

Mary P. Nichols, *Thucydides and the Pursuit of Freedom*

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Abstract Nichols understands Thucydides as a “philosophic historian”—one who seeks not only facts but the truth about human (especially political) freedom, the limits imposed on it by (especially geopolitical) necessity, and the ways in which statesmen mediate between them.

Keywords Alcibiades · Athens · Brasidas · Cleon · Freedom · Peloponnesian War · Pericles · Thucydides

Leo Strauss addressed his theme, “the city and man” by considering a dialogue (Plato’s *Republic*), a treatise (Aristotle’s *Politics*), and a history (Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War*). A student of Strauss and of his close collaborator, Joseph Cropsey, Mary P. Nichols has set her own publishing career on much the same arc. Having published illuminating studies on the *Republic* and the *Politics*, she has now turned her attention to Thucydides; as before, she has not merely followed Strauss but built on his work, sometimes raising a firm, civil voice of correction from time to time. Cheerful, lynx-eyed, and unruffled, she engages the range of recent Thucydides’ scholarship, always remaining very much her own woman.

Thucydides often gets pegged as the archetypal ‘foreign-policy realist’—even a determinist. Nichols demurs: “In this book I explore”—that turns out to be one of her favorite words—“Thucydides’ commitment to the cause of freedom.” Athenians and Spartans both aim for freedom in the war, and although they sometimes “fall short of their claims to act

freely and for the sake of freedom,” at other times they do not. What is more, “Thucydides himself is taking freedom as his cause.” His history, a “possession for all time,” as its author immodestly but accurately calls it, “speaks very much to our time, encouraging the defense of freedom while warning of the limits and dangers that arise in its defense.”

By “freedom” Thucydides means first of all political freedom, in two, complementary dimensions: the city’s autonomy—literally, its ability to give laws to itself and not to acquiesce in another city’s imperial rule—and a regime within the city that enables citizens to participate in public life—as celebrated, famously, in Pericles’ funeral oration. This is real and not imagined freedom; Thucydides’ account of “speeches and deeds that do make a difference” in the course of events, “for better or for worse.” Grim *Ananke* or necessity may limit human speech and action, but it does not determine it.

Thucydides also points to another kind of freedom, what we call intellectual freedom—his own freedom as a historian. Although he adheres to facts rather than myths, binding himself to an austere recording of givens, of necessities, he also “calls attention to the fact that he himself is a writer of speeches.” He admits that he puts speeches into the mouths of the actors in his real-world drama; absent a record of his statesmen’s speeches, he has supplied them with speeches responsive to the circumstances in which they spoke. More, “it is Thucydides’ account, or *logos*, that examines the things said in light of the deeds. His freedom in writing his history lies not merely in his pursuit of the facts with a clear mind, but in his evaluation of them. Facts serve as a test of speech, but speech also interprets the facts, or speaks for them.” He is “a philosophic historian,” but because he limits his freedom by his overall adherence to facts he serves as “a better model” than the poet—and perhaps even the philosophic writer of dialogues and treatises?—“for citizens and statesmen,” who must not ascend too far into the realm of ideas.

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Nichols organizes her book into five chapters, each centering on a statesman beginning with Pericles, “the only one whom Thucydides allows to speak uncontested in Athens.” And rightly so: “Contrary to both the democratic and realist critics of Pericles, Thucydides presents Pericles as a model of statesmanship” who explains the Athenian regime and way of life in his funeral oration in terms of freedom, and the actions that are appropriate to freedom.” Pericles understands freedom as self-rule—“a potential, not a necessity, although it is necessary for full humanity,” that is to say the rule of the human soul by its distinctively human aspect, which is reason. The one man rules the many, the democratic regime of Athens, by speech not by force. Pericles rules Athenians by their consent.

Specifically, Pericles anticipates the Peloponnesians’ intention to cut Athens down to size, persuading his fellow citizens that “war is necessary to preserve [the Athenians’] freedom.” This is a moral not a physical necessity, inasmuch as Athenians could sacrifice their autonomy to the demands of Sparta and its allies. Like Thucydides himself, who argues for the “weakness” of “ancient times,” Pericles takes his moral bearings not from tradition, not from “filial piety,” and therefore not from the laws but from prudential reasoning itself and from the character of the Athenian regime, which is self-sufficient—capable, in Pericles’ celebrated phrase, of loving beauty with thrift and loving wisdom without softness. When the harshest necessity, the plague, hits Athens immediately after Pericles delivers his oration, neither he nor the Athenians blame the gods or turn to them. Nor do they surrender to the Peloponnesians. The plague does induce Pericles to admit that Athenian self-sufficiency can never be absolute. In facing the desperate, agonized, dying Athenians, “he presents himself to the Athenians as unaffected by adversity”; “in his bearing before the city, if not in fact, he does not succumb to the plague.”

