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## Contextualism and Universalism in Thucydidean Thought

My aim in this paper is to develop a framework for understanding the diverse traditions of interpretation and appropriation of Thucydides in the modern world; that is, the ways in which his work has been understood as offering useful and useable knowledge (not readings of the text as an end in themselves), and the ways in which ideas attributed to Thucydides have been deployed to support different intellectual projects.<sup>1</sup>

Even a brief survey of contemporary references and discussions, let alone a longer historical overview, reveals a bewildering range of different accounts of what Thucydides wrote and meant, and thus what his work has to offer the present.<sup>2</sup> Just within historiography, he can appear as the exemplary scientific historian or the archetypal practitioner of rhetoric and art, the thorough-going sceptic or the mythologist, the perfectly objective analyst or a model for an engaged and activist historiography, offering entirely different images of what history essentially is or should be. In political thought, he is cited as both realist and constructivist, democrat and anti-democrat, neoconservative and liberal; in strategic studies, he may be presented as abstract theorist or pragmatist, advocate of flexible sea power or chronicler of its limits, and so forth. Thucydides' text, and the figure of Thucydides himself, do appear to be peculiarly open to a wide range of different interpretations, without this malleability undermining belief in the usefulness of his ideas. That is to say, the idea of Thucydides as some kind of authority is sufficiently powerful, and is supported – or at least not immediately contradicted – by the experience of reading his work, so that the existence of so many other interpretations of the knowledge he has to impart does not unsettle the conviction of most readers that *their* interpretation is both correct and useful.<sup>3</sup> However, the issue is not only that this authority is evoked to support radically different, if not more or less contradictory, positions and propositions in many different fields of analysis; it is that, while Thucydides continues to be widely accepted as an authority whose work still has something important to contribute to present-day understanding, the nature of this

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is above all the product of discussions with Christine Lee over the last three years; I have benefitted enormously from the breadth of her knowledge of current debates in political theory and political science, and her willingness to explain it all patiently. I am also very grateful to the organisers of the Berlin workshop for the opportunity to write a paper on this theme, and for all the helpful points raised in discussion.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the survey in Meineke (2003) and the various papers in Harloe & Morley, eds. (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Orwin remarked in discussion that he was disappointed by what he found or failed to find in Thucydides on first reading his work; it is striking that he nevertheless persisted in the search for the knowledge that he had been told could be found there.

authority, and the nature of the knowledge which his work is believed to impart, are also conceived in very different ways.

This diversity of interpretations of Thucydides and his work reflects, at least in part, a diversity of interpretative approaches, different ways of reading the text based on different conceptions of its nature as well as different sets of broader theoretical assumptions about the world, how it should be studied and to what end. From the perspective of reception theory, with its basic assumption that ‘meaning is realised at the point of reception’, or from that of the history of ideas, this is scarcely a radical proposition. What I want to argue here is not merely the banal point that any text will be understood differently in different contexts (historical, cultural, institutional etc.), even if that is something that the majority of readers of Thucydides seem happy to ignore. Rather, I want to explore two propositions: firstly, that in the case of Thucydides the debate is not only about what his text means and what it can tell us but also about what kind of text it is – which then of course carries implications for what it can tell us; secondly, that beneath the bewildering diversity of interpretations of Thucydides’ ideas there is a rather simpler structure to the underlying debate about the nature of his text and of Thucydidean thought. This structure is related above all to the theories, debates and issues that can loosely be characterised as ‘contextualism versus universalism’: questions about the relationship between past and present, about the nature and significance of historical change and cultural difference, and hence about the interpretation and usefulness of historical texts and historical data, in particular for the development of political understanding.<sup>4</sup>

The most obvious approach to characterising the underlying debate about the nature of Thucydides’ text would be in terms of a distinction between ‘history’ and ‘political theory’, perhaps with reference to a third tradition of ‘philological’ or ‘literary’ readings. In other words, readings of Thucydides can be categorised according to existing academic disciplines; quite naturally, perhaps, as most of the people offering such readings are doing so from within one or other academic disciplinary tradition, generally without reference to any other tradition.<sup>5</sup> It would be relatively easy to construct ideal types of the ‘historical’ and the ‘political’ Thucydides, based on contemporary academic definitions of those disciplines. Certainly this is how the study of the reception of Thucydides has hitherto been carried out, focusing on the way his work has been interpreted within one or other tradition and has contributed to its development – as ‘the first scientific student of international relations’, for example, or as the founder of modern

