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Thucydocios: How Not to Read Thucydides in Contemporary Political Discourse

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(Received 09 December 2025; revised 12 February 2026; accepted 13 February 2026)

Abstract

The ancient Greek author Thucydides is widely cited in discussions of international affairs and contemporary politics, such as the Russian-Ukraine War and relationships between the United States and China. However, he is often presented in such debates as a purveyor of universal theories or inspirational slogans. His reputation as an authoritative thinker, founded in the complexity and originality of his account of the past, is used to legitimise simplistic claims about the present. This article surveys three common examples of such readings—the Melian Dialogue and its relation to Realism, the Thucydides Trap, and the plague at Athens—to consider how they may offer a misleading idea of Thucydides’ work and what it could actually tell us about politics today.

Keywords: historiography; international relations; politics; Thucydides; war

The name of Thucydides appears with remarkable regularity in discussions of current world affairs. He is arguably the most-frequently name-checked classical author in this context.¹ In his work, an account of the war between Athens and Sparta and their allies in the fifth century BCE, he stated his wish to have written a “possession for all time,” useful for anyone wishing to understand present or future events.² His prominence in recent debates about US–China relations, the Russian-Ukraine War, the state of American politics, or the aftermath of COVID, to mention just a few examples, suggests that his goal has been fully realised.

However, the version of Thucydides that features in such discussions is, from a scholarly perspective, rather odd. Since I first encountered Thucydides in school, forty years ago, I’ve found him a puzzle. His language and thought are complex and ambiguous. Even a clear translation of key ideas simply raises more questions about their implications—and that is

¹ Crowley 2017 discusses an earlier “Thucydidean moment” in US political discourse; Morley 2023 surveys patterns of Thucydides references on X/Twitter. A few recent articles: Dirda 2025; Polgreen 2025.

² Thucydides 1.22.4. References to Thucydides’ work are usually given by book, chapter, and section, so you can find a given passage in any published translation. The versions I would particularly recommend for combining accuracy and clarity are Thucydides 2009, 2013—but the new Thucydides 2025 also looks promising.

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before you discover how much variation there can be between different translations.³ The claim that he speaks to modern historiography or politics constantly runs up against the differences between his world and ours, and between the way he writes about such topics and the approaches to scholarship or analysis that we would consider normal.⁴

When I read the judgement of Friedrich Nietzsche on Thucydides, it was clear that he had a similar reading experience: “One must turn him over line by line and read his unspoken thoughts as clearly as his words. There is scarcely another thinker with so many hidden thoughts.”⁵

And yet, when researching the contemporary influence of Thucydides, I find that most people seem to experience no such puzzlement. He is presented instead as the author of clear, simple laws of politics and international relations, and straightforward insightful and/or inspirational one-liners. Many of the latter are fake or misattributed, the sorts of ideas that an imagined Thucydides, the Warrior-Scholar, might be expected to endorse (Figure 1).⁶

Even when the references to his work are accurate, however, their interpretation is questionable. Thucydides appears as the hard-nosed, illusion-less analyst of human affairs who cuts through well-meaning liberal equivocation to the real heart of things. He is the man who knows, not the man who worries about complexities. “Thucydides tells us” is asserted with full confidence to support claims about the world, without any concern that these claims are frequently contradictory.

I certainly do not think that there is a single correct interpretation of Thucydides. Personally, I think his goal was not to teach his readers specific things so much as to teach them the skills of thinking and analysis. As Thomas Hobbes, who translated the work in 1629, wrote: “Digressions for instruction’s cause, and other such open conveyances of precepts (which is the philosopher’s part), he never useth... The narrative itself doth secretly instruct the reader, and more effectually than can possibly be done by precept.”⁷

There are certainly more credible and less credible readings, however. Readings that engage with the whole work, and those that reduce it to a few decontextualised soundbites. Readings that pay attention to the differences between past and present, and those that assume direct continuity or deploy classical authority simply to legitimise their prior assumptions. I am not trying to claim a classicists’ monopoly on interpreting classical texts; scholarship in multiple disciplines offers rich, powerful, and thought-provoking readings of Thucydides from their different perspectives.⁸ But those readings too all have a sense of nuance and complexity.

The less good readings, the misappropriations and misreadings, are not completely useless. They show us how Thucydides has been read, and why—and, perhaps most importantly, *how*

³ Mynott 2013.

⁴ The best general account of Thucydides’ work remains Connor 1984, but Roberts 2024 is a short, clear introduction. Chapters in Balot, Forsdyke, and Foster 2017 and Low 2023 offer a range of perspectives on many different aspects. On Thucydides’ historiography, Greenwood 2006; for its modern influence, Morley 2014.

⁵ Nietzsche 1988, 156.

⁶ On misattributed quotes, Morley 2013. See also the “Misattributed” section of the Thucydides Wikiquote page: <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Thucydides#Misattributed>.

