

Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics

Thucydides and the invention of political science

Version 1.0

November 2005

Josiah Ober

Princeton University

Abstract: Thucydides self-consciously invented a new form of inquiry, which can reasonably be called “social and political science.” His intellectual goal was a new understanding of power and its relationship to human agency and the deep structures of human society. His understanding of agency and structure is in some ways reminiscent of the reflexivity theory developed by Anthony Giddens.

© Josiah Ober. [jober@princeton.edu](mailto:jober@princeton.edu)

It is commonly supposed that Thucydides was, first and foremost, a historian and that his claim to fame lies in his work as a historiographical innovator. According to this view, Thucydides took up the nascent prose genre of history from earlier writers, including Hellanicus and Herodotus, and transformed it into a rigorous and “scientific” discipline. Herodotus (1.1) had stated that the purpose of his *Histories* was the preservation of memory, “so that things done by men not be forgotten in time, and that great and remarkable deeds... not lose their glory.”<sup>1</sup> Like Herodotus, Thucydides was intensely aware of his own role, as a writer, in the cultural process of preserving memory of the past and he followed Herodotus in presenting a sequential narrative of remarkable past events. The standard view of Thucydides as a historian has much to recommend it. He certainly regarded earlier Greek practitioners of self-conscious history-writing as rivals: Like the early red-figure vase painter Euthymides, who wrote on a signed masterpiece amphora “As never Euphronios,” by censuring Hellanicus by name for his inaccuracy in regard to dates (1.97) and Herodotus by implication for factual errors, Thucydides situated his work in a competitive relationship with that of earlier historians.<sup>2</sup> But the vase painters Euthymides and Euphronios were participants in what both would presumably have recognized as a single artistic genre, a rule-bounded enterprise in which bold innovation was possible but which also recognized and respected clear generic guidelines.<sup>3</sup> It is not so clear that Thucydides would have accepted that he was working in just the same generic enterprise as Herodotus – he did not describe his text as *historiai*.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is not clear that the rules structuring fifth-century prose writing were nearly as clearly defined as were, e.g. vase painting styles or poetic forms. The essential point is that Thucydides’ text seems clearly to break with, as well as to build upon, the texts written by the Greek founders of the enterprise of writing history.

#### Modernity and reflexivity

This essay will suggest that Thucydides developed a new approach to describing and using the past, and that his approach amounted to nothing less than the invention of a new discipline, political and social science. By this I mean that that he regarded as inadequate the motivating purposes of all previous (and many later) historians: preserving memory for its intrinsic worth, praising heroic exploits, exposing moral errors, and making causal connections between apparently disparate events in the past. Although we can find substantial traces of each of these purposes in Thucydides’ writing, his description of past events was a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This is stated explicitly in the key programmatic statement at 1.22.4: The author will be content if his text is judged “useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future.”<sup>5</sup> The text thus does seek to offer a precise account of the past. Yet the purpose of offering such an account is not the preservation of memory of the past for its own sake, but rather guiding action in the future. I suggest that Thucydides’ text teaches its reader that the key to effective future action is understanding socio-political systems, i.e. political science.

The programmatic statement at 1.22.4 suggests that Thucydides’ work was intended as a sort of “political systems users’ manual.” Its integration of socio-political

theory with an accurate narrative of past events was meant to enable human agents (i.e. his readers) to gain leverage upon and thus to participate actively within an interlocking system of social and political structures. It was meant to give human agents knowledge that would be useful in terms of expanding their capacity to exercise individual agency within their societies. Such agents would enter into a reflexive relationship with society: Thucydidean agents would be not only the products of society, but would also be catalysts in the evolution of their societies.<sup>6</sup>

One way to specify authorial purposes is to define the field of arguments with which a text is engaged.<sup>7</sup> Thucydides' text engages with a considerably wider field than that defined by the writers we now think of as the "early Greek historians." Most obviously, he compared his own enterprise with that of both poets and prose-writers (*logographoi*: 1.21.1). The poetic tradition with which he is explicitly concerned is, *imprimis*, Homeric, although the influence of tragedy is apparent as well (see chapter 00). The *logographoi* to whom he refers probably included historians, but also writers of political tracts and authors of speeches for Athenian law courts (see chapter 00). Like historians, both poets and legal speech-writers dealt with the past and both had developed elaborate "rhetorical" schemes through which the content of past events (real or imagined) could be given the artful and pleasing forms that Thucydides bluntly rejects.<sup>8</sup>

Thucydides was certainly familiar with tracts critical of Athenian democracy – the close intellectual relationship between certain of Thucydides' core concerns (e.g. sea power and empire) and those of the somewhat earlier Ps-Xenophontic *Athênaiôn Politeia* has long been recognized.<sup>9</sup> Thucydides also borrowed from the methods and language of the Hippocratic tradition of medical writing. And he was eminently capable of citing and mimicking the arguments and styles of Sophists (e.g. in the Melian Dialogue) and assembly orators (e.g. in the Mytilenean and Sicilian Debates). Among teachers of sophistry and rhetoric were some who claimed explicitly to have developed a "political science" – *politikê technê*. But the sophistic/rhetorical conception of *technê* was narrowly instrumental; it did not rest, as Thucydides supposed any proper understanding of "political science" must, upon a systematic understanding of socio-political structures and their dynamic interaction within larger societal systems. In brief, Thucydides quite deliberately confronted contemporary intellectuals from across a wide range of what we now think of as literary genres – and as a result there is no single established or emergent field of literary endeavor into which his work can reasonably be pigeon-holed.<sup>10</sup>

Although Thucydides' prose is spectacularly artful in its own way, I believe that we should take him seriously when he suggests at 1.22.4 that the lasting value of his text (and thus his claim to pre-eminence in the intellectual contests in which his text engages) is not to be found in its pleasing literary expression, but in the precision, penetration, and practical applicability of its analysis. Thucydides' claim for the permanent worth of his work (i.e. as a *ktêma es aiei*) rests upon the accuracy of two foundational insights: First that the world in which he grew up (that is, Athens of the mid-fifth century) was something new and profoundly different from both Athens of the past and from the rest of the Greek world. Next, Thucydides saw that, despite its dazzling newness, the Athenian world remained grounded in features of human psychology that were constant. Neither insight was original to Thucydides, but I will argue that he deployed these two foundational conceptions in ways that render his work extraordinarily original. Thucydides' deployment of these two ideas also renders his work distinctively "modern"

*avant la lettre*. It is hardly surprising to claim that Thucydides is in some ways “modern”; he has long been claimed as a forefather of the modern discipline of “scientific” history.<sup>11</sup> But I propose that he is modern in a sense that is much more comprehensive and more disturbing to our own academic conception of appropriate disciplinary boundaries.

Since the mid-nineteenth century of our era, much sociological and political analysis has been devoted to explicating the features of “modernity” and thereby distinguishing modernity from “traditional” pre-modern societies. Anthony Giddens usefully focuses on three key factors: 1. separation and zoning of time and space (which he calls “distanciation”), 2. the development of “disembedding mechanisms” that ‘lift out’ social activity from localized contexts (including government administration), and 3. the reflexive appropriation of expert knowledge.<sup>12</sup> While acknowledging that there remain many salient differences between Athenian modernity and our own (e.g. in terms of organization of labor and scale of globalization), I argue that Thucydides had identified something akin to each of Giddens’ three distinguishing factors in fifth-century Athens and thus that we may legitimately speak of Thucydides’ modernity and the modernity of the Athens in which he grew up.