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<sup>4</sup> See for example the different arguments developed in Floyd & Stears, eds. (2011)

<sup>5</sup> This is quite unmistakable in both the organisation of Harloe & Morley (2012) and the approaches chosen by most of the contributors.

scientific history – or has been read by particular authors who are firmly located by the analyst within one or other tradition.<sup>6</sup> On the relatively rare occasions when someone seeks to reflect on these different traditions of interpretation rather than simply take one of them for granted, this is still carried out in conventional disciplinary terms. Thus Josh Ober questions whether Thucydides would ever have conceived of himself as a ‘historian’ in anything resembling a modern sense, since that category clearly did not exist in fifth-century Athens – in order to present Thucydides in different but equally anachronistic terms: ‘his approach amounted to nothing less than the invention of a new discipline, political and social science’.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that so many people think in terms of present-day academic disciplines, both in trying to conceptualise the nature of Thucydides’ text and in discussing modern readings of it, means that we cannot ignore them altogether, but it is worth keeping in mind that ideal types always emphasise certain aspects of the objects they seek to capture and categorise at the expense of others. Disciplines are never entirely homogeneous, even at a specific moment; within each discipline we can always identify a range of theoretical and national traditions and sub-disciplines, with different strategies of reading and interpretation. While it might make sense at one level to contrast ‘historical’ and ‘political-theoretical’ readings of Thucydides, the latter category lumps together IR realists, constructivists, Straussians and many others, amongst whom the disagreements over aims, methods, assumptions and conclusions are at least as prominent as their shared ideas and assumptions if they are compared en masse to ‘historians’. Further, disciplines are not hermetically isolated; there is plenty of cross-pollination and even collaboration, so that there may be significant resemblances or overlaps between some historical and some political readings; see for example the ways that Peter Euben and Ned Lebow have drawn on contemporary historical and philological-literary readings of Thucydides in order to critique dominant political-theoretical interpretations.<sup>8</sup> Most obviously these disciplines are a relatively recently and entirely contingent phenomenon; interpreting not just Thucydides and other ancient writers but Machiavelli, Hobbes, Kant or any other figure from before the nineteenth century in terms of the disciplinary structure of the modern university is a manifestly anachronistic procedure, producing, deliberately or not, a naive and/or specious teleological history of the discipline as already-established in the works of writers who are retrospectively

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<sup>6</sup> The quote comes from Gilpin (1984), 291.

<sup>7</sup> Ober (2006)

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Euben (1990), Lebow (2003).

claimed as founding figures.<sup>9</sup> Thinking about modern readings of Thucydides in these terms is more defensible, since so many of those readings, especially in the last fifty years or so, emerge from within those academic contexts and are addressed primarily to an audience of disciplinary colleagues; however, this still begs the question as to whether readers and their interpretations are primarily shaped by their contingent location within academic institutions.

Attempting to describe the different ways that Thucydides has been read over the last few centuries in a different manner, going beyond conventional disciplinary labels and assumptions, will not necessarily produce a less anachronistic account. It will, however, at the least offer a different perspective, not only on the history and dynamics of the reception of Thucydides but also on broader questions of how past texts are interpreted and appropriated in the present for different purposes, and how knowledge of the past is valued and employed – beyond the familiar distinction between ‘humanities’ and ‘social science’.<sup>10</sup> Nicole Loraux’s warning that ‘Thucydides is not a colleague’ was directed towards classicists and ancient historians, but is more generally applicable, and should serve to unsettle our assumptions not only about Thucydides but also about our own taken-for-granted categories.<sup>11</sup> I would suggest that an exploration of the different reading strategies that have been applied to Thucydides offers an opportunity to interrogate the assumptions of History by means of Political Theory and those of Political Theory by means of History, and to consider both in the light of Thucydides and the particular issues of change and continuity, contextualism and universalism that his text continually raises.

