

Summary of "The restless ambition of power. Thucydides' look"

This thesis aims at the investigation of power in the work of Thucydides. I want to show the lessons learned from his work in the field of International Relations and their influence in later ages.

My choice was motivated by a passion for the topic of power, already dissected with extreme modernity in the fifth century. B.C. Many modern and contemporary authors were inspired by the Thucydides' work; just to name a few, we can think to Canfora, who has always been dedicated to the explanation and interpretation of ancient history, on the national stage. There are also notable contributions of Gilpin, who has theorized the concept of "hegemonic war", and Cesa, who showed how to derive relevant topics for the international politics, thanks to this historiography.

First of all, this theoretical analysis has been addressed from the texts that emphasize the importance of the author in this field of study, noting how Thucydides had marked a shift for International Relations, even before this subject was born officially. And the names of other great scholars of politics interstate came back with some consistency, about his own reading. More I continued to search for different sources, the more I became convinced that most of the tenets of the paradigm in question originated in the greek political, who explained our nature, how we really operate, and therefore how we act in the international system. I was struck by his logic, clear and obvious as lighting and, above all, I am fascinated by the opportunity to discover different and diverse areas of study, even if they are united by the insights drawn from the *Peloponnesian War*: for example, oratory and acting, are so far from this area of study, but, at the same time, they are integral part of the power, and therefore of politics.

To start, I wanted to narrow the ideological context of the realist paradigm, to give a frame of reference where Thucydides fits into, even if it is from him that everything had its origin. After that, I wrote a short biography of the author, highlighting the peculiarities of his work. To better understand the historical period which I was referring, it was necessary a summary of the highlights at the turn of the Peloponnesian War, the causes which have inevitably led to that outcome. At this point, I am dedicated to a detailed analysis of Thucydides as a realist, making several references to quotations from a specific episode, the dialogue of the Melians and the Athenians, from which, actually, my interest in the subject was born . Then, I wanted to take a look also to the other two classical realists, Machiavelli and Hobbes, not so much as scholars in itself, but as readers and interpreters of Thucydides, something which we ourselves should do. In this way, I was able to draw similarities and differences, but above all developments within the same discipline, although that has been developed in past ages, even among themselves.

In the *Peloponnesian War*, we understand that the description of international politics is based on its nature of conflict, due to the clash of conflicting national interests; instead, the explanation of that policy is carried out with a clarity that few realists have been able to apply.

The profit is taken as a decision criterion for the three fundamental goals (firstly, safety and, foremost, honor and profit); it is a form of interest that drives foreign policy and it gives order to a chaotic whole. In this environment, the power has an instrumental value, which serves to discern a famous dichotomy, dominant / dominated, in power relations. But the realists are guilty of imprecision in defining the relationship between security and power. For many of them, the first law of nature is self-preservation, maintained thanks to the power: however, it is not clear if it is the purpose or means. In the first case, consider it like an end in itself, would mean to distort reality, coming to the conclusion that states should fight continually and compete for the accumulation of power. On the contrary, if it is considered a tool, we can run into an ambiguity for a long time criticized, in which it is not clear the distinction between the will of survival and that power.

However you want to consider, power is one of the highest value for this paradigm and, therefore, the analysis becomes long and controversial: it takes into consideration all the different aspects, from military to economic, passing through the stable characteristics up to the variables. Just about, if you take the sublime and unsinkable form of power as a variable, we come to consider that the balance of power may be a regulatory mechanism, which manifests itself as a territorial or compensation in the form of arms or alliances. We use the power against power, thereby applying the first law of nature.

Thucydides also speaks of balance of power as almost homogeneous distribution, where the *poleis* face up to the threat to security, all together.

Then, there is also the well-known criticism about the non-morals in Thucydides, given that justice is only instrumental to hide the topic of useful, but in hindsight, for the realists, ethics and power are two sides of the same coin and, indeed, the ethics principles must be linked to the political requirements: only through the results of that sphere you can assess the merits and the morality's relevance. Clearly, it depends on the international community to keep alive those principles, but the perennial gap between the moral dictates, inapplicable to politics, and the requirements of the latter remains unsolvable. Recognized it, already, Thucydides made no secret: in fact, in the mouths of his cunning, sometimes proud, but almost always concrete characters, he puts words that hypnotize the listener or the modern reader. Again, I quote a passage of the familiar dialogue between the Athenians and the Melians, where they say:

Your hostility does not hurt us as your 'friendship' which would appear as a sign of our weakness, and your hatred for the subjects would be the proof of our strength [...] Your strengths are hopes about the future, but instead what you have is actually a few things, not to guarantee your survival compared to the forces that confront you [...] faced with the choice between war and security you will not insist to choose the worst. Since, those who do not yield to their peers, and pleased the strongest show balance with the weaker ones have the best success.