Without papering over salient differences or forgetting what is genuinely distinctive about our modernity, we can learn something about both Thucydides and Athens by recognizing that Athens was modern in certain of the ways that contemporary political and social scientists have defined the term. Furthermore, by adopting Giddens’ conception of social change as a product of a reflexive relationship between knowing agents and social structures, it is possible to suggest that Thucydides participated actively in *making* his own time and place modern: Thucydides self-consciously sought to gain expert knowledge of socio-political structures. And he also sought self-consciously to engage his expert knowledge in a reflexive relationship with those structures. That is to say, his analysis was specifically meant both to make some relevant parts of social structure understandable (to his readers, educated by his text) and meant to promote change in the social system through the willing activity of appropriately educated human agents. His text then is a sort of super-*technê* – it teaches the techniques that allow systems to be both grasped and reflexively influenced by those who have become technical experts.

If we pursue Giddens’ argument to its end, it would appear that as structures and systems are destabilized through the activities of persons who have come to be “Thucydidean technical experts” (and as these agent-experts themselves are changed through their own formation within evolving social structures) the sort of expertise that Thucydides’ unchanging text could offer must eventually become dated and thereby irrelevant. This is because the system cannot remain stable once it has reflexively incorporated expert knowledge of itself – it must morph into something other than what it was, and so the past will thereby be meaningfully discontinuous with the future. But Thucydides apparently thought otherwise: In his programmatic statement of purpose he specifically stated that his work, describing a particular past, was intended as a legacy (*ktêma*) for all time (1.22.4). It remains to be seen whether that claim is best read as is a sort of limit-marker (a *horos*) of Thucydides’ modernity (and if so where the *horos* should be placed), or whether the text might be able to sustain a claim that its lessons would always enable an agent to work effectively within social systems, even as those systems continue to evolve through the reflexive interaction with knowledgeable agents.

### Tradition versus modernity

In answer to a query by the unthinkably wealthy Croesus of Lydia, Herodotus' Solon states that in his opinion the happiest man ever to have lived was his fellow Athenian, Tellus, who "was from a prosperous city, and his children were good and noble. He saw children born to them all, and all of these survived. His life was prosperous by our standards, and his death was most glorious: when the Athenians were fighting their neighbors in Eleusis, he came to help, routed the enemy, and died very finely. The Athenians buried him at public expense on the spot where he fell and gave him much honor." (Hdt. 1.30.4-5). Herodotus' account of Solon's reply to Croesus is deliberately retrospective (harking back to a time when Eleusis was independent) and it may be taken as defining "traditional Greek social ethics." In the fifth century, most citizens of most Greek poleis would still, I think, have readily recognized "Tellus' world" – that is the social system that sustained Tellus' ambitions and actions -- and many would have endorsed the life plan described as "best" by Herodotus' Solon. While granting that few men, if any, would ever achieve Tellus' level of happiness, they would have seen nothing in their communities that would have made living such a life an unreasonable aspiration. In this sense, we may say that most of Greece remained "traditional" rather than "modern."<sup>13</sup>

By the age in which Thucydides received his social formation and with which he is concerned – the age of Pericles, Cleon, and Alcibiades -- Athenians might still have looked back upon "Tellus' world" with nostalgia, but their own lives were lived in conditions that had transformed that world in fundamental ways: As the administrative center of an Aegean empire and Mediterranean-wide trade network, Athens had become prosperous and powerful beyond the wildest dreams of Herodotus' Solon. Tellus' last battle was a border skirmish with the Eleusinians, who lived in the next valley over from the Athenian plain. In the new age of empire, war was not limited to formulaic land battles with neighbors: Wars were fought in far-flung places, by naval forces in close coordination with land armies, and according to complex strategic plans.<sup>14</sup> Tellus' hopes for the future were secured first by the survival of his own fine children and grandchildren and then by a funeral monument attesting to his individual glory. The new world of Athens encouraged citizens to imagine the future in terms of the glory of their polis; Athenian war dead were given a standardized collective burial in a public cemetery.<sup>15</sup> Tellus was able to make life-choices with a certain degree of confidence, based on his own inductive knowledge of how his world worked. He understood the social structures that defined the relatively simple socio-political system of which he and his family were parts. Thucydides' contemporary Athenians inhabited a vastly larger and more complex society, one in which confidence in personal inductive knowledge had necessarily been replaced by a calculus of risk-management based on trust placed in a highly complex system – a system that was difficult, perhaps impossible, to grasp as a whole.<sup>16</sup> It was this system and its workings that Thucydides' text sought to render comprehensible.

The transformation of Athens, from the world of Tellus to the world of Pericles, from a relatively simple and traditional society to a complex and "modern" one, was in large part a product of democracy and empire. Herodotus (5.78.1) had recognized that in the years after the fall of the Peisistratid tyranny in 510 B.C., freedom and equality, the

hallmarks of democracy, had resulted in a phenomenal growth of Athenian military capacity. Meanwhile, the democratic institutional reforms of Cleisthenes resulted in a new administrative system. By interlocking local social networks into a master political network, that system permitted Athens to transcend the limits of governance methods dependent upon the personal knowledge typical of a small, “face-to-face” society. As the new administrative system was put into operation, and as they gained experience of it, the Athenians willingly exchanged their traditional confidence, based on inductive knowledge of one another as individuals, with trust in the system itself and in its capacity to control risk through mechanisms of accountability and transparency. The result was a highly effective public administration that could operate at a heretofore unimaginable scale and with unprecedented speed.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the public space of the city was likewise transformed: New buildings were erected for specifically public purposes within a clearly bounded public zone, a spatially delimited agora.<sup>18</sup> Even the conception of time changed, with a standardized public calendar and close attention paid to the demarcation of short-term public and legal time by technological means.<sup>19</sup> After the defeat of the Persian invaders, the Athenians turned almost instantly to the creation of a vast alliance which quickly, through interaction with evolving Athenian administrative system and the new conception of space-time, developed into an Athenian empire.

The need to control the empire – militarily, financially, and administratively -- led to innovations that further challenged traditional assumptions about time and space, about citizenship and locality. A fleet of hyper-sophisticated warships, moving across the Aegean with startling speed, defeated conventional ideas about force and distance. The pace of life increased dramatically: Public decisions were made and experimental policies were developed faster than traditionalists imagined possible. Property and local residence were no longer stable structures grounding individual lives: Many Athenian citizens now lived much of their lives abroad, as clerouchs or garrison troops, and many others controlled substantial foreign holdings or were involved in overseas commercial ventures. The Athenian system of People’s courts took on new duties of imperial control, so that once-local disputes were now transported to Athens and arbitrated in the imperial center. Standardized coinage for the empire revolutionized the use of money as a symbolic measure of value, while developing systems of credit and borrowing allowed for the partial disembedding of the economy from traditional social relationships.<sup>20</sup> Record-keeping was increasingly standardized and publicized.<sup>21</sup>

The new Athens revolutionized thinking about about power and agency: Novel forms of power, political and military, were developed and quickly deployed on a previously unknown scale. Social and political life became interpenetrated in new and surprising ways. Overall, there was an increased self-consciousness about the role of willed human activity as the source of all humanly relevant phenomena. And yet, at the same time, the increasing complexity of the system seemingly rendered its mastery by any one individual increasingly less likely.<sup>22</sup> In the place of individual mastery of the whole stood a network of knowledges, expert and amateur. Expert knowledge (in the form, e.g. of secretaries to magisterial boards) was interwoven with the political practice of amateurs (e.g. lotteried magistrates). Meanwhile, self-proclaimed specialists in various kinds of useful social knowledge (including the Sophists) actively promoted their expertise as a commodity that could be exchanged and reproduced through rational

processes of learning. The reflexive interaction of these standardized and commodified forms of social knowledge with the society further stimulated ongoing social change.