The following is a first attempt at identifying the most salient features of ‘reading strategies’ as applied to Thucydides. How far this model may be more widely applicable I am not sure. This approach does tend to highlight particular features of Thucydides’ text, or its tradition of reception, which contrast with most of the texts that are usually considered within reception studies. Compared with the other classical figures who remain significant in contemporary debates, most obviously ‘pure thinkers’ like Plato and Aristotle, Thucydides’ text does seem to present particular problems – and opportunities – in relation to the theme of contextualism versus universalism, and hence is open to dramatically different readings strategies to a greater degree than the others. Further, I should note that I have almost entirely ignored the literary aspects of the tradition – reading Thucydides in order to learn how to write, to

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<sup>9</sup> Compare the way that Hobbes’ characterisation of Thucydides as ‘the most politic historiographer that ever writ’ is often interpreted as if he were calling for interdisciplinary collaboration in a modern context.

<sup>10</sup> Morris (2002) remains an excellent sketch of the differences between these branches of human studies.

<sup>11</sup> Loraux (1980); English version Loraux (2011).

demonstrate techniques of rhetoric and so forth – not least because the rhetorical and literary aspects appear as a *problem* for most present-centred readings of Thucydides, potentially undermining its usefulness, rather than being something that readers actively seek in the text as they do with Homer or Vergil. In brief, this is not a complete account of all modern readings of Thucydides, but of those (the majority, I would argue) that accept, more or less, Thucydides' own claim for the usefulness of his work and seek to put this into practice. In other words, it seeks to establish what sorts of reading strategies are required, based on what assumptions, in order for something apparently useful and relevant to be drawn from (or found in) the text.

## I. Intended Outcomes

By this, I mean what a given reader hopes to find in reading Thucydides, and aims to extract from the text. For the purposes of this analysis, I am going to assume that these readers are both simple and rather boring; they have one clear purpose in mind in their reading, and are focused on different sorts of utility. In other words, I am discounting motives such as pleasure or psychological neediness as well as the search for literary models, in order to focus on the different kinds of knowledge that might be obtained from reading Thucydides. I am also ignoring for the moment the possibility that reading Thucydides could in fact be both useful and pleasurable at the same time, or even that a reader might seek different kinds of knowledge simultaneously. Within these artificial parameters, we can first distinguish two broad types of information that can be extracted, with more or less ease, from Thucydides:

**D: Data** The information that Thucydides' narrative supplies about the course of the Peloponnesian War, the operations of Athenian democracy, the career of Pericles, Greek military strategy, ancient plagues and so forth.

**T: Theory** Thucydides' own ideas about the world and the way that it works: his interpretation of political behaviour, relations between states, the causes of war, the nature of civil strife, the nature of historiography and so forth.

The dividing line between these two categories may in practice open to dispute; for example, is Thucydides' description of the stasis at Corcyra to be considered as data or theory in these terms, or some complex combination of the two? However, any given reader of Thucydides will (a) have their own view on this matter, and (b) have one rather than the other in mind as the sort of

information that they are seeking in the text. They will therefore tend to read the text in those terms, and understand an episode such as the Corcyrean stasis either as primarily a source of information about the course of events in 427 BCE or as primarily an exposition of Thucydides' theories on the nature of civic society and the sources of internal political conflicts, theories that are partly derived from analysis of those events and partly presented through a narrative account of them.

Secondly, there are the different purposes which this information is intended to serve. Again I would like to propose two broad categories, which closely correspond to ideas about what can be found *in* Thucydides:

**D<sub>1</sub>: Data** Information about the past: specific, particular, 'historical': the sequence of events, the course of development, the nature of past intellectual and cultural life and so forth.

**T<sub>1</sub>: Theory** General, more or less abstract and universal ideas about the way the world works: why wars begin, how states make decisions, why social cohesion breaks down etc.

Obviously, and to a greater extent than with the previous categories, these ideal types D<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>1</sub> represent a spectrum rather than a polarity. Historical accounts always involve at least some measure of generalisation, even if historians have traditionally fetishised detail and particularity, while most varieties of political theory have at least some purchase on actuality. However, for the purposes of argument, we can again assume that any given reader will have a particular conception of what they are trying to achieve as a result of reading Thucydides, and for what purpose they will use the information thus gathered. Putting these two sets of ideas, then, we can distinguish four different intended outcomes from reading Thucydides, which reflect different kinds of intellectual projects.

