

## Critical Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Resonating Voices of Thucydides

James Rochlin\*

**Abstract:** *What makes Thucydides' work so incredibly alive and relevant for global politics today is the analytic of how the story is told. Three points stand out in this regard. First, the The Peloponnesian War features a momentous epistemological jump. One facet of this, among so many, is that divinity is swept aside and humans become the masters of their own destiny. Next, despite its recent reputation for being a classic text of Realism, Thucydides' work is not subject to the stultifying shackles of ideological boundaries. It is vastly eclectic and non-doctrinaire. Finally, the unraveling of the 27-year epic war is told through a multitude of competing voices that evokes the reader to interpret the text's ultimate meaning. It is this element that injects so much life into the text, since rather than being subjected to the dictation of 'truth' through an author's monologue, the reader must assume the role of judge and truth producer. These themes of epistemic rupture, human agency, eclecticism and situated truth are vital in relation to analyzing the current juncture in world politics, especially regarding the opportunities and perils of navigating through a sweeping transformation of the global constellation of power.*

**Keywords:** Thucydides, critical theory

---

\* Professor at University of British Columbia

## Introduction

I began re-reading the classic strategic literature and embarking on some new reads in the late 1980s and early 1990s, after being inspired by the writings of Robert Cox and RBJ Walker.<sup>1</sup> Cox's leftist work resurrected and extrapolated the insights of Gramsci to world politics, while Walker's postmodern piece highlighted the continued relevance of Machiavelli. Subsequently, upon re-reading Machiavelli and reading Gramsci for the first time, two very broad themes stood out. First, how refreshing it was to read classic literature when the intellectual straightjacket of the Cold War was finally over. The world was being redefined, the binary and Manichean world of US capitalism versus Soviet Communism had melted. Intellectually, it was as if the sky had opened, and reading the classics helped flesh out what was old and new in world politics. And they still do at a time of tremendous flux in the global constellation of power - the sky is as intellectually open as ever. Second, in sharp contrast to today's ridgedly demarcated ideological camps of realism/Marxism/postmodernism, generally the classics are refreshingly eclectic. For example, while Gramsci has become the darling of the post-Marxist left, what is striking in *The Prison Notebooks* is that his intellectual hero was none other than the quintessential Realist Machiavelli. Michel Foucault, through his brilliant work on the politics of epistemology, grounds his pathbreaking postmodern perspective on the identical temporal ruptures noted by Marx. The 'Greats', it seems, were not weighed down by ideological purism. Why should we be?

Over the last couple of decades, with each re-read, I have become increasingly wowed by the sheer brilliance of Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*. Even at the most superficial level, the narrative of the piece is strikingly relevant, with its focus on the tumultuous rise and decline of a hegemonic power. Uneven growth among states in an anarchic system is perceived to be the recipe for global war. At the beginning of the epic, Thucydides informs us of the brazen zeal and over-confidence among Athenians, especially among young men.<sup>2</sup> War was going to be fun! At that stage, life was good in Athens, but it tyrannized and exploited its colonies in a reckless manner that would prove disastrous as the long war painfully unfolded. Key chances for peace were missed near the beginning of the imbroglio, when blind greed prompted Athenian policy makers to "grasp at something further."<sup>3</sup> A point of no-return and demise commenced for Athens following the infamous Melian debate and the disastrous invasion of Sicily, after which Athens shriveled amidst losing battles and the social decay emanating from both the plague and the fall of democracy at the hands of the oligarchs.

Despite that compelling storyline, what makes Thucydides' work so incredibly alive and relevant for global politics today is the analytic of *how* the story is told. Three points stand out in this regard. First, the *The Peloponnesian War* features a momentous epistemological jump. One facet of this, among so many, is that divinity is swept aside and humans become the masters of their own destiny. Next, despite its recent reputation for being a classic text of Realism, Thucydides' work is not subject to the stultifying shackles of ideological boundaries. It is vastly eclectic and non-doctrinaire. Finally, the unraveling of the 27-year epic war is told through a multitude of competing voices that evokes the reader to interpret the text's ultimate meaning. It is this element that injects so much life into the text, since rather than being subjected to the dictation of 'truth' through an author's monologue, the reader must assume the role of judge and truth producer. These themes of epistemic rupture, human agency, eclecticism and situated truth are vital in relation to analyzing the current juncture in world politics, especially regarding the opportunities and perils of navigating through a sweeping transformation of the global constellation of power. Let us proceed to consider some of Thucydides ideas and how they can serve as an anchor, a reference point, from which to consider aspects of the current global political economy.<sup>4</sup>

### The Big Jump

An epistemic rupture is key to how Thucydides tells the story of war and power. He begins the book as follows: "Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between Peloponnesians and the Athenians...Indeed this was the greatest movement yet known in history..."<sup>5</sup> Immediately we are told of a rupture in two senses. First,

Thucydides described the Peloponnesian War as the 'greatest movement' - the big one, as it were, in terms of both its magnitude and social significance.