In the face of this Athenian juggernaut of innovation, the future was no longer securely predictable, but trust in the system allowed individuals to calculate risk and thus to participate actively in the new order. And yet, was the system itself actually stable enough to be worthy of trust? Were Athens' contradictions and tensions, its restless newness, its brash future orientation, sources of strength or of weakness? Would this strange new phenomenon prove to be an inexorable force that would ultimately push traditional communities out of existence? Or was it a sport of historical contingency, an anomaly doomed to quick extinction? Could it co-exist over time with traditional societies that valued stability and continuity above innovation and change? These were the sorts of questions that Thucydides set out to answer for his readers.

#### Dynamic systems and conflict

In the next two sections I offer a story about how Thucydides, who grew up in the “world of Pericles” I have described above, came to invent political science by making analytic sense of that world and its relationship to traditional Greece. It is, of course, impossible to trace the actual course of development of Thucydides' thought: We cannot know the sequence in which he took up and developed the ideas and understandings that ultimately resulted in the production of the text as we have it. So the postulated developmental scheme that follows should be regarded as a heuristic device rather than as a defensible hypothesis. But the order in which thoughts occurred to Thucydides is actually not important for my argument. What is important is specifying the several intellectual elements without which the text as we have it could not have come into existence, and their relationship to one another.

The foundations of Thucydides' text were, I suggested above, two basic insights: First that human psychology was (more or less) constant, and next that democratic Athens, the Athens of Pericles et al., was in fact something new, and therefore represented an important break with the traditional Greek forms of social and political organization that I have dubbed “the world of Tellus.” We need not suppose that either of these basic insights was original to Thucydides himself. The notion that human nature is quite standard was a central postulate of the mid-fifth century Sophists. Ps-Xenophon's tract and Aristophanes' comedies (inter alia) suggest that it had become a commonplace, at least within intellectual circles, to claim that “the new Athens is importantly different” – and different in ways that were potentially catastrophically disruptive to the norms and practices of traditional Greek communities. Indeed, Thucydides may have borrowed more or less directly from his predecessors in the way in which he introduced his readers to “new and different Athens.” Ps-Xenophon adopts the literary conceit of the knowledgeable insider explaining to a naïve and incredulous non-Athenian reader the extent and specificity of Athenian difference. Likewise, Thucydides' *Corinthians* (1.68-71), take the role of knowledgeable experts, seeking to explain to an apparently naïve and initially incredulous Spartan audience just what is new and different about Athens.

Thucydides' *Corinthians* contrast the “modern Athenians” with the “traditional Spartans.” The two societies are presented as polar opposites based on various criteria: Athens was quick to act, while Sparta was slow; Athens was technically innovative, while Sparta was utterly conventional; Athens was risk-prone, while Sparta was risk-

averse, and so on. The modern-Athens/traditional-Sparta contrast is played out in Thucydides' text in speeches by Archidamus and Pericles and with further elaborations: Athens' navy is contrasted to Sparta's land army; vast Athenian capital resources are juxtaposed with non-existent Spartan financial capital; Athenian volatility is compared to Spartan stability. There is every reason to suppose that by the time Thucydides came to write his text, the Athens/Sparta contrast was well established as a topos of intellectual political discussions. Moreover, many of the elements emphasized by Thucydides' speakers as fundamental to Athenian modernity were certainly well established topics among fifth-century writers. There is no reason to suppose that Thucydides was being particularly original in listing them. Finally, the relationship between democracy as a political form and the more obvious elements of Athenian modernity was well established. What then was Thucydides' distinctive and original contribution?

Having grasped clearly the standard fifth-century topics regarding what I am calling Athenian modernity and the ways in which it contrasted with Spartan traditionalism, Thucydides' first substantial breakthrough was to see that the contrast was not just a static "fact about the world."<sup>23</sup> Rather it was the driving force behind a long (twenty-seven year) and destructive period of armed conflict between two great but very different powers. That conflict dominated Thucydides' adult life and was, of course, the subject of his written work.

Thucydides' insight about the destructive dynamism inherent in the contrast of modernity and traditionalism is expressed most bluntly in a well-known passage (1.23.6) in which Thucydides claims that the "truest cause" of the conflict was Spartan fear at the growth of Athenian power. That is to say, the Spartans came to realize the truth of the portrait of Athens presented by Thucydides' Corinthians. Moreover, they came to acknowledge the force of the Corinthian speech: Athenian modernity, if allowed to continue apace, would ultimately overwhelm all traditional forms of Greek community. Thucydides' Corinthians explain that the logic of Athenian modernity was dynamically expansive. Once that dynamic expansiveness was recognized by Sparta as potentially fatal to the continuation of Spartan society, war became inevitable. In short, Thucydides took up a static conception of "modern Athens and traditional Sparta" and developed that conception into a dynamic model capable of explaining the underlying causes of great historical events – and capable of doing so without recourse to any extra-human forces. The reader realizes that the great war was the inevitable result of the deviation of Athens, as a socio-political system, from the traditional forms of Greek community and the threat that deviation represented to hyper-traditionalist Sparta.

Having grasped the dynamism of the Athens/Sparta contrast, Thucydides next came to realize that the conflict would be great, sustained, and unitary: Each side possessed substantial, if very different, resources -- political, demographic, and material. Those resources would allow both sides to continue to fight despite unpleasant surprises entailing seemingly catastrophic losses, setbacks that would have forced other communities to suspend hostilities. The war therefore had the potential to extend vastly over space and time – far beyond the "single campaigning season in a border zone" that was the typical form of inter-polis conflict in the "world of Tellus," and exceeding even the great mythic wars of Homeric epic. The new war was a single great conflict, fought in multiple operational theaters, and sometimes through proxies. Apparent pauses in the hostilities were not true eras of peace, but only masked an ongoing conflict. This was

because the Spartans recognized and feared the consequences for themselves of Athenian modernism: As long as Athens remained modern (thus dynamically expansionist), and Sparta remained traditional (and thus a certain victim of unchecked Athenian expansionism) there were no true grounds for peace. Thucydides' recognition of the dynamic nature of the Athens/Sparta contrast and the potential scope of the conflict is thus the source of his proleptic claim that he saw that the war would be great (1.1.1) and of his post-eventum claim that the conflict was a single war that lasted 27 years (5.26).

Thucydides next came to realize that the burgeoning conflict between democratic-modernism and oligarchic-traditionalism exacerbated conflicts *within* Greek states. Thus, in spatial terms, the war was fought internally, in the form of *stasis*, as well externally between political communities and groups of communities. The extensive "global" spatial frame of the war was therefore matched by an intensive conflict that brought war within the walls of the city, and even within the walls of the household. The conflict between modernity and traditionalism thus produced socio-political pathologies that proved capable of infecting and ultimately destroying polis communities. The fact that the dynamic conflict was contested by two opposing political systems (democracy and oligarchy) offered distinct socio-economic groups (the rich and the poor) within a given city the opportunity to identify their particular and factional interests with much larger processes, with complex systems (in the form of the Athenian and the Spartan alliance) promoting, variously, modernity and tradition. And that tendency to identify with destabilizing external processes and systems, rather than with "the common good of the unitary local political community," meant that local interests and values quickly became unanchored from the local habits and iterated practices of the infected community.

