transnational set of norms and values.

A full exposition of how the narrative following 2.65 complicates the strong Realist's vision of Athens as a unitary state-actor, behaving rationally to further its hegemonic interests in a world of similarly motivated state-actors, would much exceed the limits of this chapter. Here I offer just one example of how the Realist calculus established by Theoretikos becomes inextricably tangled in Histot's unfolding analysis of Athenian internal politics and in issues of social diversity, norms, and values.

Mytilenean Debate

In the fourth year of the war (428 B.C.) the great polis of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos declared itself independent of Athenian control, thus confirming Pericles' comment about the attitudes of subject states and fulfilling a prediction about revolts within Athens' empire made by the Corinthian envoys to Athens in the debate over Corcyra.34 Thucydides points out that the revolt of Mytilene occurred at a difficult time for Athens: the city was suffering from plague and "from the war, which had only just now reached its full strength" (3.3.1). Beset by these problems, most Athenians were reluctant to acknowledge the truth of the report (3.3.1). But eventually the danger of the situation intruded on the Athenian consciousness and a fleet was sent to besiege Mytilene. The Mytileneans were soon shut up behind their city walls. Hard-pressed by an efficient Athenian siege and betrayed in their hopes of reinforcements from Sparta, they ran low on food. The aristocratic leaders of the revolt consequently armed the Mytilenean lower classes in anticipation of a battle. Yet once armed, the demos of Mytilene failed to support the insurrection. Faced by insurrection and the specter of civil war, the leaders of Mytilene hurriedly surrendered (3.28). The crisis over, the Athenian Assembly set about deciding who had been responsible for the revolt and who should be punished.

The material factors detailed by Theoretikos played key roles in the Athenian suppression of the revolt: Athenian capital reserves and sea power proved fully capable of overwhelming or scaring off all opposition, whether it was a small Peloponnesian fleet in the Aegean or the army of the revolting Mytileneans. But irrational emotions, confused Athenian perceptions regarding the wellsprings of their own power, and stark domestic social divisions were made manifest in the ensuing debate over the fate of Mytilene.

Thucydides' account convinces his reader that, although Athenian dunamis had stood the test, suppressing the revolt of Mytilene consumed considerable Athenian time, effort, and cash. The revolt coincided with a Spartan naval expedition to Ionia (3.29–33). Although the Spartan admiral with his small fleet accomplished little in military terms, he threw a bad scare into the Athenians and he brutally murdered a number of captives (3.32.1). The mood of the Assembly was not charitable: In a fit of anger the Athenians voted to treat the population of Mytilene as a single, unitary entity (i.e., to treat Mytilene judicially as a state-actor). They ordered their general on Lesbos to kill all adult male Mytileneans and to sell the rest of the polis' population into slavery (3.36.1–3). A trireme was dispatched to Lesbos carrying the grim instructions. But very quickly, while the ship was still en route, Athenian anger was replaced by a sense of remorse and "it became clear" that "most of the citizens" wanted a chance to reconsider their action (3.36.5).

A second Assembly was hastily called and we are told that several speeches were given on either side of the issue. Thucydides presents two orations that, he says, represent the most starkly opposed positions (3.49.1). The first of the pair is spoken by Cleon, son of Kleainetos, the citizen who had been "victorious" (3.36.6) in advocating the general punishment at the first Assembly. Thucydides describes Cleon as "the most violent of the citizens [of Athens] and by far the best trusted by the demos" (3.36.6). Cleon's speech, which opposes any amelioration of the sentence against the Mytileneans, is attacked (3.41) by a certain Diodotus, the son of Eukrates, about whom we are told nothing other than that he had also spoken against Cleon at the previous meeting. The two speeches are a matched pair and share several themes; both offer a substantial "meta-rhetoric" (i.e., a rhetorical discussion of the nature of public deliberation), and both purport to explain the proper foundations of state policy. Together they offer Thucydides' reader her first detailed insight into the environment and the tenor of post-Periclean democratic politics and policymaking. Although, in line with the analysis of 2.65, the self-interest of Athenian politicians is a key factor, the Mytilenean Debate as a whole suggests that self-interested behavior of politicians was only one factor in a much more complicated social and political situation.

