

## REVIEW–DISCUSSION

Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 243. Hardcover, \$85.00/£55.00. ISBN 978-0-521-19266-8.

Martha Taylor, *Thucydides, Pericles, and the Idea of Athens in the Peloponnesian War*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 311. Hardcover, \$85.00/£55.00. ISBN 978-0-521-76593-0.

[*Note:* Tables of Contents appear at the end of the review]

What did Thucydides really think, and what message did he intend his readers to take from his work? According to one tradition of his reception in the modern era, his own account of his aims and working practices in 1.20–22 can be taken at face value: his core belief is that accurate knowledge of the events he describes will be useful to his readers, and so he dedicated himself to reporting those events as completely and accurately as possible. This is how many historians of ancient Greece since Grote have tended to read him, as a reliable (if not indeed unimpeachable) source of information about past events; they may show some concern about the veracity of the speeches—at times, fiercely defending their reliability in the apparent fear that questioning Thucydides here might lead to questioning his entire work—but for the most part his account is accepted as a straightforward reflection of historical reality in all its complexity, which can then be used as the basis of modern accounts of the same reality.

This is, however, by no means the only way of reading Thucydides. Contemporary political theorists, for example, read Thucydides as a kind of political theorist, albeit one with an alien style of argument and presentation. Since Thomas Hobbes, but above all since the mid-twentieth century, he has been seen as concerned with identifying and elaborating general principles of social behaviour or international relations, which are developed and supported through the analysis of empirical evidence from one specific historical context but applicable to others, including the modern world. The primary question for political theorists, therefore, is not the accuracy of Thucydides' account of specific events in the fifth century but the nature of the ideas that he sought to develop through his account—a question that is made more difficult to answer precisely because Thucydides, for contingent

reasons, chose to tell a story rather than setting out the abstract political principles that were the intended message of his work.

Philologists and classicists—all those considering ancient historiography as a literary genre rather than simply a source of evidence—have reached a similar position to the political theorists from a quite different direction. Even a brief consideration of Thucydides' literary practices and the role of selection, interpretation and representation in all historiography, let alone a detailed study of the rhetoric of the speeches or the construction of the narrative, leads to an emphasis on the way that the historian's own conceptions, beliefs and purpose will inevitably shape the resulting text. Thucydides has clearly made significant choices in what events to include with what level of detail, how to present the connections between them, which individuals to put forward as the leading actors and what motivations to attribute to them (or rather, to reveal through his account of their words and deeds). Although he eschews virtually all direct commentary on the events, beyond his initial statement that understanding them is useful, and is one of the most strikingly absent authors from his own text, many readers have experienced the strong sense that this absence is a deliberate concealment, another rhetorical technique to promote his agenda: it is clear that his account must be organised around an idea or set of ideas about the events described, if not expressly designed in order to persuade his readers to accept his conception without noticing that they had done so. It was such an impression of Thucydides that led Nietzsche to emphasise the richness of his hidden thoughts, and the need to take his work apart line by line in order to uncover the ideas that secretly give it life. Classicists seek the conceptions that are manifested in the form and techniques of Thucydides' history in order to understand the work and its imaginative effects as an end in itself, whereas political theorists want to strip away the literary and historical aspects in order to uncover universal principles that can be analysed in the abstract and applied elsewhere—but they share a common concern with trying to establish what Thucydides really thought as the key to his work.

The two books under review represent a partial union of these two strands; both are basically classical in conception and approach, offering a reading of Thucydides' work and its underlying message through the close analysis of his rhetorical and narratological techniques, but both make reference to recent readings of the text in political theory, such as those of Peter Euben or Clifford Orwin, and express a wish that the ideas they uncover may inform wider debates outside classics. Both are responding to one prevalent reading of Thucydides' views, which sees him as an adherent, or at any rate admirer, of Pericles and, by implication, his imperialist policies. This reading is linked to the well-established 'realist' interpretation of Thucydides in International Relations, which in its crudest form takes the Melian Dia-

logue's 'might is right' argument as a straightforward statement of the historian's own views, but it lays particular weight on Thucydides' closing judgement on Pericles' leadership in 2.65: this was the period when the city was best governed and reached the peak of its greatness, and all the indications in the first few years of the war were that Pericles' plans for victory, having essentially provoked the war with Sparta in order to maintain and extend the Athenian empire, were working. Both Taylor and Foster seek to detach Thucydides from Pericles, rejecting the notion that the work should be seen as a retrospective justification for Athenian policies at the start of the war; they both do this not by re-asserting the image of Thucydides as a scrupulously neutral and objective chronicler of events, but by putting forward an alternative reading of the underlying tendency and message of his work.