As a result, the vocabularies in which values and interests were described were dissociated from the ordinary constraints of practice and habit. In the place of local and practice-grounded definitions, the kind of loose abstractions bandied about by the Sophists gained purchase on human calculation and action. Thus a kind of negative reflexivity was established between a sophisticated and instrumentalist "political *techné*" and the dissolution of once-stable social structures. Thucydides offers Corcyra as a case study of this disintegrative process, but he underlines its generality: *stasis* born of the modern/traditional conflict afflicted communities throughout the Greek world. Participants in later *staseis*, he notes, reflexively employed knowledge of what had occurred elsewhere in order to invent new forms of atrocity (3.82). Thus, the clash between Athenian modernity and Spartan traditionalism was implicated in the devastating collapse of what Thucydides poignantly and pointedly describes as the "ancient simplicity" (3.83).<sup>24</sup>

The phenomenon of *stasis* exposed another dynamic interaction, between the socio-political system pertaining in a given community (and its moral and cultural underpinnings) and the demands of human nature. The analogic relationship between polis and soul, and thus between intra-community conflict and pathologies of moral psychology would be fully developed by Thucydides' younger contemporary, Plato (notably in the *Republic*). But Thucydides himself made considerable advances in understanding the ways in which intra-state conflict could reveal truths about base-line human psychology. Thucydides supposed that *stasis* undermined the social structures which ordinarily constrained people's actions. Freed from the constraints of social structure, people tended by nature to act selfishly. That is, they sought to promote their

own interests in competition with others rather than cooperating with people different from themselves on common projects. This tendency to self-aggrandizement contributed to the degeneration of existing social structure and thus of civilization itself. Self-interest could not provide an alternative “natural” structure (in the form of a libertarian utopia) because people’s selfish actions were guided by a fatally weak inductive knowledge of the complex of factors that were conducive to their actual interests. And so their actions did not consistently result in furthering their real interests. Self-interest in the absence of true knowledge cannot be judged as rational. A rapidly degenerating social system was, by definition, a highly complex human environment, in which apparently rational (but actually irrational) choices had catastrophic consequences as circumstances changed in chaotic and unpredictable ways.

Thucydides’ great case study of intra-community conflict is the *stasis* that destroyed the once-prosperous polis of Corcyra. But all communities were vulnerable to the degenerative logic of human nature if and when social structure was severely disrupted: The inherent human tendency to selfishness was a factor in the chaotic behavior of Athenians at the height of the plague and in the Athenian *stasis* of 411. Yet the Athenian case also shows that degenerative social pathology need not be fatal: Athens retained the capacity to act cohesively as a community throughout the plague era and recovered from the revolutionary period of 411. Contrary to what some of the Sophists apparently taught their students, understanding the ultimate psychological basis of human action was not, in and of itself, adequate to allow a given agent to intervene effectively in a given social system: Thucydides’ text shows that actual political behavior was much more complex and various than just “selfish human nature writ large.” The simple realization that humans tend to seek their own interests was only one part of a larger socio-political equation.

#### Democracy and power

Thucydides suggests (5.14.3) that at the outbreak of the war, the Spartans and presumably many other Greeks (2.8.4-5) expected it to be a relatively brief affair that would end in a Spartan victory. This expectation was based on extrapolating from a limited knowledge of history and political systems. They acknowledged that Athens had grown strong in the decades after the Persian wars, yet the inherently volatile Athenian democratic system was still not considered a match for Sparta’s awe-inspiring record of constitutional stability. The central Greek campaigns of the mid-fifth century had provided an apparently decisive test case: when Sparta exerted itself, Athens was ultimately forced to sue for peace. In order to explain how and why the “twenty-seven year war” defeated the confident early expectations of experienced observers, and broke the established spatial and temporal bounds of Greek inter-state conflict, Thucydides needed to do much more than redescribe the self-evident surface features of Athenian modernity (speed, innovation, risk-taking, and so on). He needed to probe the underlying nature of Athenian power and its relationship to both the democratic political order and to human psychology. This brings us to the core of Thucydides’ project and its intellectual originality.

Thucydides’ Corinthians express what is probably a standard Greek assessment when they imply that the visible manifestations of Athenian exceptionalism were simply a matter of an inherent “national character.” They show no interest in probing how that

character emerged in the course of a particular national history, or how it was developed and sustained through distinctive political institutions and cultural habits. By contrast, Thucydides' text, both the analytic portions that precede the "Corinthian assessment" and the narrative that succeeds it, provides the reader with a deep and detailed explanation for the origins and vitality of an Athenian "national character" that was different from that of other Greeks, and one that was especially conducive to expansionism.

Thucydides' reader (as opposed to the Corinthians' Spartan audience) learns that the Athenians' dynamic expansionism must be understood, first, in terms of their perfection of a technology of power. In the so-called Archaeology, Thucydides details the conditions that limited the robustness of early Greek societies. Due to internal discord and the endemic presence of pirates, the early Greek communities were unable to accumulate the three necessary prerequisites of power. The first of these was money for investment in major capital projects. Next was secure fortification walls, capable of defeating attempts to seize capital resources. Third was a navy, by which power can be quickly projected at distance and without experiencing "distance-decay," thus allowing for the extraction of resources from weaker communities. This "material triad" of money, walls, and ships was reflexively connected to knowledge of what we may call a "conceptual triad" of empire (*archê*), security (*asphaleia*), and extendable power (*dunamis*). Earlier Greek powers (e.g. Minos of Crete) had developed impressive but still rudimentary versions of this double (material/conceptual) triangle. It remained for the Athenians of the fifth century to bring the system to something like perfection. The inner workings of this remarkable technology of power are further explained for the reader in the course of Pericles' three speeches – the Funeral oration and two speeches to the Athenian Assembly.<sup>25</sup>

The perfected technology of power allowed for, perhaps even mandated, expansive growth. Conceptual knowledge allowed the material elements to be employed more effectively, and reflection upon their use produced deeper conceptual understanding. Because it was dynamically reflexive in its operations, the technology led to growth without apparent limits: Greater capital enabled infrastructural improvements that in turn enhanced security. This meant an increased capacity to project greater power more quickly and over greater distances. And that in turn brought in more capital. And so on – potentially, it seemed, *ad infinitum*. Although each of its material elements (money, walls, ships) was highly visible, the reflexive technology of power that drove Athenian growth was extremely difficult to understand in its fullness – Thucydides' Pericles describes it as a sort of "secret" in a speech to the assembly (2.62). Moreover, the secret is not fully revealed even in its telling -- Pericles focuses heavily on the navy/*dunamis* axes. It is unlikely that a listener who heard only the three Periclean speeches recorded by Thucydides (or similar ones) would be able to accurately grasp the complex system that linked the technology of power with imperial growth.

In a number of passages, most obviously in the Assembly debate on the Sicilian expedition, Thucydides suggests that the Athenians' own inductive knowledge of the system of power and expansion in which they participated was strictly limited.<sup>26</sup> Yet the system undoubtedly worked extremely well. It fulfilled the demands of human nature in that people's interests were served by it: The system distributed great benefits to Athenians (as individuals and as a community) in terms of psychic rewards (participation in glory, enhanced agency, satisfied curiosity) as well as material rewards. As a result, the

Athenians came to place ever more trust in the system. Moreover, they were willing to take ever greater risks (individually and as a community) as a result of their growing trust. Fed by a burgeoning aggregate risk-taking capacity, the system could take on new challenges, expand in new and surprising directions. Setbacks there were, but these were factored into the overall equation: The risks the Athenians took did indeed expose them to danger, but they remained calculated risks rather than simple rashness. Thucydides' Pericles alludes to the rationality of risk-taking when he contrasts Athenian and Spartan forms of courage: Unlike Spartan habituation, Athenian courage was grounded in reasoned choice-making.<sup>27</sup>

The expansive system reflexively incorporated structure and choice: Based upon a technology of power, it quite reliably produced a psychology of rational risk-taking. That psychology in turn furthered the productivity of the system and reinforced trust in it. Athenian "national character," which appeared to less astute observers to be a simple fact of Athenian "nature," was explicable to Thucydides' readers in terms of the reflexive interaction between a technology of power and human psychology.

