

HUMAN NATURE AND *STASIS*: ON THE INFLUENCE OF THUCYDIDES ON HOBBS' SCIENCE OF POLITICS

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SUMMARY: The article assesses the influence of Thucydides on Hobbes' conception of man and, more generally, on his model of "Civil Science". That influence is traced back to the time when Hobbes worked on his translation of Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War. At that time already, Hobbes described Thucydides as "the most politic historiographer that ever writ". The main thesis of the article is that Hobbes' admiration for Thucydides can be best explained by his ability to describe political conflict. This thesis is supported by a comparative analysis of some important themes in Thucydides' historical narrative and a number of major theoretical statements of Hobbes' anthropology and political theory. There is a remarkable similarity between Hobbes' account of the three principal causes of conflict between individuals in the state of nature – competition, diffidence and glory – and the three main instincts of man to which the Athenians appeal to justify their striving for power in a speech that Thucydides relates. However, Thucydides exerted the most powerful influence on Hobbes by his descriptions of internal war. The final part of the article examines two topics from Thucydides' famous description of the *stasis* which took place in Corcyra – the impossibility of justice and the perversion of language in time of sedition.*

KEY WORDS: history, justice, nature, polis, politics, science, *stasis*, war.

As Reinhart Koselleck wrote, "Hobbes' doctrine of the State grew out of the historical situation of civil war" [Koselleck 1988: 23]. It is therefore not surprising that one historian exerted decisive influence on Hobbes. As is well known, that historian was Thucydides, the author to whom we owe the most

* This article was written within the framework of the research project 179039 of the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade *Structural Social and Historical Changes of the Serbian Society in the Context of European Integration and Globalization*, financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

impressive descriptions of civil wars in ancient Greece. Some interpreters of Thucydides went so far as to consider his life's work – *The Peloponnesian War* – as an unfinished history of one long civil war that inflamed Greece in Pericles' time. Thucydides' influence on Hobbes was deeper and wider still. It shaped the main features of Hobbes' conception of human nature, as well as some central arguments of his political theory.

THUCYDIDES' EXCELLENCE

Hobbes was deeply critical of the intellectual authorities of classical antiquity. He described the reception of Aristotle's, Cicero's and Seneca's works which took place in independent universities of his time as one of the sources of the greatest evils in political life – of rebellion and civil war. Hobbes censures ancient Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, not only for their teachings on man and state, but also for their metaphysics, as well as for their misconceptions of knowledge, which they handed down to posterity. However, Hobbes' polemic against ancient Greek authors reaches its climax when it comes to their political ideas, above all to their concept of civil liberty and to its modern interpretations [Hobbes 1968: 261–268, 682–703; EW VI: 216–218, 233]. In Hobbes' view, the common trait of these political conceptions lies in the fact that they subvert the only sound principle of political science – the one of absolute sovereign power, which all citizens must obey as the sole provider of their safety and protection. Hobbes thought that the dissemination of ancient Greek ideals in the culture of Christian Europe contributed to the decay of what he saw as the most important virtue of the citizen, his obedience to public authority.

For Hobbes, Thucydides was an exception among Greek authors. The first work that Hobbes published under his name was a translation of Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*. This was, at the same time, its first translation from the Greek (in Emilio Porta's edition) into English. In fact, the only earlier translation of Thucydides into English had been done from a translation into French by Claude de Seyssell. However, even that was not taken from the original Greek but from a Latin translation made by Lorenzo Valla. Furthermore, according to Hobbes, Valla had used a less perfect version than the one he had at his disposal. Hobbes invested much effort in translating the book. Among other things, he enriched his translation with maps, one of which was drawn by himself, taking into consideration several ancient sources [EW VIII: ix–x; Schlatter 1945: 350–352].

Hobbes held Thucydides in extremely high regard. In the two texts he published alongside his translation – “A preface to the readers” and a short essay entitled “On Thucydides' life and history” – he described Thucydides' merits as a historian in superlatives. According to Hobbes, Thucydides is an author “in whom /.../ the faculty of writing history is at its highest” [EW VIII: vii]. The reason of Thucydides' excellence is that he fulfills the true task of a historian, which consists in reporting the course of events and not in speculating on them or in moralizing: the nature of history is, according to Hobbes, “purely

narrative”. Following this principle of writing history, Thucydides does not insert his own personal thoughts into his report of the Peloponnesian War, nor does he lecture on politics or morality, but limits himself to narrating the sequence of events. As Hobbes admits, the only exception to this are the speeches of historical actors, which Thucydides had partially to reconstruct taking into account the circumstances in which they were delivered [cf. PW I: 38–39]. This method, according to Plutarch’s expression, makes Thucydides’ reader a spectator who looks upon historical events with his own eyes, which is the reason why Thucydides deserves the title of “the most politic historiographer that ever writ” [EW VIII: viii; cf. Plutarch 1962: 500–503].