**D – D<sub>1</sub>** Information about the past is extracted from Thucydides in order to write a historical account (of the Peloponnesian War, Athenian democracy, ancient warfare, epidemic diseases through history etc.). This approach often emphasises the particularity of events as an end in itself; it may draw on more general ideas only as a means of interpreting the evidence, in order to produce a modern narrative that replicates the timeframe of Thucydides' narrative. Insofar as more general conclusions are drawn from Thucydides' account, they are strictly time-limited and contextualised: for example, the text may be interpreted as a source of information about ancient Greek naval warfare more generally rather than just about naval

warfare in the Peloponnesian War. The classic example of this kind of reading is George Grote's *History of Greece*, which takes Thucydides as a virtually unimpeachable source of information about the events which Grote wishes to re-present in his own narrative.

**T – D<sub>1</sub>** Information about Thucydides' own ideas about the world, politics, the nature of historiography etc. is used to write a broader historical account of the development of such ideas. Such accounts may be focused on the same historical period that Thucydides describes (the cultural world of fifth-century Athens), or on the longer-term development of classical antiquity (G.F.Creuzer's *The Historical Art of the Greeks*, for example), or on a still longer timeframe (the history of historiography, the development of ideas of citizenship); they may also, in certain cases, focus primarily on modern developments, with Thucydides' ideas presented as a point of origin. This approach again emphasises the particularity of events (namely, that Thucydides had such ideas at this specific period) in the context of a broader account of historical development and/or a broader characterisation of the intellectual/cultural life of Athenian society in this period. To put it another way: Thucydides' account is once again mined for historical data relating to the period when it was written, but this time it is not the events he narrates but the ideas and assumptions that shaped his narration that are of interest to the reader.

**D – T<sub>1</sub>** Information about the past, derived from Thucydides' account, is used as the basis for developing normative theories with more or less universal applicability about war, politics, inter-state relations etc., and/or (more commonly) as the basis for testing normative theories derived from abstract principles or other historical contexts. Taking the Corcyrean stasis as an example again, a reader might reflect upon this episode (treating Thucydides' account of it simply as a reliable source of data) in order to identify more general principles of social breakdown and the sources of internal conflict, or might take a modern theory of the origins of faction and see how well it works when applied to this test case. The intended result is a general theory of, say, social order that has been derived from, tested against and/or refined through the data extracted from Thucydides' account.

**T – T<sub>1</sub>** Thucydides' own theories, identified in and extracted from his account of events, are used to develop, test, support etc. normative theories with more or less universal applicability. This approach has the same intended end product as the previous one, but it starts from a different attitude to Thucydides' text, a different idea of what is most important in it. This



approach may involve the recognition that Thucydides' narration is shaped by his own theories and rhetorical strategies, rather than being a straightforward objective account from which data can be extracted without worrying about the views of the historian – in other words, this is really a default position from  $D - T_1$ .<sup>12</sup> More commonly, Thucydides is explicitly recognised as someone whose ideas are of interest and worth engaging with, an authoritative theorist of human affairs; the events he describes are of interest only because they are the basis on which he developed his ideas.

I would stress again that this is a highly simplified schema; as with any set of ideal types, it over-emphasises certain differences and occludes others. Within a single work, for example, a historian might draw on Thucydides both as a source of information about events and as an exemplary cultural figure, in order to combine both narrative and a descriptive account of contemporary culture and ideas within a single book on fifth-century Athens ( $D/T - D_1$ ). Equally, works of theoretical analysis might seek to engage simultaneously with actual events, with Thucydides' account of those events and with the ideas that shaped that account, in order to test and refine a general theory; one classic example is Clifford Orwin's discussion of the Corcyrean stasis and the Athenian plague, which moves backwards and forwards between the events themselves and the Thucydidean analysis of them, testing each against the other not as an end in itself but in order to develop ideas on social dissolution which have a more general application ( $D/T - T_1$ ).<sup>13</sup> Further, one might identify accounts which make three rather than two moves from Thucydides: mining it for data to construct a historical narrative with the underlying purpose then of developing or supporting more general principles (for example, George Grote's and J.S. Mill's use of an account of Athenian history based largely on Thucydides to underpin their revaluation of democracy ( $D - D_1 - T_2$ )), or writing a history of political thought incorporating Thucydides' ideas in order to legitimise claims about the proper goals or methodology of political theory in the present ( $T - D_1 - T_2$ ).<sup>14</sup>

