

## REVIEW

### THUCYDIDES ON FREEDOM

Mary P. Nichols, *Thucydides and the Pursuit of Freedom*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015. Pp. 208. Hardback, \$49.95. ISBN 978-0-8014-5316-8.

This book sets out to ‘explore Thucydides’ commitment to the cause of freedom’ (1). This commitment, Nichols argues, is manifested in the historical account which Thucydides creates: her contention is that the *Histories* reveal not just the way in which freedom acts as a political goal (for Sparta as well as for Athens), but also the ‘failures and excesses’ (2) to which the pursuit of freedom can lead. Nichols’ further claim is that this same theme is also the (or at least, a) key to understanding Thucydides’ practice as a historian, one which similarly seeks to find a balance between freedom (above all, the freedom to analyse and to criticise the events he describes) and the constraints imposed by the limits of his knowledge of those events.

In support of this hypothesis, Nichols offers a set of readings of key moments or themes in the *Histories*. These readings, which follow the order of Thucydides’ work, form the core of each of the book’s five chapters; the book as a whole therefore takes its readers systematically (albeit not comprehensively) through some of the high points of Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War.

We start (in Ch. 1) with Pericles. Nichols is unpersuaded by those who have been tempted to see any irony or subversion in Thucydides’ presentation of the man: Thucydides’ account of Pericles is, for Nichols, intended as a case-study of the possibility of a truly idealistic politics, a politics infused with ‘nobility’, a term which recurs in Nichols’ discussion in this chapter. (Hermocrates, by contrast, though similar in some respects is, she argues, set up by Thucydides precisely to show what Periclean politics would look like with the nobility taken out of it.) Freedom, meanwhile, is what the Periclean approach to politics both requires and engenders: ‘Pericles’ politics as Thucydides presents it demonstrates the very possibility of the freedom required for deliberation and choice’ (28).

The theme of political deliberation (and its absence) reappears in the second chapter, which concentrates on the fates of Mytilene and Plataea. Nichols sees a clear contrast not so much between the substance of Athenian and Spartan action in these two unedifying episodes, but in the route by which each side reaches those actions. While the fate of individual Plataeans can be scrutinised, the basic decision that death is the appropriate punishment for those deemed guilty is never up for debate; the Athenians, by contrast, are

shown to deliberate at length over the course of action they should take, and it is this deliberation, Nichols argues, which ‘shows us the superiority of Athens’ (74).

Ch. 3 shifts the focus wholly to Sparta—or rather to one (atypical) Spartan, Brasidas. In fact, a key part of Nichols’ argument here is precisely that Brasidas not only does not, but could not function in a truly Spartan context (she notes that Brasidas, the uncharacteristically un-Spartan speaker, never speaks at Sparta or to Spartans). On the other hand, Brasidas’ freedom from Sparta is not absolute, and the promise of liberation which he offers to the Greeks is, therefore, also constrained: ‘Brasidas transcends his city in trying to make true its noble purpose of liberation, but ... his actions depend on the necessities that Sparta provides’ (103–4).

The fourth chapter deals with Melos and with the Sicilian Expedition, paying particular attention to the disruptive role of Alcibiades in these events. (Nichols’ interesting suggestion is that Alcibiades is hidden in plain sight in Thucydides’ account of the fate of Melos: the abandonment of restraint and the belief in the possibility of conquest without limits which the episode demonstrates are, she suggests, intended to be read with Alcibiades’ distinctively amoral approach to politics in mind.) For Nichols, Alcibiades is both the exemplar and the instigator of an approach to political action which has become dangerously unconstrained, with famous (and famously disastrous) consequences.

Ch. 5, finally, brings to the foreground an idea which has been lurking in the background for much of the book: that is, the connection between freedom and home. Here, Nichols explores the various ways in which leading actors in the *Histories*—Brasidas, Alcibiades, Nicias, Thucydides himself—are, often at critical moments, physically removed from their native cities, and traces the ways in which physical dislocation intersects with their freedom of political action, or, in another way of formulating the relationship, in which the freedom of the individual actor might conflict with, or even mitigate against, the freedom of the city as a whole (Nichols sees this latter theme as a particular characteristic of Alcibiades’ behaviour).

There is much to like in this book. Nichols’ readings and interpretations are always thoughtful, regularly persuasive, and, even when (to this reader) unconvincing, nevertheless thought-provoking. But it is also, at times, a rather frustrating work. The greatest frustration relates to the core theme of the book: freedom. Nichols does offer a definition of the term in her introduction (3–4), but it is rather brief, and does not really engage with the rich and complex varieties of freedom (and freedom vocabulary) which we find in Thucydides (and other Greek authors). This looseness of definition continues throughout the work, so that it is sometimes hard to tell precisely what sort of freedom we are dealing with (and how it might relate to other senses of the term); likewise, it is not always clear whether the freedom which is being discussed is one which

Thucydides (or his actors) was interested in or would have recognised, or one which emerges from Nichols' own explanatory framework. Nichols' analysis of the Mytilene Debate in Ch. 2, for example, argues that the speeches here (especially that of Diodotus) are deeply concerned with the question of Athenian freedom, and the connection between freedom and power; of Diodotus' speech, we are told that 'free and powerful ... is precisely what he in the end asks the Athenians to be' (63). But the freedom which is explicitly discussed in Diodotus' speech is not that of Athens but rather that of the Mytileneans, and the relationship between freedom and power in this speech (unlike, certainly, in other speeches in the *History*) is presented as something antithetical rather than complementary (as, for example, at 3.45.6). This does not, of course, mean that Athenian freedom cannot also be an underlying theme of the speech, but Nichols' discussion leaves me uncertain about exactly how Thucydides (or Nichols, or both) envisage that latter theme operating, and in particular how the (implied) emphasis on Athenian freedom interacts with the (explicit) commentary on the Athenians' suppression of their allies' freedom. This is, surely, an important and problematic question, and it is therefore rather tantalising to find it raised, but not fully engaged with.

The frustration that this sometimes rather allusive approach to the text can cause is, it is probably fair to say, one which is likely to be more strongly felt by a classicist or ancient historian than by those who come to this book from some other, particularly philosophical or social scientific, perspectives. Nichols' approach to Thucydides is deeply informed by (though not, to be sure, dictated by) that of Leo Strauss, and, like Strauss, she is interested in reading Thucydides as a commentator whose interests (and utility) transcend his own specific political context. To complain, therefore, that Thucydides seems (at times) to serve as a jumping off point for more abstract reflections on the nature of politics (or freedom), rather than to remain at the heart of the analytical project, might in some ways be to miss the point of the enterprise. On the other hand, such a view would also seem to be in tension with Nichols' own position that her reading of the text as a meditation on the themes of freedom, homecoming, and politics is one which Thucydides himself endorsed—indeed (as noted at the start of this review) one with which his own practice as a historian is fundamentally implicated.

Overall, then, this is a book which is certainly worth reading. Its central theses might not be wholly persuasive to all readers (though of course it is hard to think of any reading of Thucydides which would gain universal acceptance among his methodologically and ideologically diverse readership). But it is hard to dispute the importance of the questions which Nichols' study

encourages us to (continue to) grapple with: what is Thucydides' purpose in writing his history, and what should our purpose be in continuing to read it?

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