But how did this reflexive power/trust system connect to political structure, to the democracy? Here Thucydides could build upon the work of writers like Ps-Xenophon, but once again he made considerable advances over his predecessors. Ps-Xenophon had recognized that there was an organic connection between Athenian sea power and democracy, but his analysis had not proceeded much beyond the thoughts that the navy provided employment for the lower class "many," and that it lent them an enhanced sense of their own social worth. In the Funeral Oration, and related passages, Thucydides' text goes deeper, revealing how a democratic society in which all classes regard themselves as engaged in a valuable common enterprise, one that reliably distributes rewards to each and to all, can make highly effective use of available manpower: Each and every adult male Athenian, regardless of his family wealth, was both expected and potentially able to be "useful" to his polis both militarily and politically.

In the course of the narrative, the political society of democratic Athens was implicitly contrasted to that, for example, of oligarchic Mytilene: In Mytilene, as soon as the lower classes were given arms (in a desperate attempt to break the Athenian siege in 427), they turned their weapons against the ruling oligarchs, thereby ending the Mytilenean capacity to resist the Athenian siege. The reader is invited to contrast the behavior of the Athenians during the same year: In the aftermath of a devastating plague, they launched the largest fleet of the war to date. They simultaneously engaged in naval operations off the Peloponnesus, stymied a Spartan-led naval expedition into the Aegean, and dispatched a large scale land-sea operation to Mytilene, all the while keeping the rest of the empire under control. Because all Athenians regarded themselves as engaged in a common enterprise, they were capable of making full use of their plague-reduced but still considerable manpower resources. And thus they were able to turn what should have been a Spartan opportunity into a resounding Athenian victory. As Thucydides' Pericles explains in the Funeral Oration, it was the participative and meritocratic political culture of democracy that made this sort of national performance not only possible but predictable.<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, the reader comes to understand that Athenian political culture led to individual versatility. Athens' capacity to accomplish so much did not rest solely on each Athenian being willing and able to make himself useful by deploying a particular and

pre-established “skill set” -- e.g. hoplite maneuvers, wall-building, or rowing a trireme. Rather, each individual Athenian was capable of taking on a variety of tasks. As Thucydides’ Pericles famously pointed out, the democratic polis was a system of education and Athenians were highly educable. The Athenian regarded his own service to the state as a sort of ongoing self-education, and proved willing, eager, and capable of learning new skills under stressful conditions and in real time.<sup>29</sup>

One example of this capacity is provided by the Athenian hoplites in 427, who boarded ships in Piraeus, rowed themselves to Mytilene, quickly built a wall of circumvallation, then took up arms and began the siege in earnest. Another example is provided by the Athenian rowers who landed at Pylos in 425, decided to build a fortification by hand, defended it successfully with improvised weapons, and thus set up the stunning Athenian victory on Sphacteria -- a victory that (for a time) seemed to offer the Athenians a way forward to final victory in the war itself. By contrast, the Spartan hoplites on Sphacteria proved spectacularly inept at learning anything new: they waited passively on the island until the Athenians invaded with light-armed troops, then sought to fight a standard hoplite battle under impossible conditions, only to be easily defeated by the innovative tactics adopted by the Athenian commanders. Once again, the basis for the distinction between the tradition-bound Spartans and the innovative, hard-working, and self-educating Athenians, and its relationship to the political institutions and culture of democracy, had been laid out, albeit in somewhat abstract and idealizing terms, by Pericles in the Funeral Oration.

Thucydides’ reader comes to understand that the modernity of Athens was the product of remarkably complex system – one that conjoined a technology of power with both a psychology and a politics. The system was dynamically reflexive but it could not and did not just run on its own. In order to perform effectively, it required a process for rational decision-making, one that that would reliably (although, given the Athenian propensity to experimentation, not inevitably) develop the sound policies that would allow Athenian energy and resources to be deployed in profitable enterprises.

In the context of war, developing sound policy included everything from master plans that would be spatio-temporally expansive enough to take into account many local theaters of conflict over a period of years, through effective military strategy for gaining victory in a particular theater in a given campaigning season, to tactics that would win individual battles. Pericles addresses this point in the Funeral Oration (2.40.2-3), if only briefly and elliptically. He claims that, unlike other peoples, the Athenians did not need to confront a choice between careful deliberation and bold action. They were uniquely able to conjoin deliberation with action through processes of public reasoning that allowed all to participate either at the level of proposal-making or at the level of judgment. And once again, the narrative of events supports the general theory. In the descriptions of Phormio’s naval operations in the Gulf of Corinth in 429, of the operations at Mytilene in 427, and of the Pylos-Sphacteria operations of 425 Thucydides’ readers are offered revealing glimpses of Athenian leaders proposing bold plans based on their assessment of opportunities, risks, and available resources; audiences of citizens judging those plans; and the outcomes that resulted. The narrative of events thus illustrates how deliberative public processes were connected to actions.

Pericles’ distinction between proposal-making and judgment points to the importance of leadership in the democratic system. The essential structural role played by

skilled and forward-looking leadership is the final element in Thucydides' analysis of the Athenian socio-political system. In a detailed assessment of Pericles' career (2.65) Thucydides reveals that Pericles was an essential element of the overall system because he was capable of intervening in the system on the basis of a true understanding of it. Moreover, Pericles had the necessary technical skills as a public speaker, combined with a deep psychological insight into how different kinds of speech could affect the moods of audiences. And so his interventions were reliably effective in gaining his chosen ends. And finally, Pericles was incorruptible: he never put his own personal interests above or in opposition to the interests of the community as a whole. Thus, his interventions were not only effective, but genuinely and publicly beneficial.

Pericles might initially appear to be somehow "inhuman" in his unwillingness to pursue his personal advantage. But in fact, as Pericles' three speeches themselves make clear (esp. 2.60.2-5), there was no contradiction between seeking his individual good and the good of his community. Pericles' nature was entirely human, but his tendency to seek his own interests was framed by his political-moral insight that even (or maybe especially) under the conditions of modernity, the individual's best interests could only be secured in the context of a powerful and flourishing community. As Athens flourished, so too did Pericles, and he acted accordingly and with complete consistency. In a sense, then, Pericles recapitulates the ethical choices of Herodotus' Tellus: Ironically, Pericles may appear as a sterling modern exemplar of "the ancient simplicity." The difference between Tellus and Pericles is that Pericles acts on the basis of his special theoretical and practical mastery of the workings of a highly complex system; Tellus was able to rely on his ordinary inductive knowledge of a traditional society.

During Pericles' long period of political ascendancy, then, the Athenian system could grow in complexity without the danger of losing coherence; it developed through reflexive interaction with a particular human agent. The system was given direction through the interventions of a political leader who genuinely understood it, and who had the capacity to influence it and the conjoined rational self-interest and benevolence to seek positive change. The provision of knowledgeable, skillful, and rationally benevolent leadership was an essential part of the system's functionality and overall reliability. Without suggesting that Pericles sought or received a cult of personality, Thucydides leads his readers to suppose that the warranted confidence of the citizens in Pericles as an individual leader was an important element in their trust in the system overall. And thus the leadership factor was a key to rational risk-taking, and thus to the dynamic expansionism of the system.