## II: Conceptions of the text

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<sup>12</sup> For examples of the way that Thucydides' understanding and representation of events are clearly shaped by his own ideas about politics, see Taylor (2010) and Foster (2010).

<sup>13</sup> Orwin (1988).

<sup>14</sup> On the latter, see for example the discussion of the 'historiographical turn in IR' offered by Bell (2003).

One part of any reading strategy is the intended outcome; the other is the way in which the text is conceived by any given reader, which determines the way in which it will be read in order to yield the desired result. This is at least as important a factor as the different aims of readers in producing the wide variation in modern readings of Thucydides; whereas there is little real dispute among modern readers that Plato wrote philosophy and Livy wrote history (the argument is over how far those simple labels occlude significant differences between ancient and modern), in the case of Thucydides there is serious dispute about the nature of the text and how best to characterise it. The majority of readers are at least partly conscious of this issue, if not always of its full dimensions; those that explicitly describe the way they are conceiving of Thucydides' text in their reading usually do so in a concessionary form – many different variants of 'despite the appearance of X, this is really Y'. Even more than in the previous section, therefore, characterising any given reading is a matter of plotting a point on a spectrum rather than assigning it to one of two polarised categories. I propose that, at least for the case of Thucydides, textual conceptions can be plotted on two axes.

The first focused on different ideas of authorial intention: what sort of text did Thucydides set out to write? This might be seen in terms of genre, with a spectrum of possibilities between 'history' at one end and 'political theory' at the other (though clearly this tends to replicate problems with projecting present generic and disciplinary conventions back into the past) or, more abstractly, in terms of whether Thucydides' primary interest is perceived to be factual information or theoretical principles, particular or general knowledge. Did he intend primarily to offer information about specific events or to develop more general ideas about the way that human beings behave? Clearly, not least because of Thucydides' own methods and stated methodological principles at I.23, the answer must be that the text is some sort of combination of the two; indeed, that is precisely why it is open to such contrasting and inconsistent readings. However, I would suggest that the majority of readers, even those who genuinely strive to keep both aspects in balance, end up favouring one over the other. Any given reading can then be characterised as *basically* 'historical' (**H**) or 'philosophical' (**P**) in its tendency, according to whether the reader considers that Thucydides' main purpose was to offer an accurate account of events as an end in itself (albeit one founded on the conviction that the reader will be able to draw more general understanding from it) or to develop normative theories (albeit with a stronger emphasis on the particularity of events than one would usually expect from such a theoretical enterprise).

The second axis is one of familiarity: how far is Thucydides' text conceived to be basically similar in intent, methods, assumptions and so forth to contemporary examples of the

genre to which it's been assigned? The more familiar (**F**) the work is felt to be, the less it then needs to be contextualised and the more it can be read in a straightforward manner according to the norms of the present-day discipline. The more alien (**X**) it seems, the more awareness the reader will have of issues of translation (both literal and cultural) and problems of interpretation in making sense of the text and extracting the desired information from it. This assessment – assuming that it is made consciously and explicitly (there are plenty of examples in both the historical and philosophical traditions of readers simply taking it for granted that they are dealing with a familiar sort of text) – will rest on assumptions about the defining features of the present form of the genre, since inevitably *some* elements of any historical text will seem unfamiliar. Generally, if not inevitably, readings that treat Thucydides as familiar will prioritise subject matter and methodology over literary form: *despite* the inclusion of speeches, this is critically informed, if not scientific, history; *despite* the emphasis on the narration of events, this is at its heart normative political theory. This approach reflects a general tendency within the humanities and especially the social sciences to discount literary form and rhetorical presentation as being ancillary to content and argument, but it is also a necessary move because the unfamiliar nature of the literary aspects of Thucydides' work, especially the inclusion of speeches, is hardest to overlook when reading.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, characterising Thucydides as an alien text often involves the argument that form and content are inseparable, so that the unfamiliar rhetorical form means that the work as a whole cannot be treated as a modern historical or political account; such readers often draw upon philological studies of Thucydides' work as a literary artefact, which take its unfamiliar nature for granted. However, it may also derive from a broader insistence on the importance of context in evaluating any historical text, even if this runs the risk of implying that such texts can therefore have no significant bearing on the present, as has been suggested of the approach of the 'Cambridge School' within the study of the history of ideas.<sup>16</sup>

