

BOOK REVIEW

Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present. By GEOFFREY HAWTHORN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xxiv + 274. Paperback, \$26.99. ISBN 978-1-107-61200-6.

Geoffrey Hawthorn makes two main points about Thucydides in this very interesting and eloquent book: the actors in his history are politicians and not idealistic constructs: subject to various pressures, more or less thoughtful, and usually trying to deal with short term solutions; on the other hand, the events that result are not demonstrations of any higher truth. As Professor Emeritus of International Politics at Cambridge, he writes from that perspective, but he relies on the careful translation by Jeremy Mynott, with its interesting footnotes, and he is widely read in Thucydidean scholarship (especially Hornblower and Rood), as well as in political science and philosophy (especially Bernard Williams).¹

Hawthorn identifies himself as a "realist" like Thucydides himself. His definition of the term is stated most fully in chapter eleven: "One can read him to incline to what a philosopher might now describe as a non-separability thesis on motive, intention and action and a non-isolability thesis on motive, intention and action and their context; to the view that one may analytically distinguish between motive, intention and action, but one cannot in practice always separate them; that one may be able analytically to distinguish between motive, intention, action, and their contexts, but cannot in practice always isolate these" (149). He distinguishes "intent," which is more rational from "motive," which is a tendency towards action, largely irrational and ruled by context. He consequently views "(l)ogoi," the accounts people give, as "political acts" (17). This approach usefully observes outcomes of speeches; however, content is largely ignored.

¹ Mynott, Jeremy. *Thucydides: The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Hornblower, Simon. *A Commentary on Thucydides* (3 volumes). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 2001, 2010. Rood, Tim. *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hawthorn claims that it is impossible to assign an ideology to Thucydides (15) and on the whole demonstrates it convincingly. However, he unnecessarily dismisses those parts of Thucydides that show a broader view of the cause of defeat (mainly II.65 and VI.15) as “unsatisfactory” (66). On the other hand, it leads to his intriguing and unconventional defense of Book VIII as “Thucydides’ most sustained and compelling exposition of practical politics” (226). These views are a valuable contribution to Thucydidean studies.

This focus on irrational motives and context in some cases usefully explicates Thucydides’ statements. In his discussion of the “truest cause” (Thuc. I.23.6), in particular the statement that Spartan “fear” was one of the causes, he observes Spartan fear is mentioned by others but not by the Spartans themselves, who claim to act for other reasons (28). In his realist critique, he sees that events concerning Corcyra and Potidaea do not provide a “clear motive” for war (37), and that Corinth’s speech in the assembly in Sparta is “almost devoid of content” (43). Later, Hawthorn says Sparta was “hustled into war” (68). Sparta’s motive is their desire to be preeminent in their alliance; it is Sparta’s “necessary identity” (49, a term taken from Williams).² This is what Thucydides meant by “fear.”

In Chapter six, titled “Absent Strategies” Hawthorn argues that there was no strategic goal in Athens before 413, and that the siege of Plataea demonstrates Sparta’s lack of a larger strategy in the same period. (75) Repeatedly, Hawthorn returns to the limited usefulness of words. The Plataeans admit this in their desperate defense speech. In the Mitylenian debate, Hawthorn claims that Thucydides would have agreed with what Cleon says about Athenian addiction to oratory, an exaggeration, surely. The chapters about *stasis* are strongly praised in terms of the limits of language: “Thucydides’ account of the inversion of values is the only discussion in Greek of paradiastole, redescription, which occupied Hobbes” (101, fn. 21, with a comparison to *Animal Farm*).

There are cases where Hawthorn could have made greater use of his views. He says that the Melian dialogue reveals Athenian “hybris,” but he had earlier said, “The Athenians wanted to demonstrate their superiority in moving at sea” (161). That is a realistic motive he recognized in the case of the Spartans. He may depend too much on the received opinion here.

This is also true of the Sicilian expedition. Hawthorn points out the confusion of motives behind the Athenian decision to go to Sicily. The inconclusive

² Williams, Bernard. *Moral Luck: Philosophical Essays 1973-1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1981.

debate of the Syracusans illustrates the uselessness of words. However, he does not sufficiently take into account Athens' confused motives after they arrive in Sicily. A case in point is his discussion of Nicias' remark that that he would rather die on the battlefield than return to Athens and be put to death by the assembly. (VII.48.4) Dover³ called this "disgraceful," and Hawthorn concludes that Nicias cared too much for his own survival. However, he refers in a footnote to Rood's view that Nicias "functions as a filter for an aspect of his state at that moment" (201, fn. 20). This is the more realistic explanation.

Hawthorn concludes that Thucydides' views on politics are not particularly relevant to the higher organization of contemporary societies, but he shows that individual actors are still involved, and their motives are as complex as they are in Thucydides. Thucydides also resists "illusion and obtrusively conclusive judgement" (238). This realism is still relevant, even if Thucydides is very much a man of his own "place and time."

MICHAEL SHAW

University of Kansas, mhshaw@ku.edu

³ Gomme, A., A. Andrewes, K.J. Dover. *Commentary on Thucydides: Volume 5*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.