It is because of Pericles' special relationship to the system of which he was a part that Thucydides' stated that in the era of Pericles, Athens was in name a democracy but in fact was ruled by its first citizen (2.65.9). This does not mean that Pericles was, in his own person, the sovereign authority of the state, but rather that his leadership was an indispensable structural element in the continued successfulness of the socio-political system. In order for the system to work, as we have seen, there had to be both proposal-making and judgment. During the era of Pericles' leadership, Thucydides' readers are led to suppose that on the most important public matters, the judgment of Athenian audiences amounted to approval of proposals that were patently trustworthy because they emanated from a man in whom the Athenians rightly placed their full confidence. And thus, the political system was genuinely educational: each citizen was in effect challenged to seek

to understand why the proposal he judged best on the basis of his confidence in its author was in fact the best course of action for Athens. Rather than infantilizing the audience, Thucydides suggests, Periclean speeches and proposals helped citizens to gain a better (if inevitably only partial) understanding of how the overall system worked.<sup>30</sup>

Pericles was indispensable, but he was mortal; after his death, the system lacked a vital structural element. At least some Athenians apparently realized (if not with the analytic clarity that Thucydides offered to his readers) that Periclean-type leadership was a structural necessity; after Pericles many other would-be leaders sought to take his place. Yet they all fell short in one essential way or another: either they lacked genuine understanding of the system (like Cleon), or they lacked the rational benevolence that came with a deep recognition of the congruity of individual and communal interests (like Alcibiades), or they lacked the rhetorical skills necessary to influence mass audiences (like Nicias).

With the failure of any other leader to fulfill Pericles' structural role, Thucydides says, Athens became a democracy in fact – in that the function of judgment of proposals by mass audiences took precedence over policy-making and proposal-making by wise leaders. Given that popular judgment was now dominant, would-be leaders, predictably seeking to further their own interests, were led to pander to the audience. Thus the reflexivity of leadership and popular judgment took a decidedly negative turn: Rather than being systematically well-educated by a true leader, the masses now systematically mis-educated their would-be leaders; the *dêmos* trained pseudo-leaders to say what the *dêmos* itself would find pleasant to hear -- rather than hearing from them those proposals that would be most beneficial for the community. This, then, Thucydides suggests, was democracy “in fact” – and it was no way to run the expansive system of power and politics that had brought about and must sustain a great empire.

As we have seen, Thucydides' socio-political analysis suggests that when Athens took the road of modernity, Athenian performance (i.e. capacity to flourish as a polis and grow into an empire) became dependent upon the reflexive interaction of a technology of power with political institutions and culture, and with the impulses of human nature. Without Periclean leadership, the political side of the Athenian equation did not remain in a positively reflexive relationship with the other elements of the system. Absent the appropriate agents to give it rational direction, the system became unbalanced. Blind structures (both institutional and ideological) overweighed rational human agency. Human selfishness was uncoupled from the recognition that individual flourishing required collective efforts. Warranted trust in the system declined, and with it the capacity to take rational risks. And thus, virtually inevitably, catastrophic mistakes were made and despite the great resources that had led Pericles to predict victory, Athens lost the war.<sup>31</sup>

#### Thucydides' text

The two previous sections hypothetically reconstructed the intellectual development of a project worthy of being called “the invention of political science.” That project conjoined a theoretical analysis with narrative description of events in order to explain how technologies of power, international relations, political institutions and culture, and social psychology conjoined into dynamic socio-political systems. The result was an elegant explanatory framework that offered a new understanding of collective

behavior and the structural properties of organized communities. Thucydides did not invent each of the pieces relevant to his political science; much preliminary work had already been done by his predecessors. Thucydides' great conceptual breakthroughs were, I have suggested, in coming to understand how the diverse elements fit together and showing how they functioned in terms of reflexively dynamic social and political systems; how the "modern" Athenian system came into conflict with a "traditional" Spartan system; how a uniquely large-scale and sustained inter-state conflict generated social pathologies within many communities; and how the malfunctioning of democracy in the absence of Periclean leadership led modern Athens to lose the war to traditional Sparta.

But it was one thing for Thucydides to figure all this out for himself, quite another for him to explain it to others. It would obviously be chimerical to speak of an "invention" that remained inside its author's head. In order for his new conception of collective action to matter (in terms of authorial fame or effect upon the world), it must somehow be communicated. At some point (we cannot know just when) Thucydides made the decision to communicate his ideas in the form of a written text. This was, in the context of his times, not a remarkable decision, but it was indeed a decision he had to make. His contemporary, Socrates, having developed a similarly monumental invention (i.e. moral philosophy) never wrote any of it down, communicating his ideas instead through public and private conversations.

Remarkably, Thucydides appears to have decided at some point that his invention could be communicated *entirely* through the medium of the written text. There is no ancient evidence to suggest that Thucydides ever sought or attracted students as did, variously, the early Sophists, rhetoricians, and philosophers. Nor did he ever offer or anticipate oral performances of his text, as did all poets and many prose-writers including (reputedly) Herodotus. Indeed, the very clear statements in Thucydides' methodological introduction, to the effect that his text would not be likely to offer pleasure to listeners, suggest that the text was not intended to be transmitted aurally to students or performed before audiences. Thucydides' text is as austere "writerly" as any text surviving from antiquity. Intended as a possession for all time – and thus as having a life completely independent of its author -- Thucydides' invention would succeed or fail on the basis of the relationship between readers and text. It stood alone and could never hope for the sort of sympathetic aid that might be offered by a school of adherents or a virtuoso performance.

Having come to the decision to write a "stand-alone" text that would convey his great invention, the question was one of form: How to compose a document that would forever communicate a deeply complex and original set of ideas to readers? The answer is, in one sense, clear enough, since we have the text and its form can be analyzed by the ordinary tools of literary analysis. But it may be worth seeking to specify just how and why the text's quite distinctive form furthered the project of communicating Thucydides' invention of political science.

First, and obviously, Thucydides chose, for the bulk of his text, the form of a strict chronological narrative of recently past events: he wrote something that was related to, if in some ways quite different from, the texts of Hellanicus and Herodotus. When compared to his predecessors' work, his historical narrative is remarkably disciplined, proceeding by summers and winters through the war era, offering relatively few

substantial digressions. Next, and equally obviously, he employed the literary device (used to good effect by Herodotus) of interrupting his third-person narrative with speeches (and one long dialogue), often presented in the first person, purportedly delivered by various historical agents (individual and collective). Third, Thucydides included a number of analytic passages, in which he, as author, explains his intentions and methods and offers considered judgments upon various matters of interpretation. As every reader of Thucydides quickly comes to realize, the work produces its effects (literary and didactic) through the interplay among these several elements.

If Thucydides' invention was political science, why write a chronological narrative?<sup>32</sup> Contemporary practice in the disciplines of political science and sociology is markedly unhistorical. Although some of the modern (in the usual sense) founders of the discipline of sociological political science (e.g. Karl Marx and Max Weber) were concerned with history and wrote about historical events, they did not write continuous historical narratives. Nor did most of Thucydides' immediate Greek predecessors or successors in the field of *politikê technê* choose to write history. If, *ex hypothesi*, Thucydides was engaged in a competitive rivalry with *politikê technê* literature and if it is legitimate to call Thucydides' invention "political science," why did he choose to employ a chronological narrative of events (as opposed to, say, the literary forms of *politeia* or dialogue) as the primary structuring device for his text?

It is not possible to answer this question in any definitive way. Although I have postulated that the invention was anterior to the choice of literary form, Thucydides may just as well have begun writing a rather conventional (Herodotean/Hellanic) history, with intentions and generic ambitions that were quite similar to those of earlier historians, but in the process came to the set of conjoined insights that I am calling "the invention of political science." The developmental story I propose here is intended to foreground the role of socio-political insight in Thucydides' project. It is neither more demonstrable nor more falsifiable than the "history first" hypothesis. As with the unanswerable question of the order in which the several conjoined insights came to Thucydides, the actual process of composition does not actually matter for my argument. The point is telling a plausible story that will illuminate the form, content, and force of the text as we have it – that is to say, a story that helps us to be better readers.