How should we understand this conclusion? There is no doubt that Hobbes read many of his own political preferences into the life and work of Thucydides. When he says that it is manifest that Thucydides, of all forms of government, least liked democracy [EW VIII: xvi], and that he himself had learned from him how incompetent democracy is [Hobbes 1839: I, lxxxviii], his judgment is in accordance with the antidemocratic reputation of Thucydides widely shared by posterity. One could even say that Hobbes is more prudent than those who ascribe to Thucydides oligarchic sympathies [EW VIII: xvi; cf. Pope 1988: 276]. And yet, his thesis that Thucydides most valued the third, “regal” form of government could hardly be sustained. The only argument supporting this view is Thucydides’ obvious reverence for Pericles, whose rule is described in *The Peloponnesian War* as democratic in name, but monarchical (“rule of the first man”, as Thucydides says) in reality [EW VIII: xvii; PW I: 376–377]. This is why Hobbes tries to corroborate his views on Thucydides’ political affinities by emphasizing his Thracian regal descent and by reminding of the gold mines that were the source of his family’s fortune. Hobbes describes the exile in which the former Athenian general wrote his magnum opus as an aristocratic retreat to privacy, which was only temporarily interrupted due to an unavoidable service to the state, which ended in disaster. He also reports that Thucydides purposely “forbore to come into assemblies” and avoided the multitude, which is always in love with itself and eager to hear flattery [EW VIII: xvi–xviii].

However, the eminently “political” character which Hobbes assigns to Thucydides’ history is obviously not based on political bias. For example, Hobbes defends Thucydides’ objectivity from the criticism of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who believed that the author of *The Peloponnesian War* as a historian had had a duty, in which he failed, to place himself on the side of his city and to remove from his work all elements that could cause damage to the honour of his city [EW VIII: xxv–xxvi]. One can assume that what Hobbes considers as the eminently political character of Thucydides’ history comes from its essential contribution to political science: for Hobbes, “the most politic historiographer” means: “the one who best understood politics”.

Hobbes’ characterization of Thucydides could be partly explained by the ambiguity which is constitutive for the classical concept of politics. When writing his preface to *The Peloponnesian War*, Hobbes took the word “politics” in its Aristotelian sense, which refers not only to the practice of politics, but

also to the science thereof.¹ Not more than a decade later, Hobbes himself would take the most important step towards resolving this ambiguity, by laying the foundations of a new science of politics, called “civil science”. Hobbes would conceive this science as an exact discipline, capable of overcoming the deficiencies of the old politics: for Aristotle, politics was a subdivision of the “philosophy of human nature”, which, due to the nature of its subject matter, is not capable of scientific demonstration [Aristotle 2009: 106, 203]. On the contrary, in his first systematic works, Hobbes considers this new, true political science as the only possible guide for political action [EW I: 8–10].

At the time when his texts on Thucydides are being written, Hobbes doesn’t have this new concept of political science at his disposal yet. However, he already explains the superiority of the Greek historian in terms of his ability to teach his readers about what matters most in politics, for which history provides much empirical evidence. However delightful it might be, the observation of the flow of historical events is not an end in itself. The purpose of history is to “to instruct and enable men, by the knowledge of actions past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future” [EW VIII: vii].² That knowledge involves the understanding of the motives of political actors, which Thucydides scarcely mentions: as Hobbes says, he does not speculate about hidden intentions or unspoken thoughts of historical characters. However, Thucydides’ distinction as a historian lies in the fact that his presentation of the sequence of historical events puts the reader in the position of a witness who “may from the narrations draw out lessons to himself, and of himself be able to trace the drifts and counsels of the actors to their seat”, which is located in their heart [EW VIII: viii].

There is another explanation of Hobbes’ view on Thucydides as “the most political historiographer”, which does not contradict the previous one. It concerns Thucydides’ ability to present conflict, which is an essential feature of politics. To be sure, Hobbes assigned to his new political science, with its central doctrine of the sovereign power, the task of eliminating conflicts from social life, its pacification or “neutralization” [Schmitt 1982: 61–78]. But this precisely means that conflict was axiomatic for him, especially in the form of internal political discord or civil war. In this respect, it can be stated that the principal stimuli for the development of Hobbes’ program came directly from Thucydides’ history. This is true, above all, of Thucydides’ depiction of the worst possible form of political conflict, civil strife or sedition (*stasis*), but also of some other themes in his work.

¹ In spite of the demise of the Aristotelian concept of politics at the beginning of the modern age, the ambiguity of the word “politics” subsisted until the 19th century. This is evidenced by the survival of the university discipline of the same name, which was later to be changed, for the purpose of scientific objectivity, to “political science” [Ritter 1969: 106–107].

² Neither does this view contradict Aristotle, in principle at least. In the preface to the translation of *The Peloponnesian War* the absence of Hobbes’ later harsh criticism of the Greek philosopher is noticeable. Nevertheless, notwithstanding all his admiration for Thucydides, Hobbes is content to grant him the place of honour among historians only – the one which he gives to Homer among poets, to Aristotle among philosophers and to Demosthenes among rhetoricians [EW VIII: vii].

THE DIALECTICS OF DIFFIDENCE AND THE HAPPINESS OF MAN

Thucydides' influence on Hobbes was considerably greater than could be assumed from the number of times he mentions the historian's name. In order to appraise it, it is necessary to engage in the interpretation of the writings of the two authors.

The most conspicuous confirmation of Thucydides' influence on Hobbes can be found in the 13th Chapter of *Leviathan*. It is dedicated to the description of the state of nature, which, in theory, precedes the emergence of the commonwealth. The main characteristic of the state of nature is universal conflict among men, or "the war of all against all": it is worth noting that civil war is one of the examples which Hobbes cites to bring his notion of the state of nature closer to the mind of his readers. In this state, everybody is perfectly free. However, their freedom is not of much value, since it constantly conflicts with the freedom of others. And as all men are more or less equal as to their mental and physical capacities, no one is capable of protecting themselves from others in a durable and efficient manner [Hobbes 1968: 183–184]. This is to say that the state of nature is as unbearable as civil war. In order to escape it, men must forsake their freedom and submit to a sovereign power.