Cleon begins his speech with an implicit rejection of one of Pericles' points in the Funeral Oration: he had often noticed that a demokratia is incapable of running an empire (3.37.1). Why is this? Because the Athenians fail to see that their empire really is a tyranny (not just "like a tyranny," per Pericles), and because of their indecisiveness (3.37.2). The root of the problem is overclever public speech makers. Athens has no need for these men; indeed, ignorance (anathisia) mixed with moderate sobriety is more beneficial [to the polis] than cleverness mixed with insubordination. Ordinary men, when compared with the more gifted, actually administer poleis better. For the latter [the
Thus, if there must be politicians, Cleon suggests that they should act and speak more like ordinary Athenians. But as it is, he goes on to say, instead of politicians acting like ordinary citizens, the ordinary folk all wish that they could be clever speakers themselves. Lacking actual oratorical attainments, they fancy themselves connoisseurs of oratory (3.37.6–7). As a result, debate causes delay, which is to the advantage of wrongdoers. Instead of wasting their time listening to speeches and then endlessly changing their minds about policy, the Athenians would do better to act (that is, vote on policy issues) in the heat of righteous anger and then stick by those decisions (3.38.1).

Cleon implies that there can be no good reason for opposing his own policy of general punishment, of treating Mytilene judicially as a unitary state-agent rather than as a diverse society. He sets up a narrow and exclusionary framework to explain the motives of those Athenians who spoke against his proposal: either they hoped to make a public display of their rhetorical powers or they had been bribed (to plēthos). In either case, Cleon reminds his audience, in the end Cleon urges his listeners to take the easy path of relying on their visceral emotions when making decisions. Thucydides’ reader, struggling with the complex text, is not offered such an easy road to right judgment.

Cleon’s meta-rhetoric results in his claim that political speech is an impediment to action and that strong-felt emotion is a more appropriate wellspring of policy than public debate. Diodotus, on the other hand, stoutly defends reiterated public discussion of especially important affairs. Indeed, he says, anger and overquickness are the two greatest impediments to good policy (euboulia: 3.42.1).

But if someone argues that speeches (logoi) are not teachers in regard to affairs (pragmata) either he is a fool or he is on the lookout for some private (idiai) advantage. He is a fool if he supposes that it is possible to consider the uncertain future by some other means; he is seeking his own advantage if he hopes to propose some shameful thing, and is unable to speak well or convincingly regarding it, yet by slander ing well is able to strike fear into both the opposing speakers and the listeners. (3.42.2)

Here, Diodotus reveals the obvious flaw in Cleon’s anti-public speech meta-rhetoric: Cleon’s attack on clever speech is embedded in a clever speech, and so demonstrates the impossibility of communicating meaning except through the medium of words. Like Cleon, Diodotus attributes to his opponents an illegitimate private interest in personal gain and he claims that those private interests will endanger the state. But having suggested that Cleon is either a fool or is out for personal advantage, Diodotus then attacks the rhetorical practice of claiming that one’s enemies place personal gain over the public good (3.42.3–6). It would be much better, Diodotus goes on to say, if the Athenians would abandon their habit of dishonoring those who lose public debates. If they quit punishing losers of oratorical contests, then orators would speak their minds honestly, rather than advocating policies they did not believe in with an eye toward gaining the praise of the many (to plēthos). But, he continues, as it is, we do just the opposite, and because speakers have to work under constant suspicion of being bribe-takers, the polis loses the benefit of good advice. Evil and goodwilled speakers alike are forced to lie and the polis is the only entity for whose good it is impossible for a citizen to work openly (3.43.1–3).

Although the appeal to the public good initially recalls Pericles, Diodotus’ meta-rhetoric is almost as muddled as Cleon’s: he accuses Cleon of self-interest, and in the next breath points out how destructive the rhetorical practice of making such accusations is to the political practice of decision-making. Indeed, he claims that slanderous rhetoric is specifically destructive in that all speakers, even goodwilled men (like himself) are made into liars. In sum Diodotus willfully embraces the well-known “Cretan Liar” paradox: Since Diodotus is an orator and all orators are liars, the truth he claims to teach through speech is thoroughly compromised and his defense of the value of public discussion becomes paradoxical: What public good can result from reiterated debates among liars? Moreover, his...
comment on the impossibility of doing good openly for the polis explicitly contra-
dicts Pericles’ Funeral Oration encomium of Athenian public-spiritedness. If public
speakers are liars and unable to do good for the state in any overt way, how are we to
take his next statement (meant to refute Cleon’s claim that ordinary, ignorant citi-
zens are good administrators)? It is necessary, he says, that we speakers look a little
bit further ahead than the rest of you citizens who just glance things over in a super-
ficial manner (3.43.4). What techniques will the speaker use to gauge the likely
course of future events? How will the results of this forethought be translated into
good state policy in a democracy, given the necessity of public mendacity? Why
should listeners believe that an acknowledged liar is sincere when he claims to seek
the public good rather than private advantage? Diodotus does not say, but then,
given his argument about the impossibility of doing good openly, he simply can’t.