⁷ Hobbes 1629, xxii.

⁸ For example, Fisher 2022; Hawthorn 2014; Orwin 1994.

"The state that separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools."

One of the most definitive quotes of the Warrior Poet ethos, spoken by the great Athenian general and historian Thucydides.

It is our passion and our conviction to use our bodies AND our minds in order to protect others, in turn creating safer communities and a safer world.

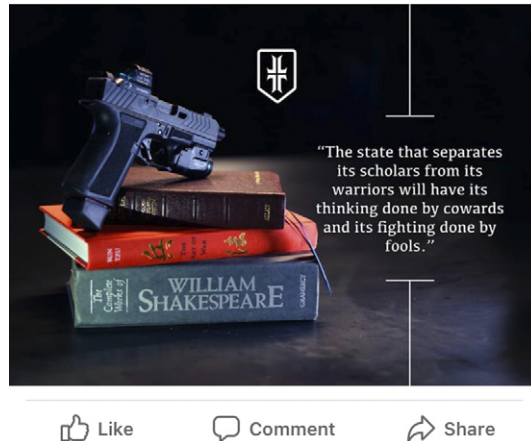


Figure 1. Screenshot of a tweet from July 27, 2020. This is not a genuine Thucydides quotation (Opinion differs as to whether posts on social media by people who are not public figures should be considered as “publications,” or whether for research purposes they should be anonymised; I have taken the latter approach).

Thucydidean authority, founded on his claim that discovering the truth about the past is vital but very difficult, is used to legitimise simplistic ideas about the present. I am going to consider three prominent examples.

“The strong do what they want, the weak suffer what they must”

Thucydides has long been associated with “Realism,” ever since British commentators in the early twentieth century tied him to the German theory of *Realpolitik*.⁹ In a speech in his first book (1.73), an Athenian claims that the motives of fear, honour, and interest are common to all peoples. In the so-called Melian Dialogue in book five, the leaders of a powerful Athenian force declare to the leaders of neutral Melos that justice is relevant only between equals, so the only reasonable course of action for a weak state is to recognise reality and accept what the powerful dictate (5.89). International anarchy and the dominance of rational interests, two hallmarks of Realism, summed up in a single line. Little wonder that this line is cited repeatedly; about the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the continuing conflicts in the Middle East, and more recently Donald Trump’s behaviour towards Venezuela, Greenland, and Canada.¹⁰

⁹ The bibliography on this topic is huge. Most recently, see Morley 2018; Novo and Parker 2020; Porter 2022; Schlosser 2023.

¹⁰ Kinstler 2026 on Trump; Suny 2025 and Morley 2022 on Russia-Ukraine; Zaretsky 2025 and Solomon 2026 on the Middle East. Cf. Sacco 2024, 29–30, where the artist/narrator turns to address the reader: “Have we all read our Thucydides?”

Thucydides is thus identified as the first Realist—and Realism is given the authority of ancient wisdom. The problem is that, while these statements do appear in Thucydides' book, it is a giant interpretative leap to assume that he must therefore have endorsed the "Athenian thesis" about might and right. There are, after all, two sides in the Melian Dialogue, neither of which is obviously right or obviously wrong. This point is sometimes partially recognised in contemporary debates; while many quote the "strong do what they want" line as a normative statement about how the world works, others argue that it proves the opposite.¹¹ Thucydides, they suggest, aimed to show the foolishness of such attitudes, given that the Athenians then launched a disastrous, over-ambitious expedition to conquer Sicily: "The strong over-reach themselves and suffer blowback...."

That interpretation is also too simplistic. Thucydides put words and arguments into the mouths of his characters, leaving it to his readers to evaluate their merits. We may wonder whether the Athenians believed what they said; is this a depiction of the pathology of power—that seems to be Mark Carney's opinion, in his recent speech at Davos—or a flawed view of the world, or just an attempt at persuading the Melians that their situation is hopeless?¹² Even if all states are driven by fear, honour, and interest, how do those motives interrelate? (Realism tends to focus just on the last.) Reducing Thucydides' understanding of politics to either an endorsement or rejection of superpower bullying ignores what is distinctive about his ideas, and how he stages debates to prompt us to think further.