However, what are the causes of this general conflict or quarrel between people? According to Hobbes, these are the three basic drives which are rooted in human nature itself: competition, diffidence and glory. Each of them has an aim towards which it is directed: gain, safety and reputation [Hobbes 1968: 184–185]. Thus, people enter into conflict with each other either because 1) they desire the same thing, which they cannot share with others, or 2) they fear – rightfully or not – that their neighbors will do harm to them, which they try to prevent, or 3) they want to distinguish themselves from others, because they value themselves more.

Hobbes' inventory of the principal causes of quarrel between people reproduces, point for point, a theme from a speech which the Athenian embassy at Sparta delivered in answer to the accusations made by the Corinthians, Lacedaemonian allies, shortly before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. The Corinthians claimed that Athens had, with its military operations in Potidaea, offended the interests of the Peloponnesian alliance and thereby broken the peace treaty on the delimitation of the spheres of influence of 445 B.C. [PW I: 108–109, cf. 42–43]. The answer of the Athenians is modulated in two similar utterances, which amount to a single statement: accused of having endeavoured to increase the power of their polis to excess, the Athenians say that they had simply acted under the compulsion of the strongest human instincts, which are natural, eternal and common to all mankind, and to which therefore nothing can be objected: they were "influenced chiefly by fear, then by honour also, and lastly by self-interest as well". Manifestly, "fear" (*deos*) corresponds to Hobbes' "diffidence", "honour" (*timê*) to his "glory", and "self-interest" (*ôphelia*) to his "competition" [PW I: 126–129].³

³ Hobbes translates the three terms respectively as „fear“, „honour“ and „profit“ [EW VIII: 81]. The similarity between the texts of Thucydides and Hobbes has often been pointed to [cf. Scott 2000: 122, 134, with references to literature].

Even if there could be any doubts about the strict conceptual correspondence between Hobbes' and Thucydides' terms, for which there is no reason, one thing is certain: the structure of the argument of the Athenian embassy exhibits the same dialectics of diffidence which is at work in Hobbes' description of the "state of nature", "war of all against all", or civil war. In fact, as they say themselves, the Athenians became concerned for their safety – which led them to persist in their striving for power – when they had become aware that the Lacedaemonians had become suspicious and hostile toward them [PW I: 129]. In like manner, the Corinthians censure their Lacedaemonian allies for their inertness, inciting them to adopt, for the future at least, a strategy of "preventive war" against Athens: it would have been prudent for Sparta to destroy the power of her enemies at its inception, and not now, when it has doubled itself [PW I: 112–113]. This confirms the principal thesis of Thucydides' work that Sparta's fear of the growth of Athenian power was the principal cause of the Peloponnesian War [PW I: 42–43]. At the same time, the argument fits excellently into Hobbes' description of the state of nature. Indeed, we come upon a very similar idea in the following passage of his book *On the Citizen*, which concerns the precautions to be taken against one's future enemy: "Since the right of protecting ourselves according to our wills, proceeded from our danger, and our danger from our equality, it is more consonant to reason, and more certain for our conservation, using our present advantage to secure by taking caution, than when they shall be full grown and strong, and got out of our power, to endeavour to recover that power again by doubtful fight" [EW II: 13].

There are many other traces of the influence of Thucydides' work on Hobbes' conceptions. One of the episodes of the Peloponnesian War deserves particular attention, all the more so because Hobbes extensively commented on it. It reproduces a dialogue between the Athenian embassy and the leaders of the small Aegean island Melos, which is even nowadays considered to be one of the best examples of imperialist discourse [PW III: 154–179]. In this dialogue, the Athenian generals confront the Melian rulers, who wish to maintain their neutrality in the conflict between Athens and Sparta, with the ultimate choice – either to completely submit to Athens by entering the Athenian maritime alliance, or else to have their city destroyed after the defeat by an overwhelmingly stronger enemy. In the moment when the negotiations began, the Athenian war fleet had already been anchored just off the island.

Thucydides wrote that the Athenians refused to discuss with the Melians the issue of the justice of their proposal. That was the reason why Dionysius of Halicarnassus reprimanded him for saying things which harm the dignity of his city. While presenting an apology of his author, Hobbes goes so far as to defend the point of view of the Athenian embassy, saying that the generals had not been authorized by the Athenian people to debate questions of equity and report the outcome back to the assembly, but had simply been ordered "to take in the island by all means whatsoever", regardless of their justice [EW VIII: xxviii–xxix]. Another point of the dialogue is worth noting, although Hobbes says nothing about it here. The choice between the vital interest of security or salvation (*asphaleia*, *sotêria*) and the complete destruction and death as the

most terrible things (*ta deinotata*), as it is presented in the speech of the Athenian embassy, is of central importance for Hobbes' argument in *Leviathan* about the reason why it is necessary to establish a commonwealth: the danger of violent death, which is a constant threat in the state of nature, and which Hobbes himself describes as the most terrible thing which can befall a man, requires the founding of a political community in which the security of every citizen will be protected [PW III: 160–163, 168–169; Hobbes 1968: 186, 223–225].

The Melians, absolutely inferior to the Athenians in military regard, nevertheless asked the Athenian ambassadors what their advantage or profit would be if they agreed to submit to a foreign power. The answer to this was that the “profit” would consist in avoiding death, which is the greatest evil of all. This assertion could be understood as an expression of overt brutality and cynicism. However, Hobbes was able to find in it an inspiration for his criticism of the Aristotelian notion of the highest good as a final goal toward which all human life is directed or, at least, to find in it a confirmation of this criticism. Taking into account the differences among different people's desires, there can be no such thing as the highest good (*summum bonum*) which would be common to all humans, if it is not their self-preservation and things that foster it. However, the “greatest evil” (*primum malum*) is the same for everyone – death, particularly “a death in pain”. One could say that what is called the highest or the first good, is nothing but the avoiding of death, because all other things which are held to be good presuppose one's own conservation [Hobbes 1968: 160; Hobbes 1839: II, 98].