The reader of these convoluted meta-rhetorical arguments may opine that nei-
ther Cleon’s claims for policymaking by ordinary men nor Diodotus’ claims for
leadership of the democracy by foresighted public speakers is particularly con-
vincing. Our sense of unease is not assuaged by their respective arguments regard-
ning the proper basis for policy. Both speakers appear at first to be Realists: they
agree that the main determinant in the Assembly’s decision must be Athens’ impe-
rial interests and each claims that his policies will best serve Athenian interests.
Each orator acknowledges the fact that Athens’ imperial income derives from pros-
perous cities, a very salient point given the importance of capital in the “material
triumph.” Cleon comes up with a tortuous argument for linking the utter destruction
of Mytilene with imperial prosperity (3.39.7–8) but the economic point clearly
favors the case for leniency: dead men don’t pay tribute. Yet Diodotus mentions
the negative economic consequences of Cleon’s policy only in passing (3.46.3).
Rather than work through the benefit/loss equation with specific reference to
Mytilene, both Cleon and Diodotus emphasize that the issue at hand has more to
do with the future than the present and with the empire in general rather than the
polis of Mytilene in particular (3.40.7, 3.44.3, 3.48.2). They are theorists of power
before being policymakers. They agree that the treatment of Mytilene will be a test
case for what happens to insurgents, and thus the issue is not the material and
particular results of exterminating a great and prosperous city, but rather how Athe-
nian harshness or leniency will be perceived by the other subject states. Each, in
short, claims theoretical insight and that policy should be made on the basis of his
theory of human behavior; neither makes any serious use of actual Greek history.

The issue thus becomes group psychology rather than the “material or historical
facts of the matter”—indeed, neither speaker suggests that facts matter very much.
And as a result, the two contestants must base their arguments on appeals to human
nature, to assumptions about what “men or states are likely to do in a given situa-
ton.” Human nature (phusis) is a major issue for Thucydides. But how, according to
these Athenian public speakers, is one to know human nature? Despite his stated
confidence in ordinary citizens as decision-makers, Cleon implies that the everyday
experiences of the men in his audience are not an adequate basis for making judg-
ments about international relations (3.37.2), whereas Diodotus—who believes that
only politicians with special insight into affairs can come up with good public policy—
claims (45.2–3, 45.6) that the collective behavior of poleis closely mimics the pri-
vate behavior of individuals. Cleon claims that people only revolt when they have
suffered some form of violence (3.39.2). And hence he is able to argue that it would
be improper to forgive the Mytileneans on the grounds that “it is human nature to do
wrong” (3.40.1). Diodotus disagrees: it is in fact the natural tendency of both indi-
viduals and poleis to do wrong (3.45.3). Yet for Diodotus it is not only suffering
violence that leads people to revolt, but a wide variety of factors: poverty, wealth,
hope, chance, and emotion of various sorts (3.45.4–6). Once again, neither offers
any historical examples to buttress his opinion.

If they disagree on the wellsprings of human perversity, nor do the two speak-
ers agree on what factors will successfully deter the tendency of people to do
wrong (i.e., the tendency of subjects to resist their hegemon). For Cleon, it is a
universal truth that people despise kindness but respect harsh treatment (3.39.5).
Wrong, according to Diodotus: the harshest treatment is the death sentence, and
that has not prevented people from doing wrong in the past. To support this claim,
Diodotus develops a quasi-historical argument: It “seems probable” that long ago
(3.45.3) sentences for wrongdoing were less strict than they are now, and that they
were gradually made harsher in a vain attempt at deterrence. He cites no authority
for this opinion, and it is not at all clear that it would fit what most Athenians
thought they knew about their own past history.34 But it did fit his argument nicely,
and rhetorical expediency, not historical validity, is obviously the point.

