Postmodern Thucydides? The *Paralogos*

Thucydides' word for what is outside language is *paralogos, "*incalculable element"
(LSJ), a noun found only in Thucydides, who uses it six times. (1.78, 2.68, 3.16, 7.28, 7.55, and
8.24) The depiction of the failures of *logos* by Thucydides illustrates why he is to be taken as
part of the "realist" or "materialist" tradition of thought.

In Thucydides' famous sentence about the cause of the Peloponnesian War, the "truest
cause" is hidden from reason: "The true though unavowed cause I believe to have been the
growth of Athenian power, which terrified the Spartans and forced them into war." (1.23.6,
Hornblower) Much has been written about the word "cause" (*prophasis)* in this sentence, less on
the word "unavowed," which translates the phrase "most invisible in words." (ἀφανεστάτην
λόγῳ, 1.23.6) Hornblower says this phrase describes a "profound" cause, but the important
words "invisible" and "word" must not be overlooked.

Thucydides' comments about his reporting of the speeches also hinted that words do not
report reality: "the speeches are given in the language in which, as it seemed to me, the speakers
would express, on the subjects under consideration, the sentiments most befitting the occasion. .
." (*τὰ δέοντα,* I. 22.1, Smith) What is "befitting the occasion" often in these speeches is to distort
the truth for some rhetorical purpose. (Macleod)

Thucydides praises Pericles as a leader because of his ability to manipulate the Athenians'
emotions with words: he depressed the demos "by speaking" (*λέγων)* when they were confident
and created confidence in them when they were irrationally (ἀλόγως*)* depressed (II.65.8).

The relationship of words and deeds is also uncertain in Thucydides. In the comments
about *stasis* in book III, Thucydides says that "they changed the customary meaning of words
with respect to deeds in their judgment." (καὶ τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐς τὰ ἔργα

ἀντήλλαξαν τῇ δικαιώσει, III.82. 4) This change extends to the political slogans used by the gangs contesting for power and rule, "the one party professing to uphold popular equality before the law, the other the moderation of aristocratic government." (III. 82.8, Hornblower) Orthodox ideology only appears in Thucydides as political slogan.

The debate over Mytilene includes an attack on the use of words in the assembly. Creon describes how language is distorted in politics while he distorts language himself. His attack on rhetoric and politics includes the pregnant phrase, ("the seemliness of a speech,' (τὸ εὐπρεπὲς τοῦ λόγου, 3.38.2), a phrase repeated by Diodotus. His argument against the Mytilenians contains a particularly obvious abuse of language when he claims that "they have not revolted . . . but they have betrayed us." (ἐπεβούλευσαν τε καὶ ἐπανέστησαν μᾶλλον ἤ ἀνέστησαν, Hornblower, III, 39.2)

The speech of Diodotus gives the fullest description of "invisible cause." He begins by stating, "all men by nature make mistakes, both in private and in public." (3.45.3, my translation) Saying that "all men" err is a challenge to the very concept of rational choice. All humans are depicted as products of their conditions: "Poverty by its pressure producing boldness, power (i.e., 'wealth," ἐξουσία, ed.) through insolence and pride producing ambition (i.e. desire for more power), and other conditions of life lead men into undertaking risks, as they are held fast now by one now by another of these conditions, through some human passion, under the influence of an overmastering feeling." (3.45.4-7, Gomme). Diodotus then mentions three more causal forces, "hope" and "desire" (ἔλπις καὶ ἐρώς, 3.45.5), which are "invisible" (ὄντα ἀφανῆ), and "fortune," τύχη. (3.45.6) This is the fullest account in Thucydides of "that which is outside language."

The external invisible cause, "fortune," τύχη, is beyond language. The fortunes of war "cannot be apprehended with *logos,"* Archidamus observes in book one (1.84.3). The

appearance of the plague was "greater than *logos"* (2. 50.1), and Pericles also says: "the spirit is enslaved by that which is sudden and unexpected and happens contrary to all calculation" (*πλείστῳ παραλόγῳ)*(2.61.3).

Thucydides' treatment of language is deeply ironic, a tool in the necessary game of politics, and his presentation of human motive stresses the controlling influence of conditions and the emotional forces they arouse. This is what Thucydides called "useful knowledge" and it is thus "realist."

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