The connection between Thucydides' work and the fundamental conceptions of Hobbes' anthropology and philosophy of morality can be followed still further. In the abovementioned speech of the Corinthian embassy, the Athenians are presented as the exact opposite of the passive Spartans, who are defensive and not prone to conquering, because they rather desire to preserve what they already have than to obtain something new. On the contrary, the Athenians “toil, with hardship and dangers, all their life long; and least of all men they enjoy what they have because they are always seeking more, because they think their only holiday is to do their duty, and because they regard untroubled peace as a far greater calamity than laborious activity” [PW I: 118–121]. There can be little doubt that Hobbes had in mind this passage when he wrote, in *Leviathan*, the following lines about man in general: “the felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied”; quite the reverse, it is “a continuall progresse of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former being still but the way to the later” [Hobbes 1968: 160].

This progress has no limit or end, in much the same way as the strengthening of empire in the description of Thucydides, whose work as a whole reflects how, in the minds of historical actors, the measures undertaken to ensure safety for Athens required a continual increase of power. Hobbes applied this view to all mankind, whose “general inclination” is the “perpetual and restlesse desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death” [Hobbes 1968: 161]. It is obvious that he projected the features which Thucydides attributed to individuals and political collectivities on the nature of man.

THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR: *POLEMOS* OR *STASIS*?

Many interpreters of Thucydides consider his accounts of the internal war which took place in particular poleis as the most significant part of his work. This view is sometimes related to the belief that the condition of civil war, strife or *stasis* represents the crystallization point of the entire conflict which Thucydides' work depicts. Volkmann-Schluck has stated that the Peloponnesian War was, because of the complicated system of alliances which came to be established in Greece, the first conflict which, as to its origin and course, displayed the characteristics of a "political" war [Volkmann-Schluck 1977: 15]. That author saw the "monster" of civil war – the word is presumably an allusion to Hobbes' *Behemoth* – as a sort of ideal type: according to him, civil war is the sharpest and the most intensive form of political conflict, which enables us to discern the ultimate significance even of those conflictual conditions which have not yet developed fully and to the extreme [Volkmann-Schluck 1977: 60]. According to a more recent interpretation, Thucydides saw the Peloponnesian War not exactly as *polemos*, but as one immense internal war, which spread across the whole Greek world and its neighbouring areas. *Stasis* is thus raised to the role of the model of the entire conflict which is the object of Thucydides' history [Price 2004: 3, 67–73]. Those statements, which contain part of the truth, require further explanation.

Thucydides, of course, distinguishes armed conflict between poleis (*polemos*) from civil war or bloody strife within the city (*stasis*), even though in his time this conceptual distinction was not yet fully developed in philosophy.⁴ Nevertheless, *stasis* and *polemos* were conceived of as poles apart long before Thucydides' time. They also had opposite value-loading, which is evidenced in Greek tragedy. Thus, for example, Athena in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* dissuades the goddesses of revenge, the Erinyes, from implanting in her people the spirit of intestine war (*Arê emphyllion*), and calls instead for war against the external enemy (*polemos*) [Aeschylus 1926: 354–355; Loraux 1987: 101]. The Erinyes comply with this and pray that *stasis* may never come into the polis and that the blood of the citizens may not be shed in internal strife, but that they may live in a spirit of mutual love, unanimous in their hatred towards the external enemy [Aeschylus 1926: 364; cf. Meier 1990: 116]. Democritus would later say that *stasis* is an evil that befalls both the winners and the losers, which indirectly shows the advantage of interstate war which, as a rule, benefits one of the warring parties [Diels 1922: II, 110 = Democritus B 249; cf. Loraux 1987: 106].

The view that *stasis* is a flaw of the city is as old as Solon's poetry. Solon described civil strife as "the common evil" (*dêmosion kakon*) which destroys many in the flower of their youth; it comes to everyone's house, jumps over the highest wall and finds them even while they are hiding in the most remote

⁴ In spite of certain reservations as to the translation of the Greek term *stasis* with the syntagm "civil war", which rather corresponds to the Latin *bellum civile* [Loraux 1987: 110], it is occasionally used in this text to refer to internal conflicts in ancient Greece. Hobbes, as a rule, translates *stasis* as „sedition“, sometimes as „commotion“ [EW VIII: 28, 338, 347].

angle of the room. *Stasis* is a misery, “an inescapable wound” (*helkos apyhton*) in the body of the polis. However, this personified strife is not some sort of mystical or inexplicable force. According to Solon’s elegy, it stems from the aristocrats’ unscrupulous desire for wealth, which creates slavery in the polis, while slavery, in turn, “awakens” (*epegeirei*) discord [Noussia-Fantuzzi 2010: 86–87; Loraux 1987: 107–108].