The most important rupture, though, does not concern the war as an extraordinary event, but occurs at the epistemological level. Thucydides places himself in the third person at the beginning of the first sentence of the book. Thucydides is attempting to tell the story of the war from the view of an even-handed and distanced observer. This epistemic break occurs with respect to how Homer told the story of war and power. It is noteworthy that a couple of times near the beginning of Book One Thucydides emphasizes and belittles the "exaggeration" of Homer's poetic telling of the Trojan War.<sup>6</sup> A common point of focus for many assessments of Thucydides is his important statements regarding his quest for the "investigation of truth" to create "...an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it."<sup>7</sup> But how was such truth established? For Thucydides, historical truth can be established through observation and corroboration. In Book One, Thucydides explains his methodology regarding the plethora of facts and speeches that appear in his epic.

With reference to the speeches in this history...some I hear myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said. And with reference to the narrative of events, ... it rests partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me...My conclusions have cost me some labor from the want of coincidence between accounts of the same occurrences by different eyewitnesses, arising from imperfect memory, sometimes from undue partiality for one side or the other.<sup>8</sup>

Truth, then, is what Thucydides views as the essence of what he sees and hears with distanced and balanced consideration, as well as information he filters from what he judges to be his most reliable compatriots (the ones with clear memories and apparently disinterested views).

At least as significant as Thucydides' quest for what some see as objective truth,<sup>9</sup> and far less debatable, is his elimination of divinity as the determinant of human action, as had been the case for Homer. These authors are epistemological worlds apart, and this explains Thucydides' strident efforts to distance himself from his famed predecessor. In sharp contrast to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Thucydides placed humans in full control of their actions. For Homer, it was the Greek Gods - such as Zeus, his wife Hera and a long cast of other divine creatures with astonishingly human characteristics - that pulled the strings of human action. Consider this passage from the *Iliad*, where Priam tells Helen

I lay no blame upon you, it is the gods, not you, who are to blame. It is they that have brought about this terrible war with the Achaeans.<sup>10</sup>

Homer told the story of politics as if humans were tethered by puppet strings to an assortment of soap-opera-like Greek gods who were the true holders of power. Thus, arguably the clearest and most important epistemic rupture in the text is that Thucydides' analysis of the war and social power focused on human agency - humans, not Gods, make politics. Nietzsche, then, was tardy in his observation that "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." It wasn't the Modernists of 19<sup>th</sup> century that committed the murder - epistemologically Thucydides did away with Him more than two millennia earlier.

Thucydides' emphasis on human agency, rather than divinity, is manifested in another manner in the text. Rather than a philosopher's monologue on the meaning of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides' tells the story in a way that mixes commentary from himself with a heavy reliance on a wide cast of characters that make speeches, and debate with one another, over a 27 year period. Some of the classic points in the text are told by Thucydides

himself, for example, such as his observation that “The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable.”<sup>11</sup> The vast array of the text’s classic passages, including key statements regarding natural ‘laws’ governing humankind, comes from the plethora of speeches and debates in the text - these points are spoken through the voice of the orators, rather than through Thucydides himself. For example, so many of the political ideals in the piece are found in the speech by Pericles in Book Two’s “Funeral Oration.” And on the darker side of politics, a speech by Athenians notes that “Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, we are presented with situated truth as spoken through the competing voices of those who populate the vast text. The reader is placed in the role of the judge who must deliberate upon the diverse and conflicting views presented by a litany of characters over a period of 27 years. Rather than being told the straight truth, then, the reader is left to figure it out.

Telling the story of war in such a fashion underscores the task at hand for current students of global politics: how to navigate a course in the global arena that takes into account the perspectives and truths of a growing roster of highly diverse and well-armed actors. The epistemic jump described by Thucydides resonates when considering the rupture we are currently witnessing in world politics. There has been a shift from an era of ideological contestation, that framed global politics beginning with challenges to British hegemony in the 1870s and ended with 9/11 and the subsequent fading of US hegemony, to the current dawn of an epoch marked by epistemic fracture.

The dimensions and implications of this rupture are still in an incipient stage, they continue to unfold and perplex. Let us consider some of these, in relation to Thucydidean thought. One example of this jump is growing, though still stunted, concern with the biosphere. While Modernist science operated on an epistemic plane of function as reflected in the field of biology, postmodern science embraces complexity and multifaceted inter-relations and hence the emerging field of the biosphere. ‘Man’s’ conquest over ‘mother nature’ as a mantra of development is no longer tenable, yet ecocide continues due to the lingering dominance of production and development models from the Modern era.<sup>13</sup>

While ecocide represents an important security threat in itself, it is part of the wider rupture in global strategic affairs known as the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA).<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically, the RMA is about both change and continuity. Some classic strategic themes remain as important as ever, but can be viewed through a new optic. Fundamental elements of strategic affairs - such as the politics of time, space, intelligence and the political motivators of fear/honor/interest - remain as important now as they did in Thucydides’ day. But they are refracted differently in the current era through such themes as complexity, asymmetric warfare, the time-space compression, ultra-surveillance, network and cellular organization, identity politics, and so on. The actors have also changed within the RMA. The nation is still a major player in global affairs - but increasingly significant non-state actors are proliferating in the form of TNCs, NGOs, and groups of people linked globally by an idea rather than being bound by territory.