### III. Reading strategies

We can then characterise different readings of Thucydides according to the combination of these intentions and conceptions: the way that a given reader understands the text, and the aims of their reading. Clearly some combinations work together much more successfully than others,

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<sup>15</sup> On the literary nature of historical and social-scientific writing, see e.g. White (1974), McCloskey (1986), Morley (2006).

<sup>16</sup> On the 'Cambridge School', see e.g. Bell (2003), Floyd (2009) and the various contributions to Floyd & Stears (2011), especially those from Kelly and Graham in Part I: 'The challenge of contextualism'.

and are more likely to be encountered.; a reader with a certain conception of the text will have a sense of what kinds of useful knowledge they can hope to extract, while one with a clear sense of the use to which they want to put Thucydides is more likely to conceive of the text in some ways rather than others. We might be tempted to think of this in terms of the text inviting certain readings – for example, through the limited number of explicit instructions Thucydides offers his reader about about the nature of his work and how to read it – and resisting others; however, this immediately takes us back to assumptions about authorial intentions, the conviction developed by many readers that they alone are reading Thucydides in the way that he intended.

**D – D<sub>1</sub>** The project of using Thucydides' history to write a modern history of the same events is clearly best served by conceiving of the text as **HF**: the more Thucydides' work is understood as different from modern historiography (let alone if it is conceived as a primarily theoretical-philosophical project) the less the 'facts' it offers can be taken at face value and the more work the reader has to do in evaluating and criticising everything Thucydides says. Especially over the last few decades, such projects have more often appeared as **D/T – D<sub>1</sub>**, seeking to identify the ruling ideas of Thucydides' analysis in the hope of correcting for his biases in the presentation of events; they acknowledge the unfamiliar aspects of his historical practice while still insisting on his basic veracity, and at the same time search for alternative sources of evidence for the period, to avoid having to rely solely on Thucydides' account.

**D – T<sub>1</sub>** Again, the emphasis on gathering reliable data about past events, this time in order to develop and test normative theories against them, means that **HF** is the most comfortable conception, with **HX** creating uncertainties about whether Thucydides' account can be trusted. It does seem, however, judging from the actual Thucydidean literature, that understanding the text as **PF** may also be a possibility here; there is in certain accounts clear recognition of and interest in Thucydides' own theories, and an awareness of the fact that he develops those theories through his account of events, but the historical data in his account are implicitly treated as separate from and uninfluenced by those theories (just as they might be in a reading of a modern theoretical piece), so that the data can be extracted and used to test and support different modern theories.

**T – D<sub>1</sub>** This is the 'history of thought' approach, incorporating Thucydides' ideas into a broader historical account. Such an approach can therefore be based on any conception of the text – this will simply result in a different account according to whether the reader sees

the text as alien (marked by differences from present practices, hence emphasising development between past and present) or familiar (either seen to transcend its context, in the way that Thucydides was seen in the nineteenth century as a modern scientific historian *avant la lettre*, or offered as evidence for a timeless essence of historical or political thought).