I suggested above that Thucydides' breakthrough insights concerned dynamic systems and reflexive processes of change. And this provides an explanation for the choice of historical narrative as a literary vehicle for the presentation of his invention. Thucydides needed to show, not just how the social systems with which he was concerned were constructed and how they functioned, but also what they *did*. Since what they did only became clear by tracking change over time, only a diachronic account could adequately demonstrate the relevant phenomena. In some cases (as in the Athenian technology of power) the functioning of the system produced change in the form of growth as a result of the reflexive interaction of its several parts. That growth resulted in further change, in the form of sustained inter-state conflict, because the Spartans became aware of the danger to themselves of unchecked Athenian growth.

But Thucydides' conception of political science was also predicated on a reflexive interaction between structure and human agency: As various human agents gained knowledge of the relevant social systems, their knowledge – in terms of both their own use of it and others' capacity to learn it -- became a factor in the functioning (or

malfunctioning) of the system and thus of the effects it produced. So, for example, the widening inter-state conflict led to civil wars within Greek communities; and knowledge of these civil conflicts was reflexively factored into the decisions of human agents and thus exacerbated the rate of social degeneration in later conflicts. Individual Spartans learned from Sparta's early failures – as Brasidas' experimental and successful campaign northern Greece demonstrated, as did the later Spartan naval campaigns in the Hellenistic region. For their part, the Athenians experienced what might be called entropic reflexivity in the post-Periclean era as would-be leaders were mis-educated by the judging *dêmos*, and thereby provided the state with inferior proposals, which in the long run fatally degraded Athens' war-making capacity.

The explicitly analytic passages in which Thucydides addresses the reader in *propria persona*, along with the speeches given to Pericles, taught the reader the bare bones of Thucydides' conception of political science. That is, they sketched out a somewhat abstract theory of power, politics, international relations, human psychology, and collective action. The chronological narrative fleshed out the theory, by demonstrating how it worked in practice. But even more importantly, the narrative enabled Thucydides' reader to grasp the processes whereby change was produced by the dynamic interaction within and between systems over time. Thucydides' reader might well pick up some theoretical insight from the analytic passages alone. He might learn something of practical value by studying the speeches. But the true didactic force of the work required putting the analytic passages and speeches into the narrative frame, and thus coming to understand the dynamic and reflexive operation of systems that was Thucydides' great invention.

Unlike a student in (for example) Isocrates' school of rhetoric, Thucydides' reader was not presented with a series of set rules, was not expected to memorize a body of *topoi*, did not learn the mechanics of a *technê*. Rather, through a deep understanding of complex systems and their effects he became (if he were sufficiently diligent) a Thucydidean technical expert in political science. And, as such, he potentially gained the true political agency once manifested by Pericles. With Pericles-like knowledge of systems he became capable of intervening, in positive ways, in social and political structure. He became a positive reflexive element of a dynamic system.

And that, I would say, is the ultimate purpose of the text. It is meant to produce leaders with Periclean abilities. Those leaders would not be sophistic immoralists; they would not be enemies of "the ancient simplicity." Like Pericles they would embrace an ethics that was in many ways compatible with that of Solon's Tellus. But, like Pericles, they were themselves far from simple. They would choose to act for the common good out of a deep understanding of how their own genuine interests related to collective action, of how modern and traditional social systems actually worked, and of how and why those systems changed (for good and ill) over time. Despite its austerity and its appearance of disinterestedness, Thucydidean social science is, therefore, grounded in the conviction that genuine knowledge will promote the good (insofar as the good is defined as the flourishing of individuals within a flourishing community). And as such it has somewhat unexpected connections with Socrates' and Aristotle's philosophical projects. If we feel that science and morality are incompatible within a modern disciplinary paradigm, identifying a concern for morality within Thucydidean political science may be taken as marking off the limits of Thucydides' modernism. Yet, given that modern

political science departments often embrace both highly empirical and normative scholarship, the simultaneous presence in his text of the morally concerned political theorist and the analytic/empirical political scientist may, perhaps, be taken as further evidence for his modernity – or even his post-modernity.<sup>33</sup>

In any event, the reader should not be misled, either by the originality of Thucydides' political science or by the apparent attractiveness of his ethics of political leadership, into accepting that everything in Thucydides' analysis is correct. Given its situation in a historical narrative, the correctness of Thucydides' political analysis may fairly be tested by history. As I have argued elsewhere, the successful rebuilding of Athens in the decades *after* the Peloponnesian War, by a democratic government and in the absence of anything resembling a Periclean leader, suggests that Thucydides underestimated the capacity of a real democracy to learn from its own mistakes.<sup>34</sup> If we could somehow pose it to him, would Thucydides accept that criticism? Or would he, perhaps, reply that this is to miss his basic point, that "systems change"? After all, post-Peloponnesian War Athens was quite different from immediately post-Periclean Athens at least in this sense: With the post-war dissemination of Thucydides' text, knowledge about dynamic and reflexive systems was available. As readers engaged with the text, they had the opportunity to become Thucydidean technical experts. Some of those experts were, almost inevitably, reflexively involved in the evolving Athenian socio-political system. I am not sure that I would accept that defense – but I *am* quite sure that, even if we could summon his ghost, Thucydides would not bother to make it – after all the text itself was meant to stand on its own, as a *ktêma es aiei*.

## Bibliography

- Allen, Danielle. 1996. "A Schedule of Boundaries: An Exploration of Time in Athens." Greece and Rome. Xx.
- Balot, Ryan K. 2004. "The Dark Side of Democratic Courage." Social Research 71:73-106.
- Brock, R. and S. Hodkinson (2000). Alternatives to Athens: Varieties of political organization and community in ancient Greece. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Camp, J. M. (1992). The Athenian Agora: Excavations in the heart of classical Athens. New York, N.Y. Thames and Hudson.
- Cochrane, C. N. (1929). Thucydides and the science of history. London,, Oxford University Press.
- Cole, T. (1991). The origins of rhetoric in ancient Greece. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Connor, W. R. (1977). "A Post Modernist Thucydides?" Classical Review 72: 289-98.
- Edmunds, L. (1993). Thucydides in the Act of Writing. Tradizione e innovazione nella cultura da Omera all'età ellenistica. Ed. R. Pretagostini. Rome, Gruppo Editoriale Internazionale. 3.831-52.
- Farrar, C. (1988). The origins of democratic thinking: The invention of politics in classical Athens. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Figueira, Thomas J. 1998. The power of money: Coinage and politics in the Athenian Empire. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Gehrke, H.-J. (1986). Jenseits von Athen und Sparta: Das dritte Griechenland und seine Staatenwelt. München, Beck.
- Giddens, A. (1990). The Consequences of Modernity. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press.
- Gomme, A. W., A. Andrewes, et al. (1945-1981). A historical commentary on Thucydides. Oxford,, Clarendon Press.
- Hansen, Mogens Herman. 1996. *Introduction to an Inventory of 'Poleis': Symposium August, 23-26 1995*. Copenhagen, Munksgaard.
- Hanson, V. D. (1995). The other Greeks : the family farm and the agrarian roots of western civilization. New York, Free Press.
- Hedrick, C. (1999). "Democracy and the Athenian Epigraphic Habit." Hesperia 68: 387-439.
- Hornblower, S. (2000). "The Old Oligarch (Pseudo Xenophon's Athenaion Politeia) and Thucydides. A Fourth-Century Date for the Old Oligarch?" Polis and Politics [Festschrift Hansen]. Edited by P. Flensted-Jensen, T.H. Neilsen, L. Rubinstein. Copenhagen, Munksgaard, xx.
- Kallet-Marx, L. (1993). Money, expense, and naval power in Thucydides' History 1-5.24. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Kallet, L. (2001). Money and the corrosion of power in Thucydides : the Sicilian expedition and its aftermath. Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press.
- Kurke, L. (1999). Coins, bodies, games, and gold : the politics of meaning in archaic Greece. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.