Traditional political actors such as the nation state generally continue to behave within the parameters of the familiar Modernist framework. While emerging countries, such as the BRICS,<sup>15</sup> may have a different political agenda than the powers-that-be, they are playing the traditional game of international politics with all of its understood rules. So, too, are US enemies in the Middle East - such as Iran and Pakistan - where the element of divinity is tied more intimately with politics than in the West. Nation states, in general, are designed to fulfill a certain function - one that is not that different from the role performed by the city states of Thucydidean times. The state is the hinge between the biopolitics performed within clearly demarcated territorial boundaries,<sup>16</sup> and the proclivity toward maintaining and maximizing power within an international system largely defined and influenced by the great powers of the day. Despite their vast differences, states have much in common. Even US rivals, such as China and Russia, lamented the 9/11 attack and expressed genuine sympathy for the US - terrorist attacks represent a threat shared by all nation states.

It is non-nation-state actors who most clearly reflect the apparent epistemic rupture in global politics. It was Al Qaeda’s attack on 11 September 2001 that re-introduced in the loudest and starkest manner for the Modernist West the politics of epistemology. It re-incorporated the element of divinity into global politics that

Thucydides had banished some 24 centuries ago. Its newfangled style of combat included suicide warriors, the transformation of commercial jets into weapons of mass destruction, network and cellular organization, and de-territorialized politics. Beyond Al Qaeda, there are a host of other non-state actors that reflect various aspects of this epistemic transformation. One of these is the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas Mexico, who represent a rainbow coalition based on a fresh system of thought that unites indigenous knowledge, feminist epistemology, respect for the biosphere, and so on.<sup>17</sup> Their reliance on the internet saved them from the fate of previous guerrillas that were exterminated by the Mexican army, as was the case in the state of Guerrero in the 1970s. And rather than relying solely upon local recruits, the Zapatistas disseminated a carefully sculpted platform to global supporters connected by tens of thousands of personal computers dispersed throughout the planet. These non-state actors wielded power by operating on an epistemological plane distinct from that of traditional Modernist nation states. Both now and in Thucydides' day, epistemic considerations represent a significant factor for the analysis of global politics.

### **Words and Truth Production**

Language was clearly important for Thucydides as an analytical variable. For example, the dozens of speeches that appear in the piece provide competing perspectives of truth, and raise the Nietzschean question of 'who is speaking'. The meaning of truth is filtered through the distinct interests of a wide assortment of orators. And these are often expressed through a calculated selection, arrangement and tone of the words to achieve the desired political result. With regard to the ultimate power of such words, much weight is assigned to a capacity for rhetoric and style. A final point regarding Thucydides' analytical consideration of words concerns their capacity to change meaning over time and context. Let us consider the current relevance of Thucydides' observations concerning language.<sup>18</sup>

The examples of Al Qaeda, the Taliban and the Zapatistas, among others, are indicative of the nation state's eroding monopoly on the Modern and centralized production of truth toward globalization's decentralized and dispersed production of many truths. Benedict Anderson demonstrated that near the dawn of Modernity the development of the printing press at the time of the French Revolution was essential in generating nationalism in the nascent Modern state. The medium, the technology, of word transmission is key to political organization and identity politics. Technological factors, of course, are also fundamental in the complex arrangement of Post-Modernity. We noted the computer's role with regard to the Zapatistas, and implicitly with regard to the RMA. Other facets of this trend are unfolding with handheld communication devices - such as the role they have played in the 'Arab Spring' and the role they daily perform with regard to dispersed surveillance. Handhelds permit even further dispersion of information, speakers and interface - the fascinating consequences of which are still unfolding.

Let us further consider Thucydides' general themes regarding language in relation to the implications of postmodern technology. He paid a great deal of attention to the speeches, the discourses, of those empowered to speak. In the main, speakers were leaders and entrusted representatives of various political entities. They were among the elite. A different brand of this kind of elitism was apparent throughout the long Cold War era of 1945-1990. Big media - often heavily influenced by ideological, governmental and class interests - became the filter through which a highly select group of individuals were allowed to make speeches to the masses. The internet and personal computer, and then handheld communication devices, diluted the power of media moguls and their political allies by decentralizing the power to make speeches, as it were, to huge audiences. While the TV and radio dictate speeches to a passive audience, the internet and handhelds have fomented instant interface. Technology, in essence, has empowered to the nth degree the number of speakers and speeches available to be heard by increasing numbers of people, and has stirred instant interaction. Although a certain amount of wealth is required to access this evolving technology, its effect so far has been plebian rather than elitist. It is unclear how long such unfettered communication will last. For example, strong filters of internet communication are apparent in countries such as China and may grow globally.

