

# The Political Realism of Thucydides and John Mearsheimer

Written by Philipp Sorgenfrei

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The Political Realism of Thucydides and John Mearsheimer

<https://www.e-ir.info/2009/12/28/the-political-realism-of-thucydides-and-john-mearsheimer/>

PHILIPP SORGENFREI, DEC 28 2009

*Thucydides' and Mearsheimer's Views on Political Realism Resemble a Mirror's Reflection; Displaying the Same, yet a Closer Look Reveals Their Inverse Nature.*

In the course of the following essay, the modern, theoretical image of John Mearsheimer's *Aggressive Realism* and its ancient reflection as found in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* will be extracted, compared and finally contrasted[1]. Since Mearsheimer is a self-claimed Realist, every corresponding view found in Thucydides will be similarly deemed "a view on political Realism".[2] However, the Thucydidian view on political Realism will be developed under the strict provisos inherent in any contemporary interpretation of a historic account written more than 2000 years ago. This and the caution it dictates with regards to any conclusion will be further elaborated in the essay's first part. Thereafter, Mearsheimer's central assumptions and claims as found in his key writing *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* will be compared to those found in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*. It will be argued, that Thucydides' description of Athens, its behavior and assumptions show a striking resemblance to Mearsheimer's theory of *Aggressive Realism*. The essay's final part however, will turn this claim upside down by exploring how the Athenian ideology and behavior is ultimately self-defeating and rejected by Thucydides himself.

In his book, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer develops a theory of state behavior and the conditions determining war and peace. Based on five fundamental assumptions, he aims to provide a "compelling explanation", to identify the "causal logic" and to highlight the underlying reason for "the behavior and outcomes" of Great Power politics.[3] He thus presents the reader with a ready-made framework of cause and effect. Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* on the other hand is by and large an account of the war between Sparta and Athens together with their respective allies from 431-404 BC. It includes detailed descriptions of battles on land and sea, political leaders and their speeches, daring campaigns as well as the horrors of civil war and the plague. The difficulties arising in extracting a "Thucydidian view" (i.e. his own interpretation of events) are twofold: First, as C. Nation points out, almost everything we know about the war, as well as about Thucydides himself is based on this single piece of writing, which was never finished.[4] Thus, the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred. Secondly and even more important is the question, whether Thucydides attempted to include a personal view or just aimed to provide a chronicle of war. Highly concerned with narrative accuracy, he states that he is only relying on the "clearest of data"[1:21][5], not even trusting his own impressions, but relying on multiple comparable sources[1:22].[6]<sup>[7]</sup> The "exact knowledge of the past" he hopes, should be an aid to those who seek an "interpretation of the future"[1:22]. Not to "...speculate as to origins and cause"[2:48], but simply explain the symptoms to be recognized by future generations.[8] On the other hand, even if underlying causes are presented, they are always conflicting and often advanced in form of dialogical speeches, which leaves the reader to ultimately judge and interpret.[9] In contrast to this finding, other parts of Thucydides' *History* clearly include an own interpretation of events and an attempt to reveal underlying causes.[10] Human nature, described as unchanging, allows events in the future to "resemble"[1:22] past events and he famously identifies the "real cause" of war in contrast to the "immediate cause"[1:22].[11] He claims that his "conclusions... [can] ...safely be relied on"[1:21]. It is interesting to notice, that the Greek word "ἱστορία" (nowadays usually translated as "history") can similarly be translated as "inquiry".[12] This adds to the impression that Thucydides wrote more than a chronology of events. Thus a "Thucydidian view" can be extracted, but it remains largely a subject to the reader's interpretation and

# The Political Realism of Thucydides and John Mearsheimer

Written by Philipp Sorgenfrei

understanding.[13]

