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Thucydides:

An Author Still Relevant for the Contemporary Analysis of International Relations?

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Abstract

The present paper aims to assess the relevance of Thucydides's study for international relations, via focusing on his most eminent text, *The Peloponnesian War*. The analysis of its relevance will be done through a tripartite structure, in which the first two parts are symmetric. In a first part, the continuities between Thucydides' historical account and the realist and neorealist theory of international relations will be analysed. While in a second part, the continuities between Thucydides' historical account and the constructivist theory of international relations will be dealt with. Finally, in a third part a limit will be raised, *via* the study of the prescriptive accuracy of *The Peloponnesian War* (on the grounds of new forms of violence).

Key words: Peloponnesian war, realism, constructivism, International Relations, relevance, limit.

Introduction

I doubt seriously whether a man can think with full wisdom and with deep conviction regarding certain of the basic issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian war and the fall of Athens.¹

The United States maintain order in the world through 700 military bases located in 130 different countries. What does this maintain of order presupposes? If order has to be

maintained it assumes the centrality of a propensity towards violence, which has as classic form of expression the war. In *The Peloponnesian War*², Thucydides offers a historical scientific account, ensured through a strict norm of proofs collection and an analysis in terms of cause and effect, of the multiple causalities responsible for war. This account contributes to reveal perennial characteristics (e.g. human nature, structure of international system, etc...) and emphasizes the dynamic of the construction of identities and structures, responsible for wars. Owing the timeless character of these former elements and that “the international system is the realm of recurrence and repetition”³, *The Peloponnesian War* constitutes a genesis of contemporary international relations theories. Therefore, this text is susceptible to provide patterns for international relations security issues and allow foreign policy recommendations. Herein, after the highlighting of similarities between *The Peloponnesian War* content and three modern theories of international relations, respectively realism, neorealism and constructivism, we will however focus on one limit related to the prescriptiveness of *The Peloponnesian War*, due to the emergence of new forms of expression of violence.

A text relevant to the realist and neorealist tradition in international relations

The Peloponnesian War constitutes a genesis of realism and neorealism to the extent that it encompasses five elements reflected in these traditions. These distinctivenesses are: the Hobbesian human nature, the anarchical international system, the self-preservation concern, the security dilemma and the charismatic leadership.

The Hobbesian human nature views humans as innately self-seeking and power-seeking. This has repercussions on the macro-level, states are interested with self-preservation and with dominion. In *The Peloponnesian War*, human nature played a role both in the outbreak of war and in its escalation, because without the *timor* of the Spartans, the Athenian power would have peacefully risen and fallen. In contemporary politics, one implicit variable responsible for the declaration of adversaries, including North Korea, Iran and Hussein’s Irak, marked with the nemesis term *axis of evil* and the subsequent war against terrorism, was the generalized fear after the events of September the 11th in 2001.

The international anarchic structure is an endemic feature corresponding to a sphere unrestrained by any higher authority or universally applicable moral law, characterized by the overriding role of power in interstate relations, causing fear and mutual distrust. Hence the anarchic structure automatically involves the self-preservation concern. In *The Peloponnesian War*, Athens invades the neutral island of Melos and provides it with two options, the

destruction or the capitulation while any potential appeal to justice is excluded. So, the limits of morality are defined by the *raison d'état* and thus the expedient (*sumpheron*) triumphs over the just (*dikaion*). The Melian Dialogue reveals how foreign policy becomes divorced from considerations of justice and correspondingly how it becomes unlimited in its aims. "Nothing so marks Thucydides' work as the sense of living in a world where moral sensitiveness and inherited tradition were a luxury, and the very survival of states hung on the skilful use of power and power alone".⁴ The Melian Dialogue situation has its echo in contemporary history, *confere* the invasion of Czechoslovakia by German military forces in 1939 and by USSR in 1968. Moreover, the capitulation option and its involvements (renouncement to freedom, to national pride, hence the war as a self-preserving instrument) can be putted in parallel with the unreasonable peace settlements stipulated by the *Traité de Versailles* in 1918, which contributed to the outbreak of the second world war.

Anarchic structure affects states behaviour in the absence of an enforcing common authority. Security dilemma or spiral model refers to a situation wherein at least two states are engaging in conflict because of security concerns. It corresponds to the achievement of security *via* the increase of relative power and the engaging in power balancing for the purpose of deterring potential aggressors. This is interpreted as a threat by exogenous sides, hence causing a mimetic action by other states, contributing finally to decrease the overall security. Thus, the security dilemma occasioned by the rise of a great power challenger (e.g. Athens), constitutes a structural factor contributing to systemic instability and increase in the likelihood of war. Contemporary illustrations, where security is a factor for the emergence of conflicts are Israel and Palestine, India and Pakistan and North Korea and South Korea. Both the ancient Hellenic world and the global community of the 21st century have found imperfect ways to reconcile their conflicts of interest, trough the use of balance of power, as demonstrated by the current difficulties to reform the UN Security Council or the ancient quarrels around the Delphic oracle.

Finally, the charismatic role played by leadership within domestic politics corresponds to how a leader and its technical tool, diplomacy, can influence the war process. In *The Peloponnesian War*, war, belligerents' representatives become caught up in ambiguous communication and erroneous calculations. This war appears as a war by accident, as a result of the failure of diplomacy (*confere*, the July Crisis in 1914). As an example, the bellicose rhetoric of Sparta's statesman Stelenaides during its parley with Athens is a determinant in the outbreak of war.