The record of the word continues to transform in politically important ways. Earlier it was observed that Thucydides struggled to provide the essence of the speeches, since it would have been impossible for him to remember them word for word. At other times, he needed to rely on the observations of trusted others. We have witnessed a steadily increasing technological capacity to record words, inflections, nuances, context and so on. Simultaneously, words recorded with exactitude have been subject to the warps of intended meaning generated by manipulative editing, political spins, lack of appropriate context, and so on. Paradoxically, technology has achieved the ability both to record speeches with the utmost accuracy and to fundamentally distort speeches for political motivations.

While Thucydides strove for accuracy in his presentation of the speeches, he was keen to the fluidity of words - particularly to the transformation of their meanings in changing times and contexts:

Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal supporter; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question incapacity to act on any; frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting a justifiable means of self-defense.<sup>19</sup>

This problem has remained relevant. Hobbes is widely credited with being the first to translate Thucydides into English in a publication that appeared in 1629, but the first English edition was translated in 1550 by Thomas Nicolls. As a keen observer noted, in just 75 years Nicolls' translation seemed out of date due to rapid and widespread changes in the English language. Throughout the translation process, Thucydides' ideas and words greatly influenced Hobbes - the former's 'fear/honor/interest' seemed to drift through the latter's emphasis on competition/glory/diffidence.<sup>20</sup>

Today we see many political manifestations of Thucydides' ideas regarding the changeability and nuances of words. From the US optic, for example, today's 'terrorist' was yesterday's 'commie'. 'Who is speaking' still influences the definition of words: what Colombia's largest guerrilla movement, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), call 'retentions' and 'taxes' are referred to by the Colombian government as 'kidnapping' and 'extortion.'<sup>21</sup> The definition of NATO's 'victory' in Afghanistan has shifted from obliterating the Taliban shortly after 9/11 to negotiating with them, and perhaps even handing power back to them, a decade later. Further, the aforementioned dispersion of words through devices such as the internet and handheld encourage increasingly localized meanings of words. Finally, as Thucydides' saw, words are politically nuanced - what is spoken is not always what is being signified. This is most fully apparent in his discussion of Sparta's pretext for a pre-emptive war, when Spartan envoys present an ultimatum to the Athenians to "drive out the curse of the goddess" or warfare is certain.<sup>22</sup> In a similar way, war was launched against Iraq due to its falsely alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction, and the invasion of Libya was cloaked as a humanitarian mission.

## **Time and Space**

Another expression of the epistemic rupture apparent in Thucydides' telling of the Peloponnesian War concerns temporal and spatial elements. Thucydides told the story of the War through clearly dated linear time over a 27 year period. This contrasts with Homer, for example, who paid virtually no attention to dates or to the temporal dimension in general, and to Herodotus,<sup>23</sup> who did not always commit himself to a rigidly sequential analysis. Thucydides' temporal rupture brings to mind the recent jump experienced in global politics through dromology and the smashing of time and space.<sup>24</sup> The implications of this are still unfolding. A fascinating interview in 2010 with drone pilots, for example, revealed just a few of the unfurling perplexities of the time space compression. One of these people, a family man who resides in Las Vegas, told of how he drives daily to work at nearby Indian Springs, where he pilots a drone some 7,500 miles away in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. He often was able to

see the expression on the faces of humans on the ground who were filled with terror as bombs fell from his drone halfway across the world. After a day's work, it was time to drive home, take the kids to soccer, and have dinner with his family.<sup>25</sup> The collision of these two worlds has myriad implications that have not yet been fully appreciated. In 2011 drones are the cutting edge for the military aviation industry.<sup>26</sup>

Thucydides also discussed other temporal dimensions of politics that have had lasting resonance. He looked at political time in terms of eras. For example, he observed a 7 year period of stasis that masqueraded as peace but was merely an interlude between war, which closely resembles the inter-war period analyzed by E.H. Carr.<sup>27</sup> And of course, Thucydides focused on eras as cycles, with the rise and decline of great powers - a theme that dominates current politics in so many ways.

A final point worthy of emphasis with regard to temporal dimensions of power is Thucydides' analysis of a point of no return. He demonstrated that the cascading decline of Athens commenced when it began to fear subordinate states within its own empire more than it feared the Spartan alliance.<sup>28</sup> The decline accelerated in the aftermath of the Melian debate, whereby Athens' insisted on a for-us-or-against-us menu that further alienated weaker entities throughout the system.<sup>29</sup> This momentum further intensified three years after the Melian episode when, in Book Seven, Athens was badly defeated and utterly demoralized upon invading Sicily. "They had come to enslave others, and were departing in fear of being enslaved themselves."<sup>30</sup> Here we also have a spatial element at play, since Thucydides emphasizes that Athens had little understanding of Sicily geographically prior to the attack. All this had been exacerbated by a growing debt crisis, which together with mounting military losses, led to the fall of democracy at the hand of the oligarchs in Book Eight. Let us proceed to consider this further.