Cleon’s position on the value of a deterrent example is part and parcel of his
general rule that holding an empire is a matter of raw strength rather than goodwill
(eunoeia: 3.37.2). He therefore refuses to take into cognizance the political impli-
cations of social distinctions between Mytileneans: the Athenians must not say
that it was “the few” (hoi oligoi) who were the cause of the revolt and let the
Mytilenean démos go free; the few and the many were all equally guilty of wrong-
ing us (3.39.6). Diodotus, on the other hand, urges that punishment be meted out
individually, and to as few individuals as possible (3.46.3). Rather surprisingly, in
light of his prior Realist linkage of individual and state behavior, he focuses on
internal social distinctions within poleis. He notes that as matters now stand, in
every polis of the empire the démos (meaning the lower classes) is well-disposed
(eunoeus) toward Athens. As a result, if in some allied town hoi oligoi initiate a
revolt, they cannot count on the support of the démos, and so you (Athenians)
have to pléthos (the many) as an ally (3.47.2). Obviously if the Athenians treat
Mytilene juridically as a state-actor, that is, punish démos and oligoi identically,
they will lose this valuable ally. Notably, both speakers use the term “démos” in its
“sociological” or “factional” sense (“lower class” not “citizenry”), and thus they re-
veal what Pericles’ Funeral Oration attempts to conceal—the “fact” (from a
Thucydidean perspective) that démokratia was the self-interested rule of a socially
defined faction rather than the rule of all citizens by all citizens. But Diodotus
wants to use this sociological fact pragmatically in Athens' interest; Cleon, whom Thucydides has told us is the darling of the Athenian démos, and whose strongly egalitarian sentiments might be expected to appeal to poorer Athenians, sees no purpose in encouraging a "transnational" lower-class sociopolitical solidarity that would cut across the nationalist sentiments of polis populations.

The two speakers also differ on the question of whether justice has anything to do with the decision. Cleon pretends it does. His conglomerate argument switches back and forth from the language of law and right to that of necessity and advantage: the Athenian empire is a tyranny, he claims, and whether it is just or unjust is irrelevant (3.37.2, 3.40.4); yet by opposing this tyranny the Mytileneans have acted terribly unjustly and so they deserve the general punishment demanded by righteous anger. Diodotus is quick to jump on Cleon's inconsistency. This is not jury trial, but a policy debate, not a case in which justice and national interest go hand in hand, but one in which advantage alone deserves a hearing. Whether guilty or not the Mytileneans are more of a benefit to Athens alive than dead, and that should be the end of it (3.44.1–4, 3.47.5).36

So what is the audience—either the original audience of assemblymen or Thucydides' audience of readers—to make of all of this? The contestants in the Mytilenean Debate pose several questions that our reading of sections 1.1–2.64, in light of the assessment of Pericles and his successors at 2.65, has taught us are vitally important: Can a post-Periclean democracy run an empire? What is the relationship between deployment of power in the international arena, domestic politics, social diversity, and Panhellenic norms? What is the proper role of politicians and public debate in the democratic state? What is the relationship between an individual speaker's personal interests and the public interest? How can one determine if there is some discontinuity between public and private interests, and what should be done about it? Can prudent (in this case, restrained) policy and decisive action be reconciled? What is the appropriate basis for a future-oriented policy? How is foresight cultivated?

Arguably, the workability of democracy and the success of Athens as a state-actor depends on having the answers to these questions. Yet neither the speech of Cleon or that of Diodotus gives a convincing answer to any of them. The reader is surely led to prefer Diodotus' position, by the clearly prejudicial introduction to Cleon as "most violent and most influential" of the public speakers, by the brutality of the policy Cleon advocates, and perhaps by the relatively greater degree of rational realism in Diodotus' arguments. Diodotus' approach of exploiting social distinctions within the allied states might be made congruent with the logic developed in the Archaeology by assuming that Diodotus recognized that social divisions made for weakness in communities; Athens might have an easier time ruling weaker subjects. But his rhetoric is a long way from the confident integration of public speech and foreign policy that characterized Thucydides' portrayal of Pericles, and the reader has become very aware that there are deep social divisions in Athens, as well as in the subject states. She is not likely to be sanguine about the

chances of the cryptic and necessarily mendacious style of leadership that Diodotus offers his audience and she may not be surprised to find that Diodotus disappears from Thucydides' text after the debate. The unsatisfactory nature of the two speeches is reflected in the final decision: Diodotus prevailed (3.49.1) but, Thucydides points out, the vote was very close.37

The complexities entailed by the social diversity and political practices that underpinned the polis as a state-actor are front and center in the Mytilenean Debate. There is no doubt that the division between mass and elite, démos and dunatos, in Athens and in the poleis Athens must deal with is of key significance both for Athenian internal politics and for Athenian international relations. Yet neither Cleon nor Diodotus offers a coherent vision of the relationship between public speech, national policy action, and the material world or of the relationship between state-actor and polis society. And without a coherent vision, it is hard to imagine that Athens will consistently make the right choices on difficult matters of policy.