However, the contrast between *stasis* and *polemos* in Solon’s fragment is perhaps not as sharp as it would become a few generations after his time. For example, Solon calls *stasis* an intestine or domestic war (*stasin emphyilon polemon*) [Noussia-Fantuzzi 2010: 86], thus bringing the two concepts closer than we would expect. With regard to the later emphasis of the advantages of *polemos* over *stasis*, as well as Solon’s own condemnation of civil strife, the combination of the two words is somewhat surprising.⁵ But something else can be inferred from Solon’s verses too: his metaphor of “awakening” civil strife seems to imply that it always “sleeps” in the polis: the danger of *stasis* always remains virtually present. This means that there is a fundamental connection between *stasis* and politics. A provision of Solon’s law, which is at first sight perplexing, speaks in favour of this interpretation. According to Aristotle’s testimony, those who refused to choose sides in civil strife were punished by loss of civil rights – by exclusion from participation in the life of the polis, which for the Greeks was the most severe punishment [Aristotle 1935: 30–31]. Civil strife is truly an “inevitable” wound, also in the sense that it imposes a choice which can be avoided only at the price of losing political existence. *Stasis* is thus inseparable from the very sense of politics.

The connection between *stasis* and the dimension of politics in the sense of choosing one’s side, which excludes neutrality, can be traced back to the etymology of the word. The noun *stasis* is derived from the verb *histēmi* (“set up”, “make to stand”, “bring to a standstill” or “stand still”), and originally meant nothing more than “placing”, “position”, “the place in which one stands”, and therefore “standpoint”. Gradually, the word came to mean “party”, later still, “party with seditious purposes”, and finally, “division”, “discord” and “civil strife” [Liddell/Scott 1996: 1634]. This semantic evolution seems to be pretty unusual, since a term which originally denotes stillness or stability acquires at the end the meaning of internal war and political overturn, which would rather make us think of movement: indeed, at the beginning of his work, Thucydides described the Peloponnesian War as the “greatest movement (*kinēsis*) that had ever stirred the Hellenes” [PW I: 2].

However, this peculiarity is not hard to explain. One standpoint, insofar as it is opposed to other standpoints, always remains a potential source of political discord. Even in modern languages words like “standpoint” or “position” have similar conflictual implications. To the same group belong some of the English terms which in Hobbes’ works always have a pejorative meaning since they denote potential causes of political dissension and ultimately civil

⁵ According to one hypothesis, Solon „purposefully presents civil strife as *polemos*“ in order to suggest „that the city’s leaders treat Athens as if it were a foreign conquest whose goods are distributed among the victors“ [cf. Noussia-Fantuzzi 2010: 248].

war: “sedition”, and the adjective which is derived from it, “seditious” (which Hobbes, as a rule, applies to perilous doctrines or people), as well as “faction”. As was rightly noted, Hobbes believed that there is “incipient war /.../ in the facts of how individual appetites and aversions are naturally formed” [Sorell 2001: 132]. This statement also applies to differences between opinions which, if expressed without any restraint, can always create dissensions in society.

The insight that every particular standpoint or point of view represents a possible threat to the interest of the community as a whole is clearly formulated by ancient Greek political authors, which “all insist that the state must stand outside class or other factional political interest” [Finley 1962: 6–7]. On the other hand, the politics of ancient Greece does not allow for a *stasis* which would take place on behalf of the whole, which is characteristic of the modern concept of revolution. Neither does Hobbes know of the latter concept, which is one of the reasons why he remains the last genuine theorist of civil war [cf. Koselleck 1995: 71–72].

However, as opposed to Hobbes, who believed that the danger of sedition and civil war

could be prevented only by absolute subjection to sovereign power, which amounts to doing away with politics altogether, Greek democracy is best understood as an attempt to head off that danger by establishing a political mechanism for majority decision-making. It was observed that the vote in democratic Athens was a prophylactic against civil war (*polemos epidēmios*) [Glötz 1929: 56]. This solution to the problem did not involve the complete elimination of political dissensus, which would later be accomplished in the absolutist state. On the contrary, it makes sense to say that Athens “was content to effect from day to day in the Assembly and the tribunal a fragmentary and piece-meal revolution” [Glötz 1929: 324]. This explains why the agonistic view of man remains relevant in the Greek political mentality not only for war but also for peace [Vernant 2007: 635] and has no negative implications whatsoever.

All of this, however, applies only to the Classical period, marked by the existence of the polis as the basic form of organization of state life. In Thucydides’ time, the polis was already on the way of disappearance as an independent political unit. Its decline can also account for the fact that Thucydides was able to be a great admirer of Pericles as a man and political leader and, at the same time, an ardent critic of Athenian democracy, in particular of its orators and demagogues. Hobbes, as is known, favoured the latter aspect of Thucydides’ work – among other things, he wrote that he had translated his history in order to warn his countrymen not to succumb to the dangerous influence of democratically-minded rhetoricians [Hobbes 1839: I, lxxxviii]. However, another point is of interest in our context: with the decadence of the polis, the borderline between *polemos* and *stasis* becomes unstable.

The two concepts cannot be rigorously distinguished in Thucydides’ history. Having in mind the devastating experience of the Peloponnesian War itself, Plato would later say that every war between the Hellenes is in reality a civil war – *stasis* and not *polemos* [Plato 1930: I, 494–497]. The Peloponnesian War once and for all destroyed the old bonds of protection and allegiance between

Greek poleis, especially between metropolises and their colonies, as well as the traditional kinship and customary ties within Greek tribes [PW IV: 110–117]. It put an end to the earlier Greek logic of belonging, which was based on filiation and shared cultural background, and replaced it with a system of wavering political alliances. Thucydides gave an impressive depiction of the consequences of these changes, which affected even military operations. For example, during the Sicilian expedition, the singing of paeans by their Dorian allies caused the biggest disarray in the ranks of the Athenians, who were Ionians: “Whenever /.../ the Argives or the Corcyraeans or any other contingent of the Athenian army would raise the paean, the Athenians were just as much terrified thereby as when the enemy sang. And so finally, when once they had been thrown into confusion, coming into collision with their own comrades in many different parts of the army, friends with friends and citizens with fellow-citizens, they not only became panic-stricken but came to blows with one another and were with difficulty separated” [PW IV: 88–89].