## Political Economy

Various dimensions of political economy figure strongly into Thucydides' analysis of the war. Early in the book he takes care to note the distinction between Athens' penchant for opulence and luxury compared to Sparta's relative modesty.<sup>31</sup> He also underscores the role of fear, honor and *interest* (economic) as the basic catalysts of politics. Uneven growth, including economic growth, provokes war in his estimation.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the long piece, Thucydides notes the centrality of production in relation to armed conflict. For example, the war was played out in relation to agricultural production seasons - there were breaks for harvests, planned invasions at the time of harvest, an armistice in spring to turn more attention to planting crops, and so on.<sup>33</sup>

With regard to Thucydides' analysis of an apparent 'point of no return' for Athens, three points stand out in the realm of political economy. First, Athens' imperial pursuits and related exploitation represented an important factor vis-a-vis its global decline. Second, the protracted war prompted a growing and ruinous debt crisis for Athens from which it could not extricate itself. Finally, what would today count as class politics drifts into Thucydides' analysis at key points in the narrative. Let us consider these points more fully.

With respect to imperialism, Thucydides' notes early in Book One that "For the love of gain would reconcile the weaker to the dominion of the stronger, and the possession of capital enabled the more powerful to reduce smaller states to subjugation."<sup>34</sup> Thus, the global political hierarchy paralleled an economic hierarchy based on larger powers exploiting smaller ones. Also in Book One, Thucydides highlights the beginning of an escalating and self-inflicted threat to Athens: its exploitation of its colonies: "Of all the cases of defection, that connected with arrears of tribute and vessels, and with failure of service, was the chief; for the Athenians were very sever and exacting, and made themselves offensive...."<sup>35</sup> Here we are confronted with what RBJ Walker has termed the inside/outside duality: a state that pursues the 'good life' within its borders but which behaves badly in the perceived dog-eat-dog global arena. Perhaps this situation is the clearest in speeches by Pericles in Book Two. In the first speech, the famous Funeral Oration, Pericles describes the political good life in Athens - its achievements and aspirations. In a subsequent speech, however, Pericles starkly admits that Athens is a tyranny that exploits its colonies: "For what you hold is, to speak somewhat plainly, a tyranny; to take it perhaps was wrong, but to let it go is unsafe."<sup>36</sup>

While Pericles indicates it would have been unsafe to let the colonies go, it proved unsafe to keep hold of them. This becomes clear as the war plays out over the eight books. In Book Three, for example, the Mytilenians note the plummeting popularity of Athens due to exploitation: “And as long as the Athenians led us fairly we followed them loyally; but when we saw them...try to make the allies their subjects, then our apprehensions began...all the allies were enslaved, except ourselves and the Chians...Given these examples, we could no longer trust Athens as a leader.”<sup>37</sup> Also regarding the political perils of Athens’ exploitation, in Book Seven Thucydides describes a strategy by the Syracusan expedition that involved invading Athenian colonies and then allowing more than 20,000 of Athens’ slaves to go free.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps most powerful in this regard is the discussion of the Athenian strategic backfire in Sicily whereby, as was noted, “they had come to enslave others, and were departing in far of being enslaved themselves.”<sup>39</sup>

While the US is not yet running with its tail between its legs, fearing enslavement as the Athenians did when fleeing Sicily, its alliances in key areas of the South have been seriously challenged since the new millennium. Nowhere is this clearer than with respect the US relationship with Latin America. Washington’s relations with the region, considered its unshakable sphere of influence in the Cold War, have reached an historical ebb in a trajectory beginning in 1998 with the election of Hugo Chávez. Shortly afterwards, the radicalization of Argentina was prompted by its severe debt crisis between 1999 and 2002 after being a posterboy for US-sponsored neoliberalism.<sup>40</sup> Since then, other key countries have veered left, including Bolivia, Ecuador, and perhaps Peru under Humala. While the regional powerhouse of Brazil could not be considered Leftist, its policy in Latin America and globally through the BRICS alliance has regularly challenged US influence. An example of this is Brazil’s leading role in creating the Union de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR),<sup>41</sup> a regional council of South American countries designed to deal with regional strategic issues without the United States.

Thucydides also addresses the political economy of war. In Book Three, for example, when describing the horrors of war, he notes that “The case of all these evils was the lust for power arising from greed and ambition; and from these passions proceeded the violence of parties once engaged in contention.”<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Athens’ ‘point of no return’ also seemed to entail a debt crisis to which Thucydides first alludes in Book Six. Thucydides’ observed Alcibiades’ role in Athens decline as follows: “For the position he held among the citizens led him to indulge his tastes beyond what his real means would bear, both in keeping horses and in the rest of his expenditure; and this later on had not a little to do with the ruin of the Athenian state.”<sup>43</sup> In Book Seven, Athens languishes from the double war in Syracuse and at home, and from the related “financial distress” of war costs and mounting debt.<sup>44</sup>