Thus Pericles presents Athenians with “an image” of freedom—not the real thing as experienced during catastrophe but real in the sense of being a model, something to be lived up to. Moderating the hubris of the Athenians, their fear, and even their anger, “Pericles’ rule is ... characterized by balance or measure, both in his policies and in the effect of his rhetoric on the people.” “With Pericles in charge Athens might have succeeded against Sparta.” Pericles’ best critics speak up here, saying that he expected too much of his successors, few of whom proved capable of such measure. Nichols agrees that “in demanding the beautiful, Pericles demands too much of his city—and also of himself.” But she adds that behind Pericles and his noble speech one must always remember the presence of Thucydides, who “shows the human without undermining the beautiful.” “Pericles is therefore wrong when he says that he is inferior to no one in knowing what is required and interpreting it.” Thucydides is to Pericles what Plato is to Socrates. The image of Athens Thucydides presents

“does not abstract his city from time and failure” in the way Pericles does: “Like a true Athenian, as Pericles presents him, Thucydides does not have to hide. He does not have to hide his own weakness. Pericles conceals his. That is, in presenting an image of Athens, Thucydides demonstrates a freedom even greater than Pericles’, for he speaks without any pretense of self-sufficiency.”

Having shown the connection between measure or balance and freedom as Thucydides presents it, Nichols turns to the theme of “Athenian freedom *in* the balance”—an image that suggests both the scales of justice and a turn of fortune. To win the war, Athens needed allies, including its colonies. A polis on the island of Lesbos, Mytilene, located to the northeast of Athens near Asia Minor, sought to exploit the Peloponnesian threat (coming from the southwest of Athens) to win freedom from the Athenian empire. This leads to the first Athenian debate Thucydides presents, in which the general Cleon debates the mysterious Diodotus on whether to exterminate the Mytileneans. Absent the persuasive Pericles, Athenians must deliberate not over whether to consent to one speech but rather over which of two arguments seems better; this too is freedom—indeed, the greater freedom of going from consenting to the one statesman of Chapter One to choosing between the arguments of the two statesmen of Chapter Two.

Cleon seeks to exploit democrats’ impatience with one another, their longing for reaching decisions, taking actions. He “denounces the endless speech and indecisiveness endemic to democratic government.” Diodotus “aims at moderating the passions of the Athenians in order to make space for thought and deliberation,” arguing that “the Athenians are responsible for their treatment of Mytilene.” Cleon uses speech to undermine “the legitimate role for speech in democratic government”; like some of Socrates’ critics, he is a misologist. Although he “speaks frequently of enemies,” he “never uses the word ‘friend,’” perhaps because friends are usually on ‘speaking terms.’ Diodotus’s name means “gift from the god”—a phrase Plato’s Socrates uses to describe himself. He overcomes Cleon’s misology by imitating Pericles—bringing his fellow citizens to reflect upon themselves, to know themselves *as* Athenians, that is, as self-ruling democrats. He brings them to reason by reasoning, by bringing out the self-contradiction of a speaker who speaks against speech. He then invites them to reason about their circumstance, to consider whether harsh dealings with Mytilene will really prove advantageous to Athens, which needs more allies not fewer. Justice—more specifically, equity—exhibited now may well rebound to advantage in the defense of Athens and its regime in the future. In defense of Athenian freedom, “he implicitly warns Athens against its own *erōs* and hope, which lead human beings to suppose they can do more than they can.” The equitable mind inclines toward pardon, which literally means “‘to know with,’ that is, to understand what the other did when he acted.”

By urging Athenians to think for a moment like Mytileneans, Diodotus would have them think of the rebels as human beings, to love wisdom in the sense of a Socratic ascent from the cave of one's own polis, with its customs and passions. This is of course what Pericles had said what the Athenian regime does, what it is. "Justice must be understood in terms of what is good for the one who is just"; to be followed it must not be other-regarding. Putting it another way, the limits of this philosophic self-transcendence that simultaneously affirms the 'self' or character of the polis may be seen in the fact that the Athenians do agree not to exterminate the Mytileneans, but do vote to enslave them.

