

BOOK REVIEW

Thucydides and the Pursuit of Freedom. By MARY P. NICHOLS. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015. Pp. x + 198. Hardcover, \$49.95. ISBN 978-0-8014-5316-8.

This densely argued book is not simply about freedom, but rather about freedom and law (nomos), seen as one aspect of the dialectic of motion and rest: “It is my contention that, for Thucydides, ((freedom and dependence)) stand together” (15). This concept is drawn from Strauss, to whom this book is much indebted. In his essay on Thucydides in *The City and Man* (Rand McNally 1954, 218; cited by Nichols, 14), Strauss speaks of the opposition of Athens and Sparta as “the specification of the most comprehensive ‘causes,’ i.e. motion and rest.” This book is therefore part of the stream of Thucydidean scholarship that could be labeled philosophical, as opposed to literary and textual. However, Nichols has read widely in various approaches to Thucydides, and a nuanced reading results. Freedom is required for creativity, but when it loses contact with law and appears in a pure form, it loses contact with reality.

This dialectic between freedom and law occurs at several levels. The most obvious is the conflict between Sparta, the city of rules, and Athens, the city where freedom is above the rules. On the personal level, Themistocles, Pericles, and Brasidas stand for freedom, while the Spartan king Archidamus and Nicias stand for rules. For Thucydides the historian, freedom (his exile) is necessary for evaluating facts, but he is also limited by his commitment to the facts.

The substance of this discussion occurs in four chapters, each covering a major section of the text, and in a fifth chapter, which traces a related theme that occurs in several passages. In the first chapter, Nichols observes that Pericles can rule the *demos* because of his freedom, and he uses his rule to allow democratic deliberation to occur, but he also is himself anti-democratic (“rule of the first man,” as Thucydides puts it). In his Funeral Oration, Pericles shows himself “above nomos,” and then describes a city that is ruled by its free will, and not by nomos. This model of Athens, however, is not the same as the actual Athens. But because of its beauty and nobility, this image of Athens deserves to be preserved.

Nichols depicts Athens and Sparta as shown to be opposite in terms of openness to deliberation and to clemency in the second chapter which treats matters at Mytilene and Plataea. The description of Cleon as “most violent” by Thucydides may reveal his bias, but it accurately describes Cleon’s actions in the Mytilenian debate, where he rejects deliberation and is thus anti-Athenian. Diodotus may misrepresent the *demos* of Mytilene, but he creates an image of Athens as “a powerful and free people” (63); that image resembles the Athens Pericles described, a city that shows clemency. In the trial of the Plataeans, the Spartans demonstrate the opposite of clemency when they do not allow the Plataeans to offer a defense, and yielding to Theban violence is indefensible.

Nichols finds Brasidas’ success due to his freedom in chapter three, “Sparta, Brasidas, and the Liberation of Hellas.” She also raises her second main theme, when she says that he illustrates the tension that exists between home and away in Thucydides. His freedom “makes him distrusted by his city” (79). However, as Nichols admits, “freedom” in this episode only appears as a word that Brasidas uses to persuade cities to revolt from the Athenian empire, and he shows little interest in actually bringing freedom to this region, while Sparta has none at all. “Freedom” has changed into “love of that which is far away” in chapter four, “Sicily, Alcibiades, and the Liberation of Eros.” This *eros* is radically different from the *eros* mentioned in the Funeral Oration; that *eros* was directed towards the power of Athens. Thucydides’ description of the overpowering influence of this *eros* indicates that he is a “tragic realist,” who has limited confidence in the power of reason. (108)

“Homecoming and Freedom” is the title of the fifth chapter, but it is actually about the dialectic of “away” and “home,” and “away” in fact does not exactly correspond with “freedom.” In books five through eight Brasidas never returns to Sparta, and neither do Nicias and Alcibiades. However, these three are significantly different: Brasidas is arguably not “free” in this sense; Alcibiades is free to a fault and Nicias is not free at all.

This concept is clearly significant in the case of Alcibiades. In book six, Alcibiades appealed to this “love of the absent” in the Athenian *demos* and his own character is one of “rejection of all limits.” (109) His plans for Sicily and his plots in Ionia all come to nothing, and overall his career is one of “unlimited motion.” (168)

In Nichols’ concluding chapter, “Thucydides, an Athenian,” Nichols considers Thucydides’ two extended digressions, the story of Aristogeiton and Harmodius, and his account of the end of the career of Themistocles. In these two

digressions, Nichols claims he reveals much about himself: an openness to others' opinions, an awareness of an intelligence superior to that of Pericles, and a balanced view of all forms of government. Thucydides' history, Nichols concludes, is both the product of his freedom of thought and his commitment to home.

The obvious audience for this book is for those who read Thucydides in the tradition so dependent on Strauss, who can see how the current discussion of Thucydides sees limits to the depiction of Thucydides as an ideologically pure realist. However, it is also important for other students of Thucydides to be aware of the concepts and values that the political science community applies in their reading of this endlessly challenging author.

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