Conclusions

It will be a long road from the confused rhetoric of the Mytilenean Debate to the collapse of Athenian power after the Sicilian disaster and then to the final collapse of 404. As in the case of the revolt of Mytilene, Athens' Sicilian policy and the long endgame of the Ionian War (410–404 B.C.—not recorded in Thucydides' text, but well known to him and anticipated in his narrative) will hang on the intertwining of material factors (ships, walls, and money) with the problematic factors of democratic politics, social diversity, and Panhellenic values. But by the end of book 3 of the history, the reader has already begun to grasp a basic lesson: the confident, strong Realist theory developed by Theoretikos in 1.1–2.64 is inadequate to explain what really happens to states in conflict, and a fortiori inadequate to explain the behavior of states that are democratic in fact as well as in name. He who would truly understand why great affairs of the past played out as they did, or how they might play out in the future, must move beyond the tidy theory of unitary, self-interested state-actors. He must, Histor suggests, look to the world of social relations and politics, the world of speech and reception, of human interests that are hopelessly tangled up with competing loyalties to traditional Greek norms, to the polis, to various social groups, to individual selves. Histor does not actually refute the Realist theses presented by Theoretikos. But he shows us that a knowledge of theoretical principles animating states will only be useful when that knowledge is tempered by the close attention to human complexity that comes from learning to think historically.

How might the reading of Thucydides offered here be brought into a fruitful engagement with mid-twentieth-century history? I do not actually suppose that there is a lot to be gained by a direct one-to-one comparison of historical individuals or specific events. Roberts notes that "Gerald Johnson writing in the New Republic in 1961 identified Cleon with Joseph McCarthy and the impeachment of
Alcibiades [in 415 B.C.] as the work of a House Committee on un-Athenian activities.\footnote{38} Although Johnson’s sort of comparison seems to me tendentious, perhaps comparisons drawn rather more broadly may help us to think through both historical periods. I must, however, admit myself to be well out of my professional depth when dealing with the cold war era. The reader must take what follows as provisional and as an invitation to academic colleagues with the appropriate expertise to test and revise the following hypothesis: The citizenry of the United States in the 1950s, I would posit, found itself in a position at least superficially analogous to that of the Athenian citizenry on the threshold of the Peloponnesian War. Like Athens, the United States was then a young, powerful, democratic state with a war-tested political and military leadership—\textit{as well as being a diverse society held together by a national self-identity strongly influenced by the recent experience of having led a coalition of free states to a dramatic victory against a nightmarish common enemy (Persia, Axis)}. Like pro-Peloponnesian War Athens, the post–World War II United States enjoyed a remarkably strong “triadic” base: vast national wealth and a secure hegemony, capacity to project its power (in the case of the United States, by air as well as by sea and potentially through the instrumentality of atomic weapons). Moreover, in the relative geographic security of its own hemisphere, the United States approximated the impregnable island nation of Pericles’ dreams (1.143.5). Finally, the exacerbation of a rivalry with another hegemonic power under the leadership of a one-time ally (Peloponnesian League/Soviet bloc) encouraged Athenians and Americans to think in starkly bipolar terms. Thus, per the article by Robert Campbell with which this chapter began, there was a strong and perhaps understandable tendency for cold war-era American readers of Thucydides to identify with the powerful vision of Periclean Athens offered by “Thucydides Theoretikos” in 1.1–2.64.