They do this by considering distinct, though closely related, themes in Thucydides' account. Taylor focuses on the radical idea propounded by Pericles that Athens as a polis was constituted by its citizens, wherever they might be, rather than being bound to a particular territory; this conception could induce the Athenians to withdraw from their land and leave it to be ravaged by the Spartans as a means of defending their empire overseas. She suggests that this idea—not an invention of Pericles, not least since it harked back to the evacuation of Athens in the face of the Persian invasion a generation earlier—was alien and disturbing to traditional Greek conceptions of political community. By expounding such a policy, Pericles exposes the radical and dangerous nature of his vision of Athens, inadvertently revealing that Athens could attain imperial power only by abandoning all tradition and becoming something monstrous (or, that this had already happened). Thucydides, Taylor argues, sought to offer a critique of this Periclean project. In the speeches, he made Pericles appear to condemn himself out of his own mouth; the words and ideas must have been recognisably Periclean in order to persuade a contemporary reader of their veracity, but they are presented in such a way that the true nature of the Periclean imperial project, and its incompatibility with all the surrounding rhetoric of tradition and communal values (above all in the Funeral Oration), are clear to every reader. Moreover, the narrative of events then constantly undercuts and critiques Pericles' vision of an imperial maritime Athens, showing it to be dangerous and unworkable in practice; its moral consequences are explored in passages like the Melian Dialogue, the ability of the Athenians to survive and prosper away from their territory is questioned (above all in Sicily), and so is their ability to cast aside traditional conceptions in the way Pericles' project demanded.

One of the consequences of this reading, an aspect which Taylor doesn't fully develop, is that it makes Thucydides a thoroughly conventional figure

in terms of Athenian politics; opposition to naval power and maritime entanglements, seen to be too closely associated with the democracy, was and continued to be a well-established position of Athenians with oligarchic–aristocratic sympathies. Insofar as an implicit aim of Taylor’s project is to ‘rescue’ Thucydides from too close an association with aggressive imperialism—to show that he both anticipated the failure of the policy from the beginning, and rejected its underlying principles—it succeeds in doing this only by reinforcing the view of the historian as a typical anti-democrat and defender of conservative traditions. Where he appears radical and unusual is in the literary techniques he uses to develop this case against Pericles, skilfully juxtaposing speeches and events so as to undercut the claims and expectations of the speakers, and still more skilfully crafting speeches in which the speakers, quite plausibly, unconsciously revealed their hidden intentions and effectively undermined themselves as they spoke. Taylor builds her case by working through the entire text, looking at key examples in detail to show how they develop and reinforce the same criticism of the Periclean idea; there are times when, inevitably, this starts to feel rather repetitive, as every discussion reaches the same conclusion, but a number of these analyses are truly fascinating and thought-provoking—Taylor’s discussions of the Funeral Oration and the Melian Dialogue come particularly to mind.

Foster’s book is on the face of it narrower in scope and ambition: she looks just at the first two books of Thucydides’ work, up to the death of Pericles and the judgement of 2.65, rather than seeking to cover the entire text. Further, she focuses on what initially looks like a narrower question, the way that ‘war materials’ are discussed and evaluated, both in the *Archaeology* (where the increasing wealth of Greece and the increasing destructiveness of its wars go hand in hand—and men already reveal their inability to estimate or evaluate power and resources adequately) and in the main narrative. Like Taylor, she explores the effects of Thucydides’ ironic juxtaposition of speeches and events, showing the persistent tendency of the Greeks (by no means only Pericles) to over-estimate their own resources and hence to make poor decisions based on misunderstanding of their situation, resulting again and again in disaster—and this is while the war is still going relatively well for the Athenians. In the course of this analysis, however, it slowly becomes clear that her conclusions, and her conception of Thucydides’ project, are broader than they first appear: Pericles’ imperialist policies are being used as a case study with wider applicability, rather than being the sole focus of either Thucydides’ or Foster’s account. Thucydides, she suggests, offers Pericles as the strongest example of a more general pathology, on the grounds that if even this visionary leader failed to evaluate the present, anticipate the future or develop adequate plans for either, then it can scarcely be expected from others. The rest of Thucydides’ work both explores the

consequences of this for Athens and the rest of the Greek world, and provides further examples; Foster herself does not have to, as her examples from Books I and II are sufficient to establish this as a key theme in Thucydides' work that others can develop or use to inform their readings if they wish.

It is remarkable that two books dealing with such similar themes and offering quite similar readings should appear in the same year from the same publisher; it is difficult not to compare the two, and already a tendency is visible whereby reviews of one have tended to reference the other (most often, reviews of Foster, as Taylor's book appeared earlier—and, indeed, Foster herself has reviewed Taylor). As indicated above, while there are indeed substantial overlaps in both focus and method (especially the ways in which both authors interpret Thucydidean speeches and show them to be ironised by the narrative), apparently small differences in subject matter and assumptions lead them to substantially different conclusions and perspectives. Certainly neither is an adequate replacement for the other: both make a significant contribution to the debate about Thucydides' ideas, and offer stimulating readings of his literary methods. The similarities between them, however, not only in their methodologies (the influence of Stahl seems especially strong, along with the work of Hornblower and Rood on narratology) but also in some of their aims and assumptions, do seem to reflect the current state of the discussion in the different disciplines that study Thucydides. It therefore seems worth taking this opportunity to consider them together as a means of identifying some of the general tendencies—as well as considering how far each author succeeds in taking the debate further.