Athens found itself militarily exhausted, economically wasted, and socially bankrupt as the war dragged on. In Thucydides’ narrative the death knell comes with the collapse of the inside/outside duality of the good life inside and the primitive world outside - at the end of the book, even the inside’s good life comes to an end with the fall of democracy and the rise to power of the oligarchs. Here Thucydides employs what today would be termed class analysis. Through the voice of Athenagoras, a Syracusan, the following analysis of democracy and class is presented:

It will be said, perhaps, that democracy is neither wise nor equitable, but the holders of property are also best fitted to rule. I say, on the contrary, first, that the word *demos*, or people, includes the whole state, oligarchy on a part; next, that if the best guardians of property are the rich, and the best counselors the wise, non can hear and decide so well as the many; and that all these talents, individually and collectively, have their just place in a democracy. But an oligarchy gives the many their share of the danger, and not content with the largest part takes and keeps the whole of the profit;

Finally, in Book Eight just prior to Athens’ fall to Sparta and then the ironic fall of both to Persia, Thucydides describes the death of democracy at the hands of the tiny class of oligarchs who employ the political instrument of fear to suppress the masses. “Fear, and the sight of the numbers of the conspirators, close the mouths of the rest; or if any ventured to rise in opposition, he was promptly put to death in some convenient way, and there was

neither search for the murderers nor justice to be had against them is suspected.”<sup>45</sup> The relation between power and class remains as important now as in Thucydides’ day.

All this seems particularly interesting in relation to the plight of the United States in the global political economy. Certainly Washington appears dragged down by war and debt. The Eisenhower Research Project at Brown University estimates that US wars and related operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq will cost the US between \$3.2 trillion and \$4 trillion. That cost includes medical costs and disability for current and future war veterans. However, that figure does not include interest payments on war-related debt, and the US has borrowed the entire amount for these endeavors in the decade-old War on Terror.<sup>46</sup> Those costs add to the larger US debt crisis and economic malaise, as politicians debate new ceilings for a Federal debt more than \$14 trillion. The US debt crisis, together with the escalating European debt crisis that threatens to undo the cornerstone currency of the European Union, has not deterred Washington and key European powers from risky intervention in Libya, Syria and elsewhere. Military misadventures, a ballooning debt crisis, loss of relative economic power and perhaps military power to China, and depleting global influence even in Latin America, have been compounded in the US by steadily rising inequity. The gini coefficient in the US has risen almost annually since the 1970s to reach 46.8 in 2009. The post-2008 crisis has brought into sharper contrast the gap between the country’s rich and poor. And while the Left seemed to be a viable alternative in the Great Depression, the current discourse in the States is locked between various flavors of the Right. The United States was once the epitome of the ‘New World,’ as it rebuked the tight class stratification of Europe in favor of meritocracy. But rising inequity suggests that the ball is moving in the opposite direction. It raises the specter of the US falling to the oligarchs, as Athens had. While it may be premature to suggest that the US has reached the same ‘point of no return’ faced by Athens in the Peloponnesian War, the parallel between the cases is worthy of consideration.

### **Human Agency, Choice and Levels of Analysis**

Perhaps the most significant element of the epistemic jump apparent in Thucydides’ analysis of the Peloponnesian War was the weight he afforded to human agency and choice, in contrast to telling the story of war and politics in terms of divinity, as did his predecessors. Hence, there is a strong emphasis in Thucydides’ work on the individual level of analysis - on judicious choice and good leadership. There are clear good and bad guys in the narrative, as exemplified by their political choices. Pericles, for example, is celebrated by Thucydides, who laments when his advice is not heeded by the Athenians, and as a result, they proceed to lose the war.<sup>47</sup> Later in the piece, Nicias in Book Six emerges as the voice of prudent restraint, futilely urging the Athenians not to choose to invade Sicily.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, Alcibiades is certainly a menacing figure, whose political choices plunge Athens deeper into debt and military loss. And, although he dies fairly early in the war, Cleon was noted for his relentless promotion of war over peace, and for his penchant for merciless violence.<sup>49</sup> Finally, through the voice of a Spartan envoy in Book Four, we are told that choosing “peace instead of war” is perhaps the most important choice politicians and citizens can make: “Indeed if great enmities are ever to be really settled, we think it will be, not by the system of revenge and military success, and by forcing an opponent to swear to a treaty to his disadvantage; but when the more fortunate combatant waives his privileges and, guided by gentler feelings, conquers his rival in generosity and accords peace on more moderate conditions than expected.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, the menu of political choice is key in Thucydides’ work.

While individual choice and human agency are emphasized, they are met by resistance at both the domestic and systemic levels. Hence, while important choices exist, their range is often constrained by a variety of variables. Thucydides notes, for example, how political culture, and a national psyche, can affect decisions and decision makers. In Book Two, after Athens is struck simultaneously with the plague and the mounting sacrifices of warfare, Thucydides describes a national psyche of despair and anarchy: “Men now did just what they pleased, coolly venturing on what they had formerly done only in a corner, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying and those who before had nothing succeeding to their property.

Perseverance in what men called honor was popular with none...” In another example, clear limits to choice were apparent once Athens appeared to hit a point of no return after the Melian debate, as noted earlier.