I have argued that there are, however, two identifiable “voices” in Thucydides’ text: a historical as well as a theoretical voice.\footnote{39} Theoretikos’ optimism regarding potential human understanding of state behavior is complicated by Histor’s narrative, which shows that a democracy-as-hegemon may be unstable under extreme pressure and might even collapse under the weight of its attempt to square the ideal of democratic rule by public discourse at home with self-interested, “tyrannical” \textit{rule abroad}. Some modern political analysts (one thinks of George Kennan) may have supposed that the answer to what we might call “the Thucydides dilemma” of squaring democracy and hegemony is implied in Diodotus’ vision of a wise but secretive and even publicly mendacious leadership: On this reasoning, a Realist policy elite must find ways to avoid allowing open, public, democratic deliberation from affecting major policy decisions, especially in the sphere of international relations. Such analysts may embrace some version of “democratic elitism” or advance the “end of ideology” arguments that were particularly prevalent in the aftermath of the Korean War.\footnote{39} I have argued here that Thucydides, read “in the round,” offers little true comfort for such positions. He encourages the reader to take a critical view of democracy and ideology but he also encourages suspicion of elite leadership and raises doubts about the human capacity to transcend ideology or to operate outside a set of “irrational” values and norms.

Thucydides’ Athenians ironically (in light of the Athenian celebration of their own freedom of speech) feel most at liberty to talk the language of strong Realism when audiences are oligarchs (e.g., the Athenian spokesmen at Sparta in book I and the envoys at Melos in book 5). So too the cold war American policy elite sometimes seemed to envy the freedom from democratic oversight—from political interference, from naive idealism, from extraneous, “unrealistic, irrational” factors like social or international justice—that they perhaps imagined was enjoyed by their policymaking counterparts in totalitarian societies. Accordingly, there have been many efforts to establish buffers between the policymaking environment and public deliberations, to insulate American policymakers from the messy, contradictory ideals of American society and the complexities of American democratic politics.\footnote{41} To the extent that the American policy elites have succeeded in achieving insulation and turning away from the complexity of history to the antisepic world of theory, they have blinded themselves to the meaning of important, if untidy, realities. It is not, on these terms, so surprising that American policymakers so badly misunderstood the potential role of revolutionary China in what they fondly imagined to be a bipolar international regime. Nor that the Korean War was soon followed by the even more disastrous war in Southeast Asia. Nor that the economic power and political coherence of the Soviet empire was so seriously overestimated. In retrospect, and in the light of history, it now seems clear enough that China was likely to react violently to the American move toward the Yalu River and unlikely to remain happily within the Soviet “sphere”; that leaders in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand had local agendas and were not simple “dominoes” in the great game; that the Soviet Union was incapable of maintaining indefinitely a credible pose as a unitary state-actor in the face of deep-rooted social and political contradictions. Perhaps an attentive student of Thucydides Histor, one who did not demand that a complex text tell only one simple story and offer one simple lesson, would have been more sensitive to these matters than were some American cold war analysts and policymakers.

It is tempting, therefore, to imagine that a more careful attention to Thucydides Histor would have served as a corrective by focusing American analysts’ attention on the dangerous contradictions and unstable complexities inherent in diverse societies like China and the Soviet Union, especially given that those societies pretended to be democracies, ruled by “the people.” But reading Thucydides more carefully is no panacea. A key weakness of American policy in Korea resulted from the excessive focus on Russia and the European sphere and a concomitant failure to take proper account of China as a (potentially at least) independent power with a complex history that would affect both its hegemonic ambitions and its security concerns. Similarly, the Athenian focus on Sparta and the Greek world may have blinded Athenian policymakers to the financial and diplomatic role that Persia might play in an escalating conflict. In book 1, Thucydides establishes a
strictly bipolar frame for the war that is to come (esp. 1.1.1). On the basis of my two-voice thesis we might expect that this interpretive straitjacket would engage the critical attention of Histor. Yet it is not clear that it ever did. W.R. Connor notes that the crumbling of the original bipolar framework is evident (inter alia) in the increasingly hectic narrative of book 8.42 Now, book 8 gives the impression of being a draft and it is here that the text abruptly ends. Would Thucydides have pulled it all together in a revised draft and a completed text? Or had the hypertrophy of historical complexity so overbalanced the initial theoretical order that the entire project of writing history in two voices lost its coherence and simply could not be sustained?