Alternatively, of course, the reader's conception may be shaped by the kind of story they wish to tell. Historians of historiography will generally see Thucydides as a historian, historians of political thought as some kind of political theorist, if only because that is how he appears in the different traditions of thought they are describing – these alternative conceptions certainly date back to the rediscovery of Thucydides in the Renaissance.<sup>17</sup> Presenting Thucydides as more or less familiar represents one kind of legitimisation strategy for the tradition, claiming the authority of classical origins; presenting him as alien may be a means of celebrating present understanding over the misconceptions of the past, but it may also serve more polemical ends by presenting an alternative to contemporary assumptions – Thucydides as a challenge to the present state of the discipline and a model for a new approach.<sup>18</sup>

**T – T<sub>1</sub>** This project is again theoretically compatible with almost any conception of the text; it is simply that the outcomes will be radically different depending on which approach is adopted. Attempting to develop normative theory is not an activity generally associated with mainstream history – indeed, it can be seen as a fundamental difference between ‘humanities’ and ‘social science’ approaches – but it does feature in discussions of historical theory orientated towards current disciplinary practices. Here, different readings of Thucydides replicate different versions of the ‘history of ideas’ approach discussed above: **HF** (seeing Thucydides’ ideas about the writing of history as more or less identical to modern ideas) serves to reinforce current understanding of historiography, while **HX** emphasises differences between past and present, which either reinforce the superiority of current understanding or, if Thucydides is taken as a positive model, call it into question. Historians naturally see Thucydides as a historian, but some are willing to acknowledge the extent to which his project was at least partly ‘philosophical’ (normally seen as **PX** rather than **PF**, precisely because these theories are presented through a historical narrative rather than developed explicitly). If Thucydides is seen as a special kind of historian, a sort of **HX/PX**, that too can be put

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<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Hoekstra (2012).

<sup>18</sup> This is precisely how he, along with Clausewitz and Morgenthau, is deployed by Lebow (2003), to make the case for ‘classical realism’ against conventional ‘Realist’ approaches to international relations.

forward as an alternative to current historiographical approaches, a model for a new scientific history.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, the majority of discussions of Thucydides in political theory and international relations fall into this category: Thucydides is seen as a political theorist of some kind, whether familiar (the first scientific Realist) or unfamiliar (a classical realist, a tragedian).<sup>20</sup> The more familiar he seems or is assumed to be, the easier it is to identify and extract his ideas – they may be concealed within a narrative of events, but they are assumed to have the same form as modern normative theories and propositions – and to incorporate them into a conventional discussion, whether to support prevailing contemporary views or to criticise them.<sup>21</sup> For a historicist, this procedure looks like a matter of taking Thucydides out of context and ignoring the many ways in which his work is not modern; the point is rather that, in such a reading, the most important context is assumed to be the tradition of debate around a particular issue, rather than the historical context that historicists invariably privilege. One reason for this is that the more Thucydides is conceived as an alien sort of political theorist, whose approach can be understood only by placing it within its original historical context, the less useful his ideas seem to be for present concerns.<sup>22</sup> Even if his work is in some sense theoretical, its mode of thought and underlying assumptions are simply too anachronistic, too incompatible with present-day approaches in anything but the most general terms, so that Thucydides becomes a name to evoke in passing for rhetorical purposes rather than a thinker with whom one can productively engage.

The chief way in which the unfamiliar aspects of Thucydides' approach to political theory can be acknowledged without this thereby undermining his usefulness for contemporary discussions is to rethink his 'alienness', seeing this not in terms of pastness and historical specificity but simply in terms of difference from present-day practices. The resistance of the text to conventional political-theoretical readings (or rather, the assumptions that have to be made and the questions begged in order to read it in that manner) are reconfigured from a problem to an opportunity. Thucydides becomes a model for a different approach to political

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<sup>19</sup> This is essentially the message of Wilhelm Roscher's account, presenting Thucydides as the first scientific historian who at the same time demonstrates the necessity of uniting science and art – although Roscher is also at pains to distinguish him from excessively abstract 'philosophical' approaches to the world. See Morley (2012).

<sup>20</sup> For example, Gilpin (1984), Lebow (2003) and Bedford & Workman (2001).

<sup>21</sup> For an example of the latter, see Ahrens Dorf (1997), who reads Thucydides as an essentially modern theorist whose realist analysis reaches very different conclusions from contemporary Realism.