And what of Diodotus himself? "As far as we know from the historical record, he exists only in speech—in Thucydides' work—and not in fact." Diodotus may be saying what Socrates would have said, had Socrates spoken on this occasion. And if "Diodotus were invented by Thucydides," he would not be a "gift from Zeus," but "Thucydides' gift to Athens"—the continuation of Periclean statesmanship.

Thucydides juxtaposes Athenian statesmanship, as it was and as it might have been, with the actions of the Spartans against Plataea. Unlike the Athenians, the Spartans don't really deliberate at all, but only make a show of deliberating. Nichols devotes her third and central chapter to the Spartans and their principal general, Brasidas.

Not Brasidas but King Archidamus serves as the Spartan answer to Pericles with respect to speech, praising his countrymen for not having too much learning to "look down upon the laws" and for exhibiting such "severity" as to be "too moderate to disobey them." As a consequence of this law-abiding severity, Spartans alone "do not become arrogant when successful." For Sparta, freedom comes not from abstaining from war but from preparing for war and avoiding it until ready. Archidamus seems "wary about risking Sparta's freedom to pursue freedom for others." But despite his caution (and perhaps because he *is* a Spartan, none too persuasive as a speaker?) the Spartans vote for war; there are limits even to Spartan self-limitation. The war-vote brings Brasidas forward.

Unquestionably the most able Spartan, Brasidas isn't especially Spartan in spirit. He speaks as well as he fights. Nichols points out how 'Diodotean' Brasidas is, gathering allies for Sparta by offering liberal terms to those cities who will join in the coalition against Athens. Although Brasidas "depicts a noble view of his city to the world," he "never speaks before the Spartan people" and receives tepid support from them for his expeditions. Unlike Pericles, he is never quite at home in his native city. He died in battle at Amphipolis, a "one-man show" with "no home, no people"—except, in the end, the Amphipolis, where the citizens consider him their savior in victorious death.

As for Thucydides, Nichols remarks that his appreciation of Brasidas's "daring and intelligence"—virtues "Pericles

attributes to Athens"—demonstrates that such virtues are "not dependent on a specific regime"; they are human. But if man is a political animal, in addition to a daring and intelligent one, then such virtues are nonetheless dependent upon the support of some polis, some regime. "While Brasidas does not need Sparta in order to act with daring and intelligence, he needs Sparta for his daring and intelligence to be truly good." "In politics, no one can be a one-man show." But the politics of the regime of his city aims at autonomy in the world while restricting citizen freedom at home. Its law-abiding severity almost literally alienates its best general. Thucydides' appreciation of virtue, and of politics, when seen among Athenians or Spartans, gives added weight to his claim to have been "present on both sides" of the war, owing to the exile imposed upon him by the Athenians. His presence is both physical and intellectual.

The battle at Amphipolis results in a treaty followed not by lasting peace but a truce. The truce "bring[s] Alcibiades to the forefront of Thucydides' history"—another man without a country, this time from Athens. He advances still another notion of freedom. He shares Chapter Four with decent, plodding, hapless Nicias, and their debate parallels the Cleon-Diodotus exchange in the parallel second chapter.

Strauss argues that the Athenians met disaster in Sicily because they recalled the impious but able Alcibiades, leaving the apparently pious Nicias in charge; "not indeed the gods, but the human concern with the gods" caused the failure. Nichols maintains that Alcibiades is the real source of the problem. A man of vast, politically vague but self-centered ambition, Alcibiades regards the Athenian way of life as "motion for its own sake." Unlike Pericles, Alcibiades does not consider peace the object of war; unlike Pericles (and his greatest student, Abraham Lincoln) he fails to see the sense in fighting only one war at a time. Without any publicly definable goal, political strategy loses its point; following Alcibiades in spirit even as they rightly distrust the man himself, the Athenians come to define "eternal law" as the enforcement of the will of the strong over the will of the weak. "Their appeal is less an acceptance of necessity"—as they claim in the famous debate on Melos—"than a pretext for their imitation of the gods." "If realism teaches human limits in the pursuit of power, it is a teaching the Athenians at Melos reject." The spirit of Alcibiades lures Athenians into a pseudo-realist power fantasy.