John Mearsheimer's *Aggressive Realism* as detailed in his book "Tragedy of Great Power politics" relates state behavior (in particular Great Powers) to five fundamental assumptions: Firstly, an international system of states characterized by anarchy (or the absence of an overarching authority or "world government").[14] He assumes further, that states possess the military capability to inflict damage onto each other and that states can never be sure about other states' intention as to use this capability.[15] A fourth assumption identifies state's primary concern as continuing territorial and political autonomy (survival) and finally he assumes that states pursue the former goal in a rational manner.[16] Taken together, he argues, these assumptions create a structure in which states are fundamentally insecure and can ultimately only rely on their own capabilities in their self-defense.[17] Power, acquired through military build-up and territorial expansion, is thus the ultimate assurance of survival and their maximization imperative. States therefore are ultimately aggressive with the final goal of dominating every other state, or, in the same way preventing any other state from achieving hegemony (either through war or alliances).[18] Mearsheimer concludes, that the emergence of a potential hegemon, a state that could dominate the whole system, causes the greatest of alarm among its neighbors, because it could maximize its power and thus its security by subordinating every potential rival.[19] This he argues, forces other Great Powers to pursue riskier policies, even war, in order to preserve their own very existence.[20]

In his description of Athens (the *History's* major actor), its assumptions, rhetoric and behavior, Thucydides portrays what could be called the prototype of a "Mearsheimerian state". First, Athenian representatives voice on many different occasions "Mearsheimerian" assumptions and act in the by Mearsheimer predicted expansive and purely power-maximizing way. The idea of anarchy is most forcefully expressed during the Melian dialogue, in which the Athenians clearly reject the idea of any divine intervention (a force above the force of states) in politics and war by claiming that the "gods help those who help themselves"[5:105] and "where force can be used, law is not needed"[1:77]. Uncertainty is reflected in the "hard school of danger"[1:18] and the idea of survival and rational actor echoes in the Athenian advice to the Melians to plan their cities survival on "actual resources".[5:111] Most importantly, Athens uses the idea of a constant human nature in combination with the aforementioned assumptions to invoke the image of a structure or "law of nature" which compels every state to act alike.[21] This law, based on the unchanging human attributes of fear, honor and interest dictates every state to "act as we do"[5:105].[22]<sup>[23]</sup> In other words, it is assumed that, regardless of culture or constitution, states are driven by the imperatives of self-interest; survival guaranteed by power.[24] Athens decision to ally with Corcra is ultimately explained by the common enemy Sparta and the Athenian fear to face the Corcryan navy in Spartan hands.[25] Similarly is it the fear of Athens as emerging potential hegemon that forces Sparta (even though portrayed as conservative in nature) to declare war.[26] The argument can be expanded, by introducing another characteristic of structure pointed out by Mearsheimer. He argues, that states might deviate from the structural imperatives of pursuing solely their self-interest and power, but only at costs that could ultimately lead to their destruction.[27] Again, this idea is echoed in Athenian rhetoric and action. During the debate at Sparta, the Athenian representative portrays the Athenian "moderation"[1:76] towards its subject states as harmful, since it has increased their resistance.[28] A similar argument is made by the Athenian Cleon, when he argues that mercy would make Athens pay a "heavy penalty"[3:49] and by the Athenians at Melos, who fear to signal weakness by not subjugating the island.[29] The Athenians at Melos sum the idea of unconstrained self-interest up by stating, that "...the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."[5:89].[30] However, the last and certainly most important similarity between Mearsheimer's theory and Athenian behavior can be found in the trinity of power, empire and security. Mearsheimer predicts that greatest security lies in greatest power, which can be maximized by expansion and ultimately by hegemony.[31] In other words, the best defense is a good offence.[32] Athens similarly links its power and thus security to the unabated expansion of its empire. In justifying the subjugation of Melos, they claim to equally extend their power and security.[33] The same reasoning guides the subsequent decision to extend their empire to Sicily, which is seen as directly linked to their security. The Athenian Alcibiades states that "...if you make [only] few new conquests, you imperil those already won"[6:18] and Euphemus claims that the Athenian presents in Sicily is in the "interest of our security"[7:64]. An unaggressive policy on the other hand is seen as ultimately endangering Athens' very existence.[34] Alcibiades famously points out that there is no limit to expansion and that "if we cease to rule others, we are in danger of being ruled ourselves"[6:18].[35] To escape domination one has to dominate.[36]