The Peloponnesian War through encompassing five key elements defined *à posteriori* by the

realist and neorealist theory, contributes to underscore its relevance for the contemporary study of international relations. However, analysing it only under the realist and neorealist prismatic provides a superfluous overview of its relevance. *The Peloponnesian War* depicts a comprehensive strategy which therefore involves that it stresses elements of other international relations theories, namely constructivism.

A text going beyond realism and neorealism. Its relevance to the constructivist tradition in international relations

One core claim of constructivism is the emphasis of conventions (*nomos*) and the role they play in regulating human and state interactions, by the acceptance of a mutual constitution of agents and structures. Conventions are constrains and frames for reference, used by actors to understand the world and define their interests. This ensures a logic of intelligibility - some actions are more imaginable. Thucydides grants importance to the linguistic convention's use - which enables the shared meaning that make civilization and cooperation possible. The Melian Dialogue illustrates the importance of language in shaping identities and structures. Melians and Athenians failed to understand each other, because they did not share a common language "words lost their meaning."⁵ Melians' *logos* is particular, limited to their own state, this impeached them to seize the sense of an universal necessity: the greater the power, the higher the necessity of war. (*Confere* the European Union parliament equipped with translators for avoiding misinterpreting.) Linguistic conventions ensure a probable outcome of interpersonal interactions, namely rationality which sustains other forms of conventions.

Another core claim focuses on the social construction of actors, of their identities and interests. In *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides shows that civil society is what actors make of it. In the Hobbesian tradition, the distinguishing feature of domestic level and international level is the presence of a Leviathan in the former, which ensures order. For Thucydides the character of domestic politics can vary from highly ordered and peaceful societies to those destroyed by endogenous anarchy. The Leviathan in himself does not have a constraining policy effect upon the internal society. It is the degree to which citizens construct their identities as members of a community or as atomistic individuals that constitutes the constraining social force imposing order. When the identification of citizens' identities with the community occurs (e.g. Athens *ante* war) conventions restrain actor's behaviour, since "identities are the basis of interest".⁶ When atomism dominates (e.g. Athens *post* war), civil society disintegrates and even the Leviathan cannot maintain peace. The domestic environment in this specific situation has its echo in the actual war-torn international

environment (e.g. civil war in Darfur due among other reasons to the presence of multiple antagonistic ethnicities having embedded repartitions).

A text facing a contemporary limit rooted in constructivism

The Peloponnesian War is facing a limit related to constructivism. Indeed, if a model of social construction applies, then each particular temporal and spatial sequence is characterized by differences between identities, actors, forms of cooperation, interests etc... This limit makes that *The Peloponnesian War* cannot constitute a prescriptive theory of international relations, but rather a guide. The end of the Cold War constitutes an example in this sense. It requires a re-examination of Thucydides' relevance for the theories of interstate behaviour. The dynamics of interstate relations are fluctuating (e.g. due to globalization and increasing emergence of new infrastructures and actors). Additionally, certain variables are still constant in the behaviour of states (e.g. self-interest) and in their interactions, but these variables acquire new forms of expression.

A re-examination of Thucydides' relevance for international relations can also be made through the prismatic of cyber-terrorism, a new form of expression of violence. With regard to this neoteric outline (embraces new forms of technology, new communicative infrastructures and new form of identity through the formation of communitarian webs) how would it have been possible for Thucydides to predict it? But even so, his text contains perennial characters of individuals – power maximization, fear, importance of construction of actors' identities, role of conventions. Hence, these timeless features, combined with an accurate analyse of nowadays social and political events, can provide the international relations theorists with an embryonic assistance of how to deal with the rise of these new forms of expression. Thucydides's text still remains "the surest guide to what we are likely to face in the early decades of the twenty-first century".⁷

Conclusion

The Peloponnesian War does irrefragably constitute a relevant text for the contemporary study of international relations – because of its echoes in realism, neorealism and constructivism. Despite that the last part showed a limit to its contemporary use, this text is a technical instrument, which allows the discernment of the required frames for a regulated anticipation. It constitutes a guide for international relations and therefore contemporary events must be singularized for understanding them better. To conclude Thucydides did not exaggerate the universal and timeless dimension of his book:

Il me suffira que mon ouvrage soit jugé utile par tous ceux qui veulent voir clair dans les événements passés et ceux qui, à l'avenir, leur ressembleront, tant que la nature humaine restera ce qu'elle est. Mon histoire demeurera une acquisition pour toujours. Elle n'a pas été rédigée pour le plaisir d'un moment.⁸

NOTES

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¹ Marshall, G., C. (1947). *Time.com International* : February 27, 1947. Available at www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,886385-6,00.html . [Accessed 24 November 2009].

² Thucydides (2000). *The Peloponnesian War*. New Jersey : Prentice Hall.

³ Waltz, K. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. New-York : McGraw-Hill.

⁴ Finley, J., H. (1967). *Three essays on Thucydides*. Cambridge MA : Harvard University Press.

⁵ Ball, H. (1986). *Press Courts and Politics*. New-York : Oxford University Press.

⁶ Wendt, A. (1992). *Anarchy is What States Make of It : The Social Construction of Power Politics*.

⁷ Kaplan, R. (2002). *Warrior Politics-Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*, New-York : Random House.

⁸ Thucydide (2000). *La Guerre du Péloponnèse*. Paris : Gallimard Folio.

Finley, J., H. (1967). *Three essays on Thucydides*. Cambridge MA : Harvard University Press.