Firstly, as already noted, there is the nature of the project: the wish to 'rescue' Thucydides from the accusation that he is a mere partisan of Pericles. This has a long history—the idea of the *Unparteilichkeit* of Thucydides, and his ability to be perfectly objective even about someone like Cleon, has been a staple of claims about his historical authority for centuries—and the only real innovation here is the willingness of Taylor to turn him into an anti-Periclean instead (whereas Foster's Thucydides more closely resembles the traditional version, standing above factional or national loyalties to cast a penetrating, illusionless eye over all human affairs). As it did with previous proponents of such claims, this compels both authors to develop some tortuous arguments when it comes to the eulogy in 2.65, seeking to explain how this is not really an endorsement of Pericles and his policy: Foster's claim, for example, that Pericles did grasp that Athens was as great as she had ever been, but failed to realise that this was the peak of her power and that it was precisely her greatness that would lead to her destruction, coupled with the argument that Thucydides admired and praised his leadership qualities but not his plans. This relates closely to

another conventional aspect of the idealisation of Thucydides, namely the assumption of consistency: the idea that, even if the work was never completed or fully revised (the obvious response to such an assumption), nevertheless Thucydides' ideas about the war remained consistent, or at any rate were consistent from the time he began to write until his death, and so this is how we should read his work.

This assumption has yielded some fascinating insights in recent years, above all by showing how apparent inconsistencies in the organisation of the narrative, in the views expressed by different speakers and in the relation between speeches and events actually serve to convey Thucydides' understanding. Clearly, however, it is possible to take the assumption of an omniscient, all-controlling narrator too far; sometimes even Thucydides nods, not every omission is a significant absence, and it seems at least possible that he changed his mind about Pericles or failed to square his personal admiration for the man with his broader views about the causes and consequences of the war. Perhaps he was, on this occasion, simply wrong: why does it matter? The fact that Thucydides has been deployed in the past to legitimise aggressive foreign policies may be one explanation, making an anti-imperialist Thucydides an attractive proposition (rather than rejecting the deployment of Thucydides in debates about contemporary affairs, because we're generally relieved that anyone finds a classical text relevant). This isn't, unfortunately, a theme that either author explores; their avowed focus is on 'the real Thucydides' and the classical scholarship, rather than the different ways in which he has been received and appropriated by non-classicists.

A second and related theme is a certain tendency towards reductionism, a belief that Thucydides has a single idea or conception that permeates his entire history. This tendency is found particularly in social-scientific readings, which often assume (generally on the basis of a few key passages, or just the Melian Dialogue) that Thucydides' work *is* simply an elaboration of a basic doctrine of realist political theory—the entire text is effectively reduced to the line that 'the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must' (it is invariably Richard Crawley's translation that is quoted). Historical and classical readings are far more complex and sophisticated, but there is still the risk of deciding that *a* theme is actually *the* theme. Taylor's book comes closest to this position, or at least creates this impression by interpreting passage after passage as revealing the same underlying argument (although this means she has little to say about episodes like the Mytilene debate, which do not so closely reflect the Periclean agenda or the Thucydidean critique of it, and she seems to interpret the stasis at Corcyra solely as prefiguring Athenian problems). Foster has less of a problem here, partly because her claim is that the theme

of war materials and judgements about them is only one strand of Thucydides' account, albeit an important one, and partly because it can be seen as an aspect of a more general Thucydidean conception of the unpredictability of human events and the tendency of humans to overestimate their knowledge.

At the same time, as a result of this reductionism, Taylor's version of the Thucydidean conception has the merits of both simplicity and potential applicability to other contexts. Her presentation may sometimes make it appear that the work as Thucydides conceived it was of purely local interest, relevant only to an understanding of the specific events of the war—Thucydides' purpose was simply to criticise Periclean policy, and his intended audience was contemporary Athenians. However, clearly these ideas can be seen in more general terms: claims that maritime empires are prone to over-reaching themselves and that political communities, at any rate in ancient Greece, are closely bound to their territories are susceptible to empirical testing and could then be taken as more general principles in human relations. If we read Thucydides as saying that his history will help its readers understand the way that events tend to turn out, given the 'human thing', then this is the sort of lesson we might expect him to be offering, and certainly it is the sort of idea that most political theorists look for and find in Thucydides. Foster's conception is more explicitly general and generalisable, but is at the same time less directly useful: the idea that events are contingent, contextual and unpredictable, and that humans generally fail to get to grips with this, as illustrated time and again by the events that Thucydides describes, is the sort of truth that humanities scholars rather than social scientists favour. In this reading, Thucydides conceives of his work as offering an understanding of the complexity of the world, rather than providing simple principles for engaging with the world.

Which of these interpretations seems most persuasive and productive will depend on many things; above all, the reader's own conception of Thucydides, and what kinds of truth or lessons they expect to draw from reading him. My own preference for an open, ambiguous and complex Thucydides, engaged in worrying about the unpredictability of events and the limits of human understanding rather than offering simple remedies, means that I feel drawn to Foster's account more than Taylor's, but I would stress again that both are important and stimulating books, essential reading for anyone interested in the question of what Thucydides' message to his audience may be and how he artfully conveys this through his presentation of the past.

Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism*

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