The difficulty of distinguishing between *stasis* and interstate war is evident in the very composition of Thucydides’ history. During the war between enemy poleis, the threat of internal strife is constantly hanging in the air. Thus, for example, the oligarchic government of Melos in the abovementioned dialogue refuses to debate on the Athenian ultimatum before the assembly out of fear of a possible popular uproar in the city [PW III: 154–157]. In reverse, the first book of Thucydides’ history makes it clear that political strife in the polis constantly invites the intervention of the most powerful external players, Athens on the side of the people’s party, Corinth or Sparta on the side of the oligarchic regimes [PW I: 42–57, 148–167]. In Thucydides’ work, there is a constant shift between depictions of interstate and intrastate war and transition between the two.

This indiscernibility between *polemos* and *stasis* makes Thucydides’ work all the more relevant today, with regard to the condition of the modern world, which can be described in terms of a “world civil war”, unconstrained by national boundaries.

HOBBS AND *STASIS* IN CORCYRA

Despite the fact that the Peloponnesian War saw internal conflicts with more significant consequences, such as the *stasis* in Athens, Thucydides’ most famous depiction concerns the civil strife of Corcyra, which, in fact, preceded the outbreak of the war itself [PW II: 124–151; cf. Price 2004: 304–327]. It was rightly remarked that these pages include the most comprehensive author’s comments that can be found in Thucydides’ entire work [Orwin 1988: 833]. In a way, Thucydides justified the attention he devoted to this particular case of *stasis* by emphasizing that it was “among the first that occurred” and that its brutality seemed all the greater since it was novel [PW II: 142–143]. As we shall see, the description of the civil war in Corcyra was of great interest for Hobbes, although he didn’t treat it thematically.

Thucydides presents the genesis of the conflict in Corcyra near the beginning of his book, almost immediately after the general remarks on its goals

and method [PW I: 42–79]. One of the events that led to the war was the conflict between Corcyra and Corinth over the control of a Corcyraean colony, Epidamnus, today's Durrës in Albania. That polis had also experienced civil war between the people's party and the aristocracy. The years-long internal conflicts were temporarily ended by the victory of the people and exile of the nobility. However, foreign powers then interfered in the conflict: first Corcyra, whose army fought on the side of the people, then Corinth, which supported the aristocrats. The conflict was subsequently extended to other participants as well – not only to Peloponnesian cities with a Dorian population, but also to poleis outside Peloponnesus, such as Megara in Attica, which entered into an alliance with Corinth, and Athens, whose fleet intervened on the side of Corcyra, and against Corinth, to support democracy. Finally, the Lacedaemonian assembly voted that the Athenian involvement in the conflict over Epidamnus constituted a breach of the peace treaty between Athens and Sparta, thereby declaring war against Athens [PW I: 148–149]. The decision was preceded by the aforementioned negotiations at Sparta.

The Corinthians had significantly contributed to the outbreak of the *stasis* in Corcyra. They set free the Corcyraeans whom they had earlier captured in the battles over Epidamnus, hoping that they would get their fellow citizens to come over to the side of Corinth and its allies. Thucydides says that the Corinthians had treated the prisoners with consideration from the very beginning, with that intention [PW I: 92–93]. Indeed, when they came back to Corcyra, these men started to stir up the citizens against Athens and the people's party which was in power. The Corcyraean senate first voted that the city should maintain the alliance with Athens, but also decided to renew the friendship with the Peloponnesians. However, open hostilities and armed clashes between “the many” (*hoi poloi*) and “the few” (*hoi oligoi*) started when the pro-Corinthian partisans of the oligarchic government killed the leader of the people's party, who was the Athenian proxenos, along with many other members of the senate. The conspirators justified their deed by their intention to keep Corcyra from falling into Athenian slavery [PW II: 126–131]. At first, their party had some success in the battles, but the situation then turned in favour of the people, which won a provisional victory. The efforts of the exiled members of the nobility to overthrow the people from power went on until their final destruction, which Thucydides describes later [PW II: 292–297].

The victory of the *dêmos* was of great significance for the further course of the war because it ensured the alliance with Corcyra for the Athenian expedition to Sicily. However, what is important for us in the present context is the nature of political events which Thucydides described. The opposing sides in Corcyra were fighting each other by all means and to total extermination. Not only citizens took part in the battles which were fought in the city streets. The oligarch party hired barbarian mercenaries from Illyria, while the majority of the slaves joined the people. Even women participated in the battles by throwing tiles from roofs. Their backs against the wall, the oligarchs didn't refrain from setting fire to buildings, which threatened to burn down the whole city. Even the Athenians, allies of the people's party, failed in an attempt to

stop the hostilities between the two opposing parties. From time to time, there seemed to be readiness to reach a mutual compromise in order to save the city, but with each turn of events, such as the departure of the enemy or the approach of the allied fleet, the procession of crimes and atrocities would resume its course. The difference between the private and the public ceased to exist. Creditors were ruthlessly slain on grounds of personal interest by those who owed them money with the excuse that they had planned to overthrow the democracy. Neither divine nor human laws applied any more, and anomy prevailed in the city. Sanctuaries were desecrated: murders were committed in temples or in front of them, since the right of suppliants was no longer respected. Party affiliation mattered more than loyalty to closest family members, so that fathers killed their own sons [PW II: 140–141].