Thucydides also demonstrated how systemic factors affected the range of choices for politicians and voting citizens. City states operated in an anarchical global system, as it were, and were bound in their actions by an appreciation of the human capacity for violence, aggression and greed. Thucydides emphasized what we might today call a tendency for balance in the global system, and the political intricacies of alliances.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, binding ties to allies were among the key constraints for decision makers. As we observed, many believed in ‘laws’ that governed the global system. Some of these sharply limited human choice, such as the view stated early in Book One that uneven growth leads to global war.

But despite those constraints emanating at both the systemic and city-state (later national) level of analysis, human choice is celebrated and god is removed from the political equation. Not only did this distinguish Thucydides from predecessors such as Homer and Herodotus, it began an historical trajectory whereby the West removed divinity from politics in contrast with the Chinese reliance on the Tao, or Way, apparent in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* or the role of Allah in Muslim analyses of politics such as those authored by Ibn Khaldun and Shaybani’s.<sup>52</sup> In the West, the ‘will of God’ was substituted by ‘chance’ and ‘luck’ to explain things that plain rational analysis could not. Machiavelli, for example, assigned the role of luck, or ‘fortuna’, to half of human actions.<sup>53</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

It was emphasized at the outset that four general themes found in Thucydides’ work are particularly relevant for the current juncture in global politics. First and foremost is his emphasis on epistemic rupture. He had the brilliance and audacity to think outside the episteme of his time. He departed from noteworthy predecessors such as Homer and Herodotus by his severance of divinity from the realm of politics, his devotion to the accurate telling of events, and his reliance on linear time with spatial references. Rather than being the sole purview of postmodern studies, it is important to underscore that the analytical significance of epistemology in Thucydides’ work is central to what many consider to be the seminal realist text. As we observed, it can serve as an important reference from which to consider the as epistemic rupture that is currently apparent in global politics, not only within the West but between the West and other regions.

In many ways Thucydides’ work finds concentric space with strains of existentialism such as the writings of Jean Paul Sartre, particularly with respect to his insistence on human agency and choice within the political sphere. As Sartre observed, “Dostoevsky said, ‘If God didn’t exist, everything would be possible.’ That is the very starting point of existentialism.”<sup>54</sup> And with this freedom, for both Thucydides and later Sartre, political choices become supremely significant for both leaders and common citizens. Especially through Pericles and Nicias, Thucydides demonstrates that good leadership entails a mix of ethics and power politics - not unlike the duality between idealism and realism to which E. H. Carr would later refer. Thucydides strongly emphasized that peace, the ultimate ideal for global politics, is the paramount choice that leaders and common folk must pursue. Given Thucydides’ important celebration of human agency, there is also the important issue of who is empowered with political voice. Athens’ supreme fall from grace was marked by the termination of democracy and the introduction of oligarchy. These themes remain as relevant today as they did 2,400 years ago.

Situated truth represents a central element of Thucydides’ work - we observed how various renditions of the truth were uttered by various speakers and by Thucydides’ himself. The individual, presiding over Thucydides’ vast narrative, assumes the role of judge. Absolutist and impositional proclamations of truth represent a recipe for warfare. An appreciation of situated truth is part of prudent politics and successful conflict resolution. In a world of nuclear weapons, biological and chemical warfare, and the transformation of so many dimensions of warfare apparent in the RMA, learning to accept political difference is more important than ever.

Finally, Thucydides' analysis is refreshingly eclectic, and removes many of the walls that separate the dominant perspectives of today. He emphasizes the epistemic break that Foucauldian thought celebrates, various elements of today's leftist approaches are found in Thucydides' discussion of political economy, and of course he set the foundation for traditional realism. Thucydides' enthusiasm to think about the world through such a broad optic, and his telling of an important narrative in such a brilliantly creative way, can serve as important inspiration for navigating a course through global politics at a time when the US seems to be playing the part of Athens.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> See Robert Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 12, #2, 1983, pp. 162-175; Robert Cox, *Production, Power and World Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); and RBJ Walker, *Inside Outside: international relations as political theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Landmark edition, Robert Strassler, translator, (New York: Free Press, 1996), p 93. For another good translation of Thucydides, see Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, translated by Steven Lattimore (Cambridge: Hackett, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, p. 234.

<sup>4</sup> Beyond other works cited here, for further discussions of the significance of Thucydides' work, see: C. Bruell, "Thucydides' View of Athenian Imperialism," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 68, 1974, pp. 11-17; David Cartwright, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); W. R. Connor, "A Post Modernist Thucydides?" *The Classical Journal* (vol. 72, #4, 1977, pp. 289-298; Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); G.E.M De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); L. Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969); Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 95, #3, 2001, pp 547-560; Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Hunter Rawlings, *The Structure of Thucydides' History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); C.D. Reeve, "Thucydides on Human Nature," *Political Theory*, vol. 27, #4, August 1999, pp. 435-446; R.D. Sears, "Thucydides and the Scientific Approach to International Politics," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 23, 1977, pp 28-40; Peter Singer, "The Thucydides Tapes," *Political Science and Politics*, vol. 32, #3, 1999, pp. 596-601; Philip Stadter, ed., *The Speeches in Thucydides* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973); Thom Workman, "The Tragic Reading of Thucydidean Tragedy," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 27, #1, 2001, pp 51-67;