"The Thucydides Trap"

"It was the rise of Athens and the fear this aroused in Sparta that made war inevitable" (1.23.6). Thucydides' explanation of the underlying causes of the Peloponnesian War—the "truest cause, though the one least spoken about"—has been elevated by American IR theorist Graham Allison into a transhistorical principle, that when a "rising" power confronts an "established" power, conflict is likely.¹³ Allison claims that a series of historical case studies confirms this thesis, and explicitly applies "Thucydides's Trap" to relations between the United States and China. Others have extended it to China versus India, India versus Pakistan, Russia versus NATO, and even Bitcoin versus traditional currency.¹⁴ These speculative extensions tend to become ever sillier and cruder—and increasingly to imply the inevitable victory of the challenging power (Figures 2 and 3).¹⁵

The merit of Allison's idea is that the line about Athens' rise and Sparta's fear is actually a statement in Thucydides' own voice, rather than one of his characters. The problem is that the original language is especially tricky, something that will be missed by readers relying on a translation (and still more an outdated translation).¹⁶ Thucydides certainly contrasted different kinds of causes, pretexts, or responsibility—but not in a straightforward manner. He does not say that war was inevitable; rather, the dynamic between Athens and Sparta "compelled to war," leaving it open whether this relates to the Spartans or to the whole situation. While this implies a structural or even deterministic understanding of what happened, his narrative then immediately considers short-term events and decisions in

¹¹ For example, Kokkinidis 2026; Zaretsky 2026.

¹² Discussed by Morley 2026, with links.

¹³ Allison 2017.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Jaishreenidhi 2025; Zeb 2022.

¹⁵ Critique of the model: Chan 2019; Palmer 2020.

¹⁶ Jaffe 2017 is an excellent overview of issues with understanding Thucydides' explanation of the outbreak of war. Allison and others tend to depend on Richard Crawley's 1874 translation.



Figure 2. Screenshot of a tweet by Grok, October 22, 2025.



Figure 3. Screenshot of a tweet from October 14, 2025.

detail, implying that they are equally important. Thucydides is interested in the interplay of shorter- and longer-term factors in the outbreak of war, in the different characters of peoples as well as what they have in common, and in possible counterfactuals. He sets this up as a complex dynamic in a specific context, rather than offering a vague principle that is supposedly applicable to multiple, very different cases.

Plague

In the second year of the war, the city of Athens was struck by a devastating plague (2.47–54). Thucydides himself caught it and survived, and his account—especially of the many excruciating symptoms of the disease—has a powerfully personal quality. It is an important set-piece episode for multiple reasons. Thucydides was one of the first to see such an epidemic as a purely natural event rather than divine punishment, but he was also sceptical of the theories of contemporary medical writers; he focused on the recording of what

The CDC got rid of hygiene protocols because they want people ill for Big-Pharma.

If you knew as much about history as I do, you would know vaccines are completely unnecessary with the proper education.

Thucydides defeated The **Plague of Athens** in 430-BC with cleanliness, hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, and clean water sources. They didn't use vaccines.

@SecKennedy

🗨️ ↻ 4 ❤️ 📊 27 📌 ⬆

Figure 4. Screenshot of a tweet from January 3, 2026.

Yes, the orchestrated and brazen deceit is exactly why these institutions must be abolished. All of them, the CDC, NIH, WHO.

Since Thucydides in 430BC we understood natural immunity until 2000, when you needed a vax after recovering from covid.

Unforgivable

09:47 · 18/03/2025 · 106 Views

🗨️ ↻ 1 ❤️ 3 📌 ⬆

Figure 5. Screenshot of a tweet from March 18, 2025.

happened, without speculation.¹⁷ He was interested not only in the plague but in the social and psychological responses to it, the ways that uncertainty and fear led to the collapse of social norms, inhibitions, and solidarity.

Although it became an important model for depictions of plague in antiquity and into the early modern period, this part of Thucydides' work was largely ignored in the modern era—until COVID struck. In 2020, a number of articles appeared, celebrating the prescience of Thucydides' account, and warning that this presaged the end of democracy.¹⁸ Such arguments depended on crudely conflating the death from plague of Pericles, Athens' leader in 430, and the defeat and overthrow of democracy twenty-seven years later. A detailed examination of what Thucydides actually said about the ways that disease exposes the fragility and vulnerability of human institutions would be far more illuminating.

Subsequently, Thucydides has become a poster boy on social media for vaccine hesitancy. He described what we would now call "acquired immunity"; men like him who survived the

¹⁷ Morley 2024.

¹⁸ For example, Kelaidis 2020; Zaretsky 2020.

plague were immune to it thereafter. This is now represented online as an account of “natural immunity,” which is preferable to any vaccine. Thucydides’ reputation for truthfulness and pioneering rationality is being deployed against modern medical science (Figures 4 and 5).

Conclusion

Thucydides would almost certainly be less widely cited if his work had not been rendered down into a selection of memorable slogans and forthright declarations, and read as if he were a modern theorist.¹⁹ The idea that the usefulness of history lies in unsettling our assumptions is much less attractive than the idea that history offers a simple key to understanding a complex, disconcerting world. But that is Thucydides’ message.

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Author contribution. Conceptualization: N.M.

Conflicts of interest. The author declares no competing interests.

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¹⁹ Ruback 2015; Welch 2003.

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Cite this article: Morley, Neville. 2026. "Thucydocios: How Not to Read Thucydides in Contemporary Political Discourse." *Public Humanities*, 2, e40, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10147>