As Thucydides suggests, in the state of lawlessness and anarchy of civil war, men who adhere to moral norms most often lose their life, and the issue of justice in relations between individuals is completely set aside. In a similar way, the question of justice had been rejected as irrelevant by the Athenians at Melos: according to their standpoint, justice could be discussed only among equals, and not in cases when there exists an important difference in power between the two sides [PW III: 158–159]. However, in the internal war which was fought in Corcyra, justice was brought into question in an even more fundamental way. Whenever *stasis* broke out, all agreements, promises and even solemn oaths would lose their binding power. Since they were given under the pressure of unfavorable circumstances, no one abided to them longer than their current interest required. Eventually, all trust among people disappeared: if it existed at all, it did not stem from respect for the law but from complicity in its transgression. All alliances were temporary and there was no permanent loyalty [PW II: 144–145].

Thucydides ended this account with his own observations [PW II: 142–151]. They seem to express his point of view more clearly than any other passage of the work. However, they contain no trace of an intention of putting all the blame for committed atrocities on one of the conflicting sides, or even an attempt at comparing their magnitude. Besides, any discussion regarding the morality or justice of either of the two parties is excluded from Thucydides' own considerations. In this regard, his impartiality as a historian is impeccable, but was it the only reason of his abstaining from moral judgment?

Hobbes wanted to go further: he was able to draw some fundamental conclusions from Thucydides. Civil war, just like the "state of nature", precludes justice. According to Hobbes, speaking about justice presupposes the existence of law, which is nothing but the command of the sovereign power, whose most important task consists precisely in putting an end to the state of nature, or civil war. This is what Hobbes' imperative theory of law is about: "Before there was any government, *just* and *unjust* had no being, their nature only being relative to some command: and every action in its own nature is indifferent; that it becomes *just* or *unjust*, proceeds from the right of the magistrate" [EW II: 151].

One more thing is important. Thucydides' concluding remarks suggest that one of the main effects of civil war is corruption and, more precisely, the

inversion of the established social standards, values and norms. The transformations are the most striking in the domain of language as the most fundamental social convention. Habitual meanings of moral terms are inverted: “reckless audacity” is now considered as “courageous loyalty to party”, and impulsiveness as courage. At the same time, prudence is defamed as cowardice, and moderation as weakness. Shrewdness and deception are particularly appreciated as proof of cleverness and dexterity. On the contrary, simplicity (*to euêthes*), which Thucydides considered as an essential ingredient of virtue, is ridiculed. Party interest and private profit are veiled under noble names and slogans, such as “political equality for the masses under the law” on the side of the people’s party, or “temperate aristocracy” on the side of aristocrats [PW II: 144–149].

These passages offer several early examples of paradiastole, a figure of speech by means of which “similar things are distinguished from each other”, as Quintilian would later define it [Skinner 1996: 150]. Ever since its origins in antiquity, the use of paradiastole has been of special interest in the world of human affairs, i.e. in politics and morality. That figure of speech represents a powerful rhetorical device of redescription of moral terms, and thus of revaluation of moral facts. We find it at work in Thucydides. To the extent that “reckless audacity” truly has something in common with “courageous loyalty”, actions or characters which are usually described by the first term may be brought under the latter one and thereby justified, or *vice versa*, according to the interest of the speaker in each case [Skinner 1996: 161].

Hobbes took Thucydides’ examples seriously. He probably had them in mind when he wrote in *Leviathan* that “force” and “fraud” are two “cardinal virtues” in war [Hobbes 1968: 188]. The essay on Thucydides in which Hobbes relates the circumstances of his life already hints at the inversion of meanings which occurred in the civil war in Corcyra. However, Hobbes considers this inversion to be characteristic of democracy: according to him, Thucydides decided to withdraw from public life because the people of his time had such a high opinion of their own power, that only those who encouraged them to “the most dangerous and hopeless enterprises” were held in esteem as statesmen, while “he that gave them temperate and discreet advice, was thought a coward, or not to understand, or else to malign their power” [EW VIII: xvi; Skinner 1996: 282].

Corruption of language is more than just another symptom of overall moral deterioration – it is also one of its main instruments. That is the reason why Hobbes saw great danger in the alteration of the meanings of words by demagogues and rhetoricians. His insistence on the principle that ambiguity should be avoided by giving precise definitions of terms, which we encounter in his later systematic works, is not only explained by his scientific mentality, but has political grounds too. For Hobbes, linguistic ambiguities are a source of disputes and even of armed conflict: “Metaphors, and senselesse and ambiguous words, are like *ignes fatui*; and reasoning upon them, is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention, and sedition, or contempt” [Hobbes 1968: 116–117].

In order to eliminate this danger, it is necessary to determine the meanings of words. In all cases where disagreement in respect of their definition or

use can endanger peace, the decision which settles the issue belongs to public authority [EW II: 268–269]. It is particularly urgent to fix the meaning of words in the domain of politics and morals, in which they are fluid and value-loaded at the same time, as in the case of names of virtues and vices. As Hobbes believed, the sense of moral terms cannot be reduced to their objective content or the nature of things to which they refer, but depends on the viewpoint of the speaker, which is precisely the reason why these terms often provoke discord between people. The examples which Hobbes cites are typical cases of *paradiastole*. They are almost literally taken from Thucydides: “one man calleth *wisdom*, what another calleth *feare*; and one *cruelty*, what another *justice*; one *prodigality*, what another *magnanimity*; and one *gravity*, what another *stupidity*” [Hobbes 1968: 109]. The task of defining the “real” meaning belongs to the sovereign power: as his imperative theory of law, Hobbes’ moral emotivism [cf. EW IV: 109] is closely related to his political doctrine of sovereignty.