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of interpretations of Thucydides in the realist tradition, and with an emphasis on points such as objectivity, see, for example: Laurie Johnson Bagle, "The use and abuse of Thucydides in international relations," *International Organization*, Vol 48, Winter 1994, pp. 131-153; Michael Doyle, "Thucydidean Realism," *Review of International Studies*, vol 16, 1990, pp. 223-23; Jonathan Monten, "Thucydides and Modern Realism," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol 50, 2006, pp 3-25; and Steven Forde, "International Realism and the Science of Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol 39, 1995, pp.141-160.

<sup>10</sup> Homer, *Iliad* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1995), p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding Complexity Theory and Ecocide, see: Thomas Homer-Dixon, "Strategies for Studying Causation in Complex Ecological-Political Systems," *Journal of Environment and Development*, vol. 5, #12, June 1996, pp 152-148; and Thomas Homer-Dixon, *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization* (New York: Island Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> For a broader discussion of the RMA, see: Andrew Latham, *Understanding the RMA* (Geneva: Programme for Strategic Studies and International Security Studies, 1999); Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Andrew Krepinevich, "Calvary to Computer: The Patterns of Military Revolutions," *The National Interest*, #37, Fall 1994, pp 25-40; Michael Dartness, "Insurgency Online," *Small Wars and*

---

*Insurgencias*, vol. 10, #3, Winter 1999, pp 123-143; Charles Dokubo, "An Army for Rent: Private Military Corporations," *Civil Wars*, vol. 3, #2, 2000, pp. 49-62; Steven Metz, "The Next Twist of the RMA," *Parameters*, vol. 30, #3, 2000, pp. 40-53; and James Rochlin, *Social Forces and the Revolution in Military Affairs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example: Leslie Armijo, "The BRIC countries as Analytical Category," *Asian Perspective*, vol. 31, #4, 2007, pp. 7-42; and Kristalina Georgieva, *BRIC Countries in Comparative Perspective* (Moscow: World Bank, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> See Michel Foucault, "The Birth of Biopolitics," *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York: Free Press, 1997), pp. 73-80.

<sup>17</sup> See James Rochlin, *Vanguard Revolutionaries: the Cases of Peru, Colombia and Mexico* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

See the webpage of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, [www.ezln.org](http://www.ezln.org).

<sup>18</sup> For another look at Thucydides' use of language, see Richard Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 95, #3, September 2001, especially pp 548 and 555.

<sup>19</sup> Thucydides, pp. 199-200.

<sup>20</sup> See Richard Schlatter, "Hobbes and Thucydides," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol 6., #3, June 1945, p. 352-357.

<sup>21</sup> See James Rochlin, *Social Forces and the Revolution in Military Affairs*, op. cit., Chapter Two.

<sup>22</sup> Thucydides, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> See Herodotus, *The Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Paul Virilio's *Speed and Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986) and *The Information Bomb* (London: Verso, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> See *Los Angeles Times*, "Drone pilots have a front-row seat on war, from half a world away," 21 February 2010.

<sup>26</sup> See *Washington Post*, "Global race on to match US drone capabilities," 4 July 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Thucydides, p. 316.

<sup>28</sup> Thucydides, see for example Athens' fear of revolt within its empire, p 309. For a broader discussion of these, see Daniel Garst, "Thucydides and Neorealism," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 33, 1989, p. 3-27.

<sup>29</sup> Thucydides, pp 351-357.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 472.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 148, 159, 223 and 285.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 442-443.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 472.

<sup>40</sup> "Who Said the Cold War is Over: The Political Economy of Strategic Conflict Between Venezuela and Colombia," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, #2, 2011, pp 237-260.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, J.C Amorosos, La Creación y la Evolución de UNASUR," *Revista Debate*, vol. 2., #2, 2008, pp.21-39. See also UNASUR's website, [www.pptunasur.com](http://www.pptunasur.com).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 370.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 443.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 518. The rise of the oligarchs is discussed on pages 518-533.

<sup>46</sup> See Brown University's Eisenhower Research Project, "Costs of War," <http://costsofwar.org>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 366-368.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., See, for example, pp. 234 and 310.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 233.

<sup>51</sup> The discussion of alliances in relation to the causation of war is most apparent in Book One, where Thucydides shows how subordinate powers lured Athens and Sparta into war.

<sup>52</sup> See Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Boston:Shambhala, 1998); Ibn Khaldun, *An Arab Philosophy of History* (Princeton; Darwin Press, 1987); and Shaybani's Siyar, *The Islamic Law of Nations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1966).

<sup>53</sup> See Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: Mentor, 1980), p. 120.

<sup>54</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism* (New York: Citadel, 1997), p. 41.