# The Political Realism of Thucydides and John Mearsheimer

Written by Philipp Sorgenfrei

However, Athens ultimately falls and with it the idea of Thucydides as Aggressive Realist. Even though it is characterized at the outset by Spartans and Athenians alike as the most powerful state in Greece, it finally loses the war.[37] Thucydides makes it through Pericles' funeral oration remarkably clear, that Athens power (an innovative trade-economy, superior naval forces and success in war "through unity of will"[2:39]) is fundamentally connected to its political culture and institutions. Daring fame and innovation are created through political institutions and social norms.[38] Created through a government based on the most able, legal equality and freedom for its citizens and most of all "a code, although unwritten"[2:37] that assures the obedience to laws and the "protection of the injured"[2:37].[39] The common interest and not citizens guided "by calculations of expediency"[2:40] are the basis of the Athenian empire.[40] However, in its external behavior Athens declares itself more and more free from moral constraints and moderation. In its strive for power and the primacy of self-interest, which reaches its climax in the subjugation of the neutral island of Melos and the slaughtering and enslavement of its population, the very foundation of their power becomes undermined. A foreign policy in which "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must"[5:59] ultimately affects those conducting foreign policy. A state that knows no other rule than power and self-interest ultimately reproduces these laws domestically.[41] "A democracy is incapable of empire"[3:37]. A new generation of rulers, most noticeable represented by Alcibiades conducts politics to "thwart" the ambitions of others and to "gain in wealth and reputation"[6:15] leading Athens into the megalomaniac attempts to conquer Sicily. Similar points are made with respect to the Athenians Cleon and Brasidas who were pursuing war respectively for "wealth and honor"[5:18] and to cover up for crimes.[42] Yet even the following defeat of the expedition force nor the continuing war against Sparta causes the ultimate Athenian downfall. As Jack Donnelly points out, Athens only succumbs when torn apart internally by a struggle for power between oligarchic and democratic forces, in which internal enemies are deemed more threatening than external foes.[43] Thucydides writes that "...they [those fighting for an oligarchic rule] were resolved to call in the enemy and make peace, give up their ships, and at all costs retain possession of the government"[8:91]. He thus demonstrates how the exercise of power and self-interest with no limits finally leads to internal self-destruction.[44] In sharp contrast to Mearsheimer he concludes with what could be called a Realist paradox: The primacy of self-interest ultimately prevents the pursuit of self-interest. The key to continuing power and survival lies in the balance between interest and constraint moderation.

In summary (and in consideration of the initial provisos) it was shown, how Thucydides portrayal of Athens and its behavior in the course of the war can be seen as detailed reflection of John Mearsheimer's view on political Realism as expressed in his theory of Aggressive Realism. This became particularly evident after analyzing the relationship between power, territorial expansion and security, as detailed in Mearsheimer's theory as well as Athenian execution. However, in consideration of the final Athenian defeat, the actual Thucydidian view on political Realism was revised. It was argued, that Athens Realism far from reflecting his views, rather was meant to show the dangers of Mearsheimerian Aggressive Realism. Following this reasoning, their ideas can truly be described as an inverse reflection.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

### BOOKS:

- Boucher, David, *Political theories of international relations: from Thucydides to the present*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998)
- Brown, Chris, Terry Nardin, Nichols Rengger, *International relations in political thought*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002)
- Crane, Gregory, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998)
- Donnelly, Jack, *Realism and international relations*, (Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000)
- Doyle, Michael W, *Ways of war and peace: Realism, liberalism, and socialism*, (New York; London,

# The Political Realism of Thucydides and John Mearsheimer

Written by Philipp Sorgenfrei

Norton, 1997)

- Euben, J. Peter, *The tragedy of political theory: The road not taken*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, c1990)
- Frankel, Benjamin, *Roots of Realism*, (London; Portland, Frank Cass, 1996)
- Gustafson, Lowell S. eds., *Thucydides' theory of international relations: A lasting possession*, (Baton Rouge, Los Angeles, Louisiana State University Press, c2000)
- Lebow, Richard Ned, *The tragic vision of politics: Ethics, interests and orders*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003)
- Mearsheimer, John, *The tragedy of Great Power politics*, (New York; London, W. W. Norton, c2001)
- Raaflaub, Kurt Arnold eds., *War and peace in the ancient world*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 2007)
- Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, Translated from Ancient Greek by Richard Crawley, (United Kingdom, Dover Publications Inc, 2004)

## JOURNALS:

- Garst, Daniel, *Thucydides and Neorealism*, International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 33 (Georgetown University, March 1989), pp.3-28
- Monten, Jonathan, *Thucydides and Modern Realism*, International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 50, (Georgetown University, 2006), pp. 3-25
- Nation, Craig, *Thucydides and contemporary strategy*, USAWC Guide to National Security Issues, Vol 1: Theory of War and Strategy, (Charlisle, Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College SSI, 2008), pp 129-142
- Snyder, Glenn, *Mearsheimer's World Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay*, International Security, volume 27, (Summer 2002), pp. 149-173

[1] Of course, it could equally be argued that Mearsheimer is a mere and partial reflection of Thucydides' much larger picture.