The sort of gross misestimation of other states’ strengths and intentions that characterized American policymaking in the cold war era is hardly unique in human history and there is no good reason to suppose that reading Thucydides more carefully will immunize us against error. Few Greeks, for example, seem to have grasped how weak Sparta actually was in the decades after the surrender of Athens in 404.43 Sparta’s catastrophic collapse following the loss of the battle of Leuctra in 371 seems to have come as a real shock to many contemporaries. Among them was the historian Xenophon, who, as self-appointed continuator of Thucydides’ history, had ample opportunity to absorb whatever lessons the master had to teach. Thucydides’ text remains a “possession,” and continues to tantalize those “who wish to understand clearly the events that happened in the past and that (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future” (1.22). But perhaps his most cogent lesson is the necessity of intellectual humility in the face of the uncertainties, peculiarities, contingencies, and idiosyncrasies that will continue to challenge theorists, historians, and policymakers alike.

Notes


3. It is important to keep in mind that even if we limit ourselves to Greece, Thucydides says its one possible starting point for the tradition. One might, for example, start with Homer. Thucydides uses of himself. They are used here as convenient, rather than precise, ways to distinguish between the “strong Realist” and “historical” voices in the text.


5. Michael W. Doyle, “Thucydidean Realism,” Review of International Studies 16 (1990): 223–37; “Thucydides: A Realist?” in Lebow and Strauss, eds., Hegemonic Rivalry, 169–88. Doyle rejects the notion that Thucydides is either a “fundamentalist Realist” (one who sees all human behavior as characterized by an interest-based drive for power), or a “structuralist Realist” (one who assumes that all state actors are functionally similar units, among which the most consistently rationally self-interested and power seeking will flourish). The burden of this chapter is to elaborate upon Doyle’s thesis of Thucydides as “a Minimalist, but neither a Fundamentalist nor a Structuralist,” along the lines suggested by Connor, Thucydides—that is, by paying close attention to how literary qualities interact with substantive content to “mislead” and ultimately to educate the reader.

6. Caveat lector: “Theoretikos” and “Histor” are my own labels; they are not terms that Thucydides uses of himself. They are used here as convenient, rather than precise, ways to distinguish between the “strong Realist” and “historical” voices in the text.


13. Here I am using the term “security” to mean “defense of key urban assets and population from enemy attack.” This is, of course, a much more limited sense of the term “security” than that often used by modern international relations theorists.

14. Minos’ thalassocracy is something of a deus ex machina in that Thucydides never tells us where Minos got the funds to build his navy. Was he a successful pirate who became a legitimate ruler? Or, as Charles Pazdernik suggests (in an unpublished paper, “Thucydides on Money”), should we imagine on the parallel of Pelops (1.9.2) that Minos inherited wealth from ancestral sources in the (already developed) East?

15. Thucydides’ developmental scheme seems limited to the Greek world; it does not explain the rise of Persia—which was long an entirely land-based power. That Persia was a great archai is explicitly acknowledged in the Archaeology: its strength was a limiting factor in the growth of the power of the Ionians after they had become a sea power: 1.16. It is only later that Darius, with the aid of the Phoenician navy, conquered the Aegean islands: ibid. Cf. below.


18. N. Loraux, “Thucydides et la sedition dans les mots,” Quaderni di Storia 12 (1986), 95–134, points out the importance of the theme of the poleis as existing in a more or less constant state of civil conflict.

19. I recently heard a thirdhand story of an elderly classicist who told his students, “I have taught Thucydides for 30 years; I have read the text through 30 times and each time I hope that this time Athens will win.” This “Foofolate” (the term is used by contemporary folklorists for stories told about “a friend of a friend”) nicely captures the tensions that the text encourages.


22. There is a huge secondary literature on the relationship between the speeches in Thucydides’ text and the speeches actually delivered, centered on the ambiguous language of 1.22.1. See, recently, Harvey Yunis, Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 29–86, arguing, with special reference to the speeches of Pericles, that the speeches in the text are plausible fictions, retaining the speaker’s intention but otherwise created from whole cloth by Thucydides.

23. The policy of refusing battle was perhaps politically more difficult for Pericles to achieve than Thucydides leads us to suppose: Ober, Athenian Revolution, 72–85.


25. The following several paragraphs, on the Funeral Oration, are adapted from Ober, Thucydides’ Criticism of Democratic Knowledge.

26. E.g., 2.43.1. Cf. also 2.40.1, 2.42.2.


reflects the Federalists' fear that the "mob" would unduly influence policymaking by elites; their fears were in part stimulated by their reading of Athenian history in the Peloponnesian War era (directly or indirectly based on Thucydides): Roberts, *Athens on Trial*, 179–93.
