War, Power and Justice: Thucydides

The lecture introduces the Greek historian and political thinker Thucydides and some of the main problems in his masterpiece The History of the Peloponnesian War. The lecture's aim is to give you a glance into why it is much richer and more complex than labelling it as a foundational text of political realism would lead us to believe.

Who was Thucydides?

Born around 50s of 5th century BCE

Wealthy Athenian Citizen - meant that he played an important part in democracy - minority was involved in politics, knew key players in ruling, had to serve in military if asked to do so

Part of democracy and war efforts	Served as military commander in 424BCE	Condemned to exile for his defeat

Thucydides composed his famous history of the Peloponnesian War in 432-404 BCE. - done for a modern reason

Not just an account of war; written "as a possession for all time" – to learn from history! - arguably the first of its kind of the history books.

ad bellum justifications for war

"War began when the Athenians and the Peloponnesians broke the Thirty Years Truce […]. As to the reasons why they broke the truce, I propose first to give an account of the causes of complaint which they had against each other […].

ad bellum justifications for war (cont)

But the real reason for the war is, in my opinion, most likely to be disguised by such an argument. What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta." (Book 1, 23)

"In voting for war on the ground of breach of the treaty the Spartans were not so much influenced by the arguments of their allies as by their fear of increasing Athenian power, when they could see already so much of Greece already subject to Athens." (Book 1, 88)

Athens power was growing which caused fear in Sparta - Sparta doesn't initially go to war - Sparta's allies provide the final push to go to war - sense of threat - T is of the opinion that the Spartans were influenced by the allies and by fear - open to interpretation though

Thucydides and the Melian Dialogue (416 BCE)

The Melians (from the island Melos and originally Spartan colonists) had tried to stay neutral in the war; Athens want them in their alliance. Melians are forced into a hostile stance when the Athenians tried to attack them

The Melians refused to submit to Athens, but eventually all Melian men were executed and the women and children enslaved

The Melian Dialogue - Book 5, paragraphs 84-116 (pp. 301-307)

Not so fast!

Power game vs. international legal system bound by treaties

Universal human nature vs. national character

Rationality vs. irrationality (i.e. belief in moral values)

States as actors vs. importance of political leaders (e.g. Athenian General/statesman Pericles)

Overview

1. Introducing Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War

2. Interpreting Thucydides: The Mytilenian Debate and the Melian Dialogue

3. The Legacy of Thucydides' Work

Thucydides and The Peloponnesian War

"All who approach Thucydides even for the first time will surely appreciate that they are in the presence of a truly great writer. His history is a masterpiece." (Welch 2003: 303)

Rational and human rather than divine explanations - wanted to write this fairly rather than objectively, explicitly wanted to provide a factual account rather than a divine explanation

"And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible." (Book 1, 22) - setting out an objective approach, trying to get the truth through accounts.

Sponsored by **CrosswordCheats.com**
Learn to solve cryptic crosswords!
http://crosswordcheats.com

Mytilenean Debate (427 BCE)

Mytilene is an autonomous ally of Athens & wants to rule Lesvos… it decides to revolt. (early in the war)	Timing of the revolt: Athens was weakened by plague and Spartan fleet had been promised as support

Unlike most of the Athens' allies, Mytilene is ruled by oligarchy

Democratic and oligarchic factions of the island divided over alliance

The Spartan support is limited to (under the order of Salaethus) providing heavier arms to the common people - Levsos is quite far away - offer support but not the amount that the leaders of the rebellion expect.

But the common people, hungry and desperate, threaten to hand over city to Athenians

Spartan fleet doesn't show up on time to support the Mytilenaeans

Paches (Athenian commander) recaptures Mytilene with the help of the people

This causes a debate within Athens

The Melian Dialogue

Thucydides represents two sides of the argument:	Melians argue along principled, moral lines of what is fair, just, and right. - shared lines of justice and respect for gods - let us be neutral

The Melian Dialogue (cont)

Athenians: "You are not in an equal contest, so questions of honour maintained or shame avoided have no relevance. You should be thinking more of your survival, and that means not resisting a force that is much stronger than you." (book 5, 101). - no, because they are a small power and we are a big power we cannot have this debate.

"The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" / "The dominant exact what they can and the weak concede what they must"

"Might Makes Right"…?

Peloponnesian War – 431-404 BCE

War fought between city-states Athens and Sparta + allies	Athens is a rising power and Sparta is a ruling power - after the persian war - Athens were the dominant power within the islands but sparta were growing in power	Sparta is eventually the winner of the war	or rather, Athens lost the war – increasingly weak leadership, imperial overreach… - leaders were dying off in battle and of old age and the plague all the competent generals were dead. Athens tried to fight too many wars at the same time.

Peloponnesian War – 431-404 BCE (cont)

Both city-states were Empires leading an alliance of independent states	Delian League: Athens' alliance of states (founded for war against Persia and increasingly powerful)	Peloponnesian League: Sparta's alliance of states

Two major power blocks in a stand-off like a 'cold war'

Athens was a naval power; Sparta was a land power

Athens was a democratic* state; Sparta an oligarchic state

Mytilenean Debate (427 BCE)

What to do with the Mytilenaeans after their defeat?	Kill every adult male and enslave the women and children

Want revenge, reach the decision to punish them severely but overcome with doubt at their decision - may have overreacted, call a second debate should they stick or do something different.

Two perspectives: Cleon vs. Diodotus

Sponsored by **CrosswordCheats.com**
Learn to solve cryptic crosswords!
http://crosswordcheats.com

Mytilenean Debate (427 BCE) (cont)

Cleon: empires can't be run with compassion; be consistent; don't waste time; trust your instinct; we need to set an example; punish all as they deserve - sophist and real person - very hard-nosed and ruthless	Diodotus: we must be prudent; we should show moderation in our response, because that is much more strategic in the long run (does he also appeal to morality?); punish only the 'ring leaders' of the revolt - may not have existed suggestion that T merged two people together to create this person - only punish the people who started and led the rebellion - punishing will just make future rebellions happen - long time thinking for the future - wants to maintain a successful empire.

Thucydides' legacy Interpreting Thucydides

A historian or a theorist of International Relations?	"And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible."

Thucydides' legacy Interpreting Thucydides (cont)

"I shall be content if it is judged useful by those who will want to have a clear understanding of what happened – and, such is the human condition, will happen again at some time in the same or a similar pattern. It was composed as a permanent legacy, not a showpiece for a single hearing" (Book 1, 22)

"One must turn [Thucydides] over line by line and read his concealed thoughts [or ulterior motives: Hintergedanken] as clearly as his words: there are few thinkers so rich in concealed thoughts." (Friedrich Nietzsche quoted in Harloe and Morley 2012: 13)

"The name of Thucydides has the power to persuade, even or especially to persuade those with little or no direct knowledge of his work, and even when that name is invoked to support positions with no obvious connection to anything that Thucydides himself ever wrote." (Harloe and Morley 2012: 1-2)

Thucydides as "the founding father of Realism" (e.g. Joseph Nye)?

Thucydides' legacy Interpreting Thucydides (cont)

Robert Keohane suggests that Thucydides puts forward three key assumptions of classical political realism:	'states (or city states) are the key units of action';
	'they seek power, either as an end in itself or as a means to other needs';
	'They behave in ways that are, by and large, rational, *and therefore comprehensible to outsiders in rational* terms' (Keohane, 1986, p. 7)

* rational = pursuing self-preservation through power

Sponsored by **CrosswordCheats.com**
Learn to solve cryptic crosswords!
http://crosswordcheats.com