<sup>22</sup> These are the key concerns discussed in Floyd & Stears (2011), especially the papers by Kelly, Graham and Hampsher-Monk.

theory, whether in his intellectual project (the study of recurrent patterns in human life without falling for the idea that there are fixed laws of history or society, as Williams and Geuss have suggested) or in his rhetorical technique (the use of dramatic narrative to make the issues at stake manifest, making the reader a spectator).<sup>23</sup> Presented in these terms, as a real alternative to current practices and assumptions, the unfamiliar qualities of Thucydides' text become less of a problem. The reader is encouraged to think of how these new ideas and forms could be employed in the present, rather than seeing them simply as a marker of the past; the fact that Thucydides was an analyst of contemporary events rather than a student of the past makes this a little more plausible. That Thucydides had such ideas and presented them in such a way is historically contingent, but the text as a model for political analysis is not thereby historically limited. In other words, Thucydides conceived as **PX** and even as **HX** can serve as the basis for discussing and developing normative theories as readily as one conceived as **PF** – perhaps more so, since the obvious objection that his work is manifestly *not* a piece of modern political theory has been anticipated – but at the expense of de-emphasising the original historical context of the text.

## Conclusion

What does this analysis actually offer us? Its primary message is the traditional historians' lament that 'it's much more complicated than it looks': a simple contrast between 'historical' and 'political' readings of Thucydides fails to capture the complexity of the debate, or to explain how, even within individual disciplinary traditions, the interpreters and appropriators of Thucydides are so often arguing past one another on the basis of quite incompatible goals and conceptions of the text. Each position disputes the premises of the others: historical contextualists insist on the fundamentally alien nature of Thucydides' text, hence its unsuitability for anything except writing a history of thought, while others take for granted the possibility of extracting a core of historical data or identifying normative political principles that are not wholly limited to their original context. Every reading involves a set of assumptions about Thucydides' authorial intentions and conception of the world, and has to ignore some aspects of this complex, multi-layered text in order to concentrate on others. There is no correct reading, even if some readings look to me, given my own biases, more partial and problematic than others (Thucydides as a thorough-going modern realist, for example, or Thucydides' text as an objective account of

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<sup>23</sup> Williams (1993): 161-3, (2002): 151-4; Geuss (2005): 227-33.

events, unmediated by its author's own ideas). The clearest divide, it seems to me, is not between different conceptions of the text – the majority of contemporary readings tend, however grudgingly, towards a middle ground that recognises that it is both historical and philosophical-political, both empirical and theoretical, an unusual hybrid that could be anachronistically labelled a kind of humanistic social science – but between the different purposes for which the text is read. That is a divide not only between those who seek to engage only with the past and those who are focused more on the present, but also, among the latter, between those who engage with the text on its own terms as well as on their own, remaining open to ambiguity and debate, and those who read it solely through pre-conceived ideas and employ Thucydides simply to decorate their arguments.

Two final thoughts. Firstly, it is striking how far the majority of these readings, especially those that use their reading to develop theories, insist that their interpretation is what Thucydides *really* meant. This returns to his role as an authority figure: it is not just that interesting and productive ideas can be found in or drawn from his work, if it is read in a particular way, but that ideas are seen to be interesting and productive, and often persuasive, *because* and *insofar as* they are attributed to Thucydides. This was true in historiographical debates in the nineteenth century; it remains true today in many areas of political theory, strategic studies and international relations, especially in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, a crucial component of Thucydides' authority for the majority of readers is his 'realism', the close relation that is perceived between his ideas and reality; his theories are seen to draw strength from the fact that they are not purely abstract or invented, but are derived from and grounded in concrete events and Thucydides' own real-world experience and expertise. Thucydides' ideas are thus always at least partly context-dependent; not in the sense that they are limited to a specific set of historical events, but that they are intimately connected to real events (and the Peloponnesian War thus becomes, if it was not so already, exemplary) in contrast to some pejorative notion of 'pure theory' as an inadequate basis for engagement with the real world. This perceived orientation towards reality – one of the strongest effects of the text on its readers – may well account for Thucydides' neglect in certain fields of political thought (the British tradition of political philosophy, for example, with the exception of figures like Williams and Geuss who are expressly interested in understanding the truth of experience) and his continuing popularity in others.

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<sup>24</sup> And indeed within the wider culture; see Morley (forthcoming) on Thucydides in the internet.



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