- Manville, B. and J. Ober (2003). A Company of Citizens: What the World's First Democracy Teaches Leaders about Creating Great Organizations. Boston, Harvard Business School Press.
- Neer, R. (2002). Style and Politics in Athenian Vase-Painting. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Nightingale, A. W. (1995). Genres in dialogue : Plato and the construct of philosophy. Cambridge ; New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Ober, J. (1995). Greek *Horoi*: Artifactual Texts and the Contingency of Meaning. Methods in the Mediterranean: Historical and Archaeological Views of Texts and Archaeology. Edited by D. Small. Leiden, E.J. Brill: 91-123.
- Ober, J. (1996). The Athenian revolution : essays on ancient Greek democracy and political theory. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.
- Ober, J. (1998). Political dissent in democratic Athens : intellectual critics of popular rule. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.
- Ober, J. (2001). "The Debate over Civic Education in Classical Athens." Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity. Edited by Y. L. Too. Leiden, E.J. Brill: 273-305.
- Ober, J. (2001b). "Thucydides Theoretikos/Thucydides Histor: Realist Theory and the Challenge of History." Democracy and War: A Comparative Study of the Korean War and the Peloponnesian War. Edited by D. R. McCann, B.S. Strauss. Armonk, N.Y. and London, M.E. Sharpe: 273-306.
- Ober, J. (2004). "Classical Athenian Democracy and Democracy Today: Culture, Knowledge, Power." The Promotion of Knowledge: Essays to Mark the Centenary of the British Academy, 1902-2002. Ed. J. Morrill. London, British Academy.
- Reden, S. V. (1997). "Money, Law and Exchange: Coinage in the Greek polis." Journal of Hellenic Studies **117**: 154-76.
- Ruschenbusch, Eberhard. 1978. Untersuchungen zu Staat und Politik in Griechenland vom 7.-4. Jh. v. Chr. Bamberg: Aku.
- Schaps, David M. 2004. The invention of coinage and the monetization of Ancient Greece. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Seaford, R. (1998). "Tragic money." Journal of Hellenic Studies **118**: 119-39.
- Skinner, Q. (1978). The foundations of modern political thought. Cambridge ; New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Sickinger, J. P. (1999). Public records and archives in classical Athens. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- Trevett, Jeremy. 2001. "Democracy and Coinage." in Money and Its Uses in the Ancient Greek World. Edited by Andrew Meadows and Kirsty Shipton. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Tully, J. (1988), editor. Meaning and context: Quentin Skinner and his critics. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 1.1.

<sup>2</sup> The two famous Herodotean errors: 1.20.3 Thucydides in competitive critical community: Ober 1998, chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> Neer 2002, esp. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Thuc 1.1.1 “*sunegrapse ton polemon*” might suggest that he saw himself as writing a *sungraphê* i.e. as working in the same literary genre as Hellanicus whose *Attikê sungraphê* Thucydides cites (1.97). But Thucydides never describes his work as a *sungraphê*: cf. Edmunds 1993.

<sup>5</sup> There has been much debate on this passage: Gomme *HCT* ad loc., e.g. tries to avoid the evident meaning in order to keep Thucydides within the fold of disciplinary historians.

<sup>6</sup> Cole 1991 argues that Thucydides’ text was a *technê* in the sense of a manual of useful arguments. This seems to miss the point of the work as one of systems analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Skinner 1978, with Tully 1988.

<sup>8</sup> 1.21.1, 1.22.4 with Ober 1998, 55-63.

<sup>9</sup> See, recently, Hornblower 2000, who argues (against the communis opinio, and on grounds I find unconvincing) for Thucydides’ priority.

<sup>10</sup> Of course Thucydides is not alone in his self-consciousness of multiple genres and his self-conscious attempt to surpass them: cf. Nightingale 1995 on Plato’s relationship to various genres of poetry and prose. Indeed it is hard to define prose genres of the fifth and early fourth century with any specificity.

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides as “modern scientific” historian: Cochrane 1929.

<sup>12</sup> Giddens 1990. Giddens’ view of history is binary: premodernity and modernity. Yet his pre-modern traditional society is apparently based primarily quite narrowly upon medieval western Europe (e.g. vague political boundaries, lack of monopoly of violence, concern with divine providence) – in some ways, then, his view of traditional society fails for the Greek poleis generally. But I will suggest, below, that in important ways most of Greece remained “traditional” and that Athenian modernity was therefore not a global phenomenon. This makes its history radically different from that of our modernity – but that is no reason to ignore salient differences between Athens and other Greek poleis.

<sup>13</sup> It is significant that Tellus inhabits an imagined “pre-synocism” world in which Eleusis is independent and thus Athens is only a fragment of its classical size. In terms of population and home territory, classical Athens was something like 50 to 100 times the size of a “normal polis” (see Ruschenbusch 1978, Hansen 1996), and this hypertrophy of scale was a prerequisite to its “modernity. Hanson 1995 offers an idealizing portrait of traditional Greek communities, but also presents evidence for the prevalence of Greek traditionalism in “normal poleis” during the classical era. See also Gehrke 1986, Brock and Hodkinson 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Development of new forms of war and strategy: Ober 1996 chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>15</sup> See Loraux 1986. Of course, Athenians continued to have personal concern for own children and reputation; the transformation was never total.

<sup>16</sup> Giddens 1990 usefully distinguishes between “confidence,” based on personal inductive knowledge and typical of traditional societies, with “trust,” based on the ability to calculate risk within complex modern societies.

<sup>17</sup> Cleisthenic system: Manville and Ober 2003; Ober 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Agora and public space: Ober 1995; Camp 1992.

<sup>19</sup> On the distinctive Athenian relationship to measured time, see. Allen 1996.

<sup>20</sup> See Kallet-Marx 1993 and Kallet 2001 for discussion of money in Thucydides’ era; and the debate between Reden 1997, Seaford 1998, and Kurke 1999 on the symbolic value of coinage in the polis. Other recent work on the impact of money includes Figueira 1998, Trevett 2001, and Shaps 2004.

<sup>21</sup> See Sickinger 1999 for a collection of the evidence; Hedrick 1999 for democracy and publicity.

<sup>22</sup> Although cf. below: Thucydides on the leadership role of Pericles and its relationship to deep knowledge of systems.

<sup>23</sup> Compare Ps-Xenophon, for whom “Athenian exceptionalism” seems to lead only to *aporia*: Ober 1998 chapter 1.

<sup>24</sup> Crane 1998.

<sup>25</sup> See Ober 1998, 63-94 and Ober 2001 for details.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Ober 1998, 104-20 on Sicilian expedition and Athenian ignorance.

<sup>27</sup> Balot 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Mytilenean campaign; 3.1-50. Periclean Funeral Oration and performance: Manville and Ober 2003.

<sup>29</sup> Polis as an education: see further Ober 2001b.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Farrar 1988.

<sup>31</sup> On Thucydides’ criticism of democracy see in general Ober 1998, chapter 2..

<sup>32</sup> See, further, Ober 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Connor 1977. Euben 1986 on Thucydides as postmodern political theorist.

<sup>34</sup> See, further, Ober 1998 120-21 and Ober 1996, chapter 6.