

brutal *facts* about the position of imperial States and of those threatened by them, but to *state* those facts only, in the most general way possible, and not to pretend that he had any *solution* to the *problems* that arise out of them.

One's judgments about such a difficult and elusive writer as Thucydides are bound to be highly subjective,<sup>48</sup> but my own feeling is that if one had been able to corner Thucydides and press him to give an explicit summary of his views about the behaviour of States, he would have answered roughly as follows:

All States ('yours' and 'mine' included, just as much as others) always do what they believe, rightly or wrongly, to be in their own best interests, and in particular they rule wherever they can. They provide above all for their own security, and they seek to extend their power as far as possible. In doing so, they often collide with other States. If it is they who are stronger, they will if necessary apply coercion, and the other States, just because they are weaker, will be forced back on appeals to a notional 'justice'. But how is what is 'just' decided in such cases, and whose decision prevails, if not that of the stronger State? Have independent States a 'natural right' to remain 'free and independent'? But how is such a right acquired? I recognise no such right. Any State may claim it for itself, or for the subjects of its enemies, but it will seldom hesitate to coerce a weaker State when that is what its own interest requires. Of course, proclaiming the necessity for 'justice' and 'freedom' and so forth can sometimes be very useful as a propaganda weapon. But look at the Spartans, who began the war with the promise to 'free the Hellenes', while in practice keeping their own allies carefully under control, by maintaining friendly oligarchies among them as far as possible, and ended up by selling many of Athens' former subjects to Persia, and putting others, including Athens herself, under small oppressive oligarchies, entirely subservient to Sparta's interests.

That is the way States do in fact behave, and you had better begin by taking full account of it. Take 'your own' State. If you are weak, you should be properly deferential to great powers and try to convince them that they would not really profit by conquering you—that is the argument that is most likely to appeal to them. If they do attack you, calculate your chances as coolly as possible, and if you have no reasonable chance of successfully resisting, submit. Take warning from the Melians, who would not have had to suffer Athenian rule for much more than a decade if they had had the sense to give in when the Athenians had obviously determined to subject them. Don't, of course, give way unnecessarily to equals. If you are strong enough to be an imperial

<sup>48</sup> To M. I. Finley, *Aspects of Antiquity* (1968) 56, Thuc. was 'not an original thinker'. I disagree entirely. But how can such a question be settled, when we know so little of the political thought of the fifth century? On the absence of any provable close connections between Thuc. and any contemporary or earlier thinker, see Classen-Steup, *Thuk.* 15-7 lxiii-viii.

power yourselves, then, human nature being what it is, you are bound to become one anyway. In that case, your rule (except when some very special circumstances apply) will be resented by all your subjects, and you may find yourselves driven to do some rather unpleasant things to them, in the effort to keep them down. But don't be a Cleon, and resort unnecessarily to terror, a weapon whose deterrent effect (like that of all deterrents) cannot anyway be relied on. Be rather more moderate with your subjects and with other weaker States than you need be, having regard to your power, as the Athenians generally were. Restrain yourselves as far as you can from always grasping at more, as the Athenians eventually did not. You may sometimes be able to risk a generous gesture, such as the Athenians refused to the Spartans during the Pylos affair;<sup>49</sup> but it would be foolish to go too far in that direction, because it is exceedingly unlikely that other States will behave equally quixotically to you.

You ask me whether I don't deplore all this, and advocate moral behaviour in dealings between States, as between individuals inside the State. Of course the situation is deplorable; but I seldom waste time on such useless reflections. I see the world as it is, and you would be well advised to do so too.<sup>50</sup> Morality is an admirable thing inside a State, which can have both a code of behaviour acknowledged by all and sanctions for maintaining it, so that conflicts of interest can be resolved by the arbitration of courts of justice and not by the strong coercing the weak. No one could doubt that Right is preferable to Might—when Right is both accepted as such by all parties and can be enforced. But neither condition obtains in international affairs: what is conceived as 'right' or 'wrong' in any given instance depends almost entirely on whose interests are in question, and the issue is settled ultimately by force, except in the rare cases in which strength is nicely balanced and both sides are sensible enough to realise that war can be an extraordinarily hazardous business. Learn all this from me, and you will be the better able to make the most of whatever chances you have.

It is precisely this 'moral bleakness' of Thucydides *in regard to international affairs* which is for me his unique virtue, shared with no other historian of antiquity and with few of any age. It is his wholesale application of the principle that 'moral' considerations of the kind that can and should be regarded inside the State are simply not transferable in their existing

<sup>49</sup> Gomme (*HCT* III 454 ff., esp. 458-60) makes quite a good case for the view that we need not necessarily think Thuc. believed Athens ought to have accepted the Spartan proposals (IV 17-20). But on seven of the nine other occasions on which, as in IV 21.2, Thuc. uses some form of the verb *ὀρέγεσθαι*, it has a strongly pejorative force; only in VI 16.6; 83.1 is it colourless. I feel that in IV 21.2 and 41.4 Thuc. is condemning the Athenians, if with no great acerbity; and cf. V 14.2; 15.2.

<sup>50</sup> As Woodhead (*TNP* 20) has well said, 'It is the confounding of morally and emotionally evocative words with the realities of the situation which is morally reprehensible, and that is in fact, as Thucydides is well aware, what people do'.