[2] John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power politics*, (New York; London, W. W. Norton, c2001), p.4,5

[3] *ibid*, p.5,6

[4] Craig Nation, *Thucydides and contemporary strategy*, USAWC Guide to National Security Issues, Vol 1: Theory of War and Strategy, (Charlisle, Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, 2008), p.2,3

[5] The numbers in brackets correspond respectively to books and chapters of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*: Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, Translated from Ancient Greek by Richard Crawley, (United Kingdom, Dover Publications Inc, 2004)

[6] As Peter Eueben points out, this could also mirror the role of the ancient Greek city-states' ambassadors or "Theoros", whose role is described as "[only] giving a full account of reality": Euben, J. Peter, *The tragedy of political theory: The road not taken*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, c1990), pp.33-34

# The Political Realism of Thucydides and John Mearsheimer

Written by Philipp Sorgenfrei

[7] Idea similarly in: Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998), p.37

[8] Idea similarly in: Daniel Garst, *Thucydides and Neorealism*, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33(Georgetown University, March 1989), p.5

[9] Lowell S Gustafson. eds., *Thucydides' theory of international relations: A lasting possession*, (Baton Rouge, Los Angeles, Louisiana State University Press, c2000), p.34

[10] Idea similarly in: David Boucher, *Political theories of international relations: from Thucydides to the present*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.67-68

and: Richard Ned Lebow, *The tragic vision of politics: Ethics, interests and orders*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.72

[11] Jonathan Monten,*Thucydides and Modern Realism*, *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 50, (Georgetown University, 2006), p.6

[12] Gustafson, *Thucydides' theory of international relations*, p.6

[13] Idea similarly in: Michael W Doyle, *Ways of war and peace: Realism, liberalism, and socialism*, (New York; London, Norton, 1997): p.51

[14] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power politics*, p.29-30

[15] *ibid*, p.30

[16] *ibid*, pp.30-31

[17] *ibid*, p.31

[18] *ibid*, p.29,34,156

[19] *ibid*, pp.335-337

[20] *ibid*, p.345

[21] „nature of mankind remains the same“[3:82]. Similarly in [1:22],[1:84]

Monten, *Thucydides and modern Realism*, p.11,17

[22] “...as long as human nature remains the same” [3:82]

[23] The idea that every state acts alike is also expressed in: [1:76],[6:86],[6:87]

[24] *ibid*, pp.4-5

[25] [1:35],[6:85]

[26] [1:23],[1:88],[1:118]

Similarly expressed in: Glenn Snyder, *Mearsheimer's World Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay*, *International Security*, volume 27, (Summer 2002), p.152

# The Political Realism of Thucydides and John Mearsheimer

Written by Philipp Sorgenfrei

[27] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p.2,15

[28] [1:77] and similarly in: Monten, *Thucydides and modern Realism*, p.17

[29] [5:95]

[30] Similarly Euphemus: „...for a king or city, nothing can be wrong that is to their advantage”[6:85]

[31] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power politics*, p.33,34,156

[32] *ibid*, p.36

[33] [5:97]

[34] „tremendous risk“ (to give up the empire) [1:75-76]

[35] Similarly: [6:83],[6:87],[2:63]

[36] Monten, *Thucydides and modern Realism*, p.22

[37] Sparta: [1:81], Athens: [1:143]

[38] [2:37-41]

[39] Lebow, *The tragic vision of politics*, p.259

[40] Monten, *Thucydides and modern Realism*, pp.12-14

[41] Gustafson, *Thucydides' theory of international relations*, pp.35,47

Jack Donnelly, *Realism and international relations*, (Cambridge;New York,Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.183

[42] Likewise: [5:18]

[43] *ibid*, p183

[44] Nation, *Thucydides and contemporary strategy*, p.10

—

Written by: Philipp Sorgenfrei

Written At: University of St. Andrews

Written For: Dr. Patrick Hayden Date Written: November 2009