In his own way, Nicias is no better.

...his 'piety' masks his caution. He does not manifest genuine piety, any more than the impious Alcibiades does. Genuine piety does not lie in ceding the human capacity to deliberate, judge, and act to divine forces, as Nicias does when he yields to the seers. Nor is it found in imitating the power of the gods to rule over the weak,

as the Athenians imply at Melos, and Alcibiades manifests in his deeds. Rather, it consists in accepting the limits of the human in relation to the divine, limits in both knowledge and control, which by circumscribing action make it possible. Paradoxically, it is that great humanist Pericles who recognizes those limits and is able to act, as when, for example, he traces the plague to ‘daimonic things’ that are ‘beyond reason,’ while continuing to prosecute the war with Sparta, or when he cautions them that they must pay back whatever gold necessity requires then to take from Athena’s statue to continue the war.

It seems likely that Mary Nichols is right about the gods. Alcibiades does indeed “act as if he were freer than he is”—acting as if he were the playwright in his own drama. And the Athenians imitate him, forgetting the prudence of Pericles and Diodotus. He is “the human face hidden behind the law of necessity to which [the Athenians] appeal” during the Melian debate. Neither he nor his country can rule themselves, any more. They both suppose that the conquest of Sicily is ‘about’ themselves, not Sicily. But the Sicilians will have something to say, and do, about that. Under the influence of Alcibiades, the Athenians have come to define beauty not as measure, as harmony, but as splendor, as magnificent excess.

Limitlessness in politics implies homelessness, a refusal not only of laws but of the limitations imposed by regimes—the theme of Nichols’s fifth chapter. Accused (falsely, Nichols suspects) of desecrating sacred sculptures, Alcibiades declines to return home to face the charges but offers his services to Sparta and eventually takes *his* one-man show to Persia—all the while hoping to angle back into Athens and take it over. In arguing for being allowed to return, he describes his love of Athens, which he defines not as a regime (as Pericles had done, and as Aristotle defines the polis as such) but as a locale. Alcibiades is not merely indifferent regimes but “hostile to all regimes.” Because “regimes stand between the individual and his city, structuring their relationship and interaction,” Alcibiades rejects them in rejecting structure for the limitlessness of “pure possibility.” This is freedom reconceived democratically in the most radical sense: as doing what you want, regardless of reality. It is the joint at which democratic and tyrannical longings conjoin. “Against Alcibiades, and an Athens under his sway,

Thucydides defends a political realism” to which “freedom is essential”—freedom as self-government, freedom as measure, freedom as the exercise of reason, as action within the limits set by nature and by the gods.

Nichols’s interpretation enables her to explain the opening words of the *History*: “Thucydides, an Athenian...” Although an exile, Thucydides never imagines that freedom entails placelessness. The Athenian regime gave him the chance to inquire about Athens and not merely to obey it. “It is Athens that has the custom or law of funeral orations, which naturally lead the speaker to reflect about why its soldiers give their lives for their city. Athenians stand out in Thucydides work for their self-reflection.” Self-reflection leads Thucydides to know that he doesn’t know, leads him to inquiry itself. Along with his account of how Athenians came to forget self-reflection, to believe in accordance to their own desires without knowing, to think wishfully.

In her book on Aristotle, Nichols made the fine discovery that Aristotle regarded a wife’s practical wisdom no less impressive than a husband’s. Here, too, she plays the role of Mrs. Adams to her mentors, Strauss and Cropsey, adjuring them to remember the ladies. The ladies Nichols has in mind are Archedice—her name “sounds like ‘just rule’”—the daughter, sister, and wife of tyrants who ruled some eighty years before the Peloponnesian War, who herself “possessed a moderation that the Athenians” who came later “would have done well to emulate”—and unnamed wife of the Melossian king, Admetus, who intervenes on behalf of the exiled Themistocles, saving his life by teaching him how to speak to her husband. “Like Themistocles,” Thucydides, in reporting these incidents, shows that “he is able to learn from women”—those who prefer not to dare exceedingly, and whose connectedness to generation orients them toward “something more immediate and fundamental than the unwritten memory or fame Pericles promises those Athenians who give their lives for their city.” One could do worse than to learn from some women.

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