We have everything here, everything has been said: the contemptuous tone of the ambassadors captures our attention so magnetic. There is the man, there are us, as we are, how we operate and there is the truth, the statement of the balance of power and the law of the strongest, in the fifth century B. C.

Thucydides sees in mutual fear the answer at the power politics: the first is derived from the law of the strongest, which no one can escape. If the power is an end, our nature is a problem. Fear is one of the strongest motives that pushes the fight and it is inherent in the human being, just like the suspicion and mistrust: the basis of anthropological pessimism, discussion on the security dilemma.

Therefore, this is nothing else than a more refined formulation of the "dominate / be dominated" of the greek historian, where, precisely, the maximum security require the utmost domain at the expense of portions safety of others, however. The dilemma can be resolved at the first two levels of waltzian analysis, that is individual or social, but it remains unresolved in international anarchy.

The struggle for power can not descend from the type of regime or from a leader's choice; at least, this is valid for the realists, but in Thucydides, the sensitive issue of security greatly depends on the exceptional qualities of the leader. The Athenian historian's successors found a different definition for the useful, from time to time, leaving this unpleasant task to a single actor, a group of diplomats or leaders, but we have not to forget that the intent of the realists is also to advise.

In the *Stories*, it is clear the problem posed by the absence of a leader of people, able to lead, direct them, keeping in consideration passions, but curbing them, firstly into himself. However, the report on the relationship between type of government and foreign policy is more complicated, especially if it is a democracy that imposes itself elsewhere. The problem with this form of government is the bond over public opinion, which leads, inevitably, to oscillate between indifference and total ideological battles against "evil".

Thucydides does not make real laws of international politics and not even draws practical lessons, although, from him, various school of thought have arisen: there are those who argued that the cyclical concept of time, typically Greek, ports to the eternal laws that can be cultured in the overall story. Others believe that the Athenian wished to stress the ambiguity of certain events,

emphasizing the emotions and, therefore, not a rational aspect of interstate politics. Finally, some scholars think that it was not the intention of the historian explain some laws. In any case, Thucydides offers an explanation about the method for taking certain decisions, why you adopt a behavior rather than another, and therefore, how we arrive at an outcome. It is clear that he departs from human motivation, whether we consider the individual actor (the ambitious and the bold Alcibiades or the cautious and prudent Nicias, for example), or the *polis* as a unitary actor. But the concatenation of circumstances comes even before these reasons and pushes the choices until a final outcome: it is this chain that exceeds the special quota and allows us to have a universal framework of international politics.

The greatness of the father of realism lies in having given an explanation not to one war, but to the war, in general: it is the very structure of anarchy in the international system to bring this type of concept about humans and their limitations . The strongest commands, the weak suffers, and this will be a common thread that will return frequently throughout Thucydides' work, although there is always the balance of power in order to constitute an antidote, at least temporarily.

As regards the comparison carried out with the other two classic realistic, we noted the stringent similarity on the front of anthropological pessimism, as well as a real cult for the historical-scientific Thucydides. To note that he claims to not have realized the importance of substantial events which he was about to tell, until he took away by the fact itself, of its nature: this is a prerequisite that every modern historian knows very well. About differences, Machiavelli and Hobbes take in consideration ideological and religious elements, bulkier in their eras.

In this research, there is not an analysis of the Thucydides' influence on contemporary realists, which is only hinted at (we can think about the analysis in three images of Waltz), explaining, however, from the outset, that the relevance of this character was more evident in the historical than in International Relations.

It would be also interesting to give an insight into Greek culture, starting by the structure of the internal power of Athens until the differences with that one of the other city-states. Anyway, we talk about a world in which rhetoric, theater, philosophy penetrated deeply into political domain and the study of the cradle of the culture whom we are descendants is incredibly interesting (although a bit dispersive in this context). It is sufficient saying that the importance of classical world is on political level, primarily: we still use the terms of that era. Political language is durable and it challenges and exceeds the millennia. On this subject, you should not recognize a continuity in the anthropological pessimism, as in the political dynamics.

Peloponnesian War is incredibly current, starting from the research questions and the answers that Thucydides gave to us, which remain to this day. He did not influence realists in all respects: the questions are even varied, depending on the main needs of all ages, but the content of international politics remained unaltered. The cyclical mentioned by the greek historian is not synonymous of perfect and complete predictability: rather, it means to know the highlights of date choices and strategies that, most likely, will lead to their outcomes, but this does not correspond to the simplistic belief in the past as a source of practical lessons. For those, you need experience, from case to case. What lasts through time is anarchy, fear and security, the calculation of the forces as a decision criterion, balance and alliances as means to counter or control the distribution of power. And it is about these matters that the relevance of Thucydides is unmatched.