WHAT DOES *STASIS* REVEAL TO US?

As the main causes of the unfortunate events in Corcyra, Thucydides singled out two human passions – greed (*pleonexia*) and ambition (*philotimia*), which stem from excessive party zeal (*prothymon*) [PW II: 146–147]. In civil strife, these devastating passions know no limits, so that the conflict becomes emulation in wickedness which casts away all scruples and brings to nothing all moral and religious norms. This gives rise to the question: is civil war anything else but a limit situation in which human nature openly manifests itself, whereas it remains hidden in time of public peace and tranquillity?

The arguments in favour of this view are substantial. The civil war in Corcyra undeniably has a privileged place in the composition of *The Peloponnesian War*, which Thucydides composed as a “possession for all time”. He intended his work to be read by those who “wish to have a clear view both of the events which have happened and of those which will some day, in all human probability (*kata to anthrôpinon*), happen again in the same or a similar way” [PW I: 40–41]. He uses almost identical terms in his account of the events in Corcyra: the horrors which happened there “happen and always will happen while human nature (*physis anthrôpôn*) is the same” [PW II: 142–143].

These words might lead us to think that Thucydides considered man as brutal and unjust by nature. However, the continuation of the same sentence proves that this conclusion would be wrong: human nature⁶ is “severer or milder”, according to the circumstances, which are particularly unfavorable in wartime. War is a “violent teacher” (*biaios didaskalos*), which in most people arouses passions that correspond to its own character, but in times of peace, states, as well as individuals, have “higher morals” [PW II: 142–143].

Thucydides’ statements about human nature are frequently explained by the influence of rhetoricians and sophists of his time: according to tradition, Thucydides was a disciple of Antiphon, Gorgias and Prodicus [Romilly 2002: 150,

⁶ We follow Hobbes’ translation here [EW VIII: 348].

152–154]. The antithesis between nature (*physis*) and law (*nomos*), which we encounter in the speech of the Athenian embassy at Melos, was widely exploited by the sophists. However, this antithesis does not exactly correspond to what Thucydides says about human nature in the chapters on *stasis* in Corcyra. The difference between men such as they are during civil war and men in happier, peaceful times does not coincide with the opposition of nature and law. Thucydides rather seems to suggest that human nature itself shows itself as deeply ambiguous, capable of different interpretations, according to the circumstances.

This means that it would be wrong to believe that people are bad or brutal by nature and that civil war only reveals this fact. The statement that Thucydides understood human nature as a “source and place of regression at the same time” [Loraux 1995: 322] seems exaggerated and all too Christian as well. According to Thucydides, human nature is not evil, but rather essentially unstable, precarious and dependent on circumstances, which also suggests that the circumstances in which men live should be made as good as possible.

Nevertheless, it is indisputable that Thucydides defined his standpoint in opposition to idealized representations of man in poetry and mythology [PW I: 38–41]. If this attitude did not stem from sophistic teachings, how can we explain it? In fact, it has its roots in the conceptions of Ionian physicists, who were also adversaries of mythology. As Jaeger observed, “Thucydides won his great intellectual victory by transferring that scientific attitude from timeless nature to the political struggle of his own age, darkened and confused with passions and party-interests” [Jaeger 1973: 388].

Hobbes’ approach to politics was also inspired by a new science of nature. That could explain his candid descriptions of the nature of man. Carl Schmitt had Hobbes in mind, among others, when he wrote that “all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil” and spoke of their anthropological pessimism [Schmitt 1996: 61]. And then there is religion. Hobbes used to defend himself from accusations for his uncomplimentary concept of human nature by hiding behind the authority of the Holy Bible and its central notion of man as a fallen and corrupt being [EW II: xv–xvi]. In the light of his reputation as the atheistic “Beast of Malmesbury”, this tactic must have seemed a mere provocation to his contemporaries. So instead of Hobbes’ pessimism, it may be more appropriate to speak of his anthropological realism, just as in the case of Thucydides.

Interestingly enough, Hobbes tried to defend Thucydides from the accusation of atheism. In his record of Thucydides’ life and work, Hobbes mentioned that he was, as well as Socrates, a disciple of the philosopher Anaxagoras, the last of the Ionian physicists, whose opinions, “being of a strain above the apprehension of the vulgar, procured him the estimation of an atheist”, which finally cost him his life. The same reputation led to the death of Socrates, and cast a shadow on Thucydides’ name too, although he was not an atheist [EW VIII: xv]. But couldn’t it be that three of them were atheists – Anaxagoras, Thucydides and Hobbes?

There is no simple answer to this question. However, it is clear that Hobbes, like Thucydides, but differently from Socrates, founded his conception of

man on a science which regards nature as indifferent to human goals. For Hobbes, this science was the Galilean mechanics, according to which he modeled his *Civil Science* as a study having for its object the movement of the large political “body”. Certainly, the nature of 17th century physics is not identical to that of the Ionian physicists. Nonetheless, both sciences had a similar, sobering effect on the conception of human nature and the place of man in the world.

LITERATURE

ABBREVIATIONS

- EW = Hobbes, Thomas. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. by W. Molesworth:
 EW I = *Elements of Philosophy*, London: Bohn 1839.
 EW II = *Philosophical Elements of a true Citizen*, London: Bohn 1841.
 EW IV = *Triplos, in Three Discourses, et al.* London: Bohn 1840.
 EW VIII–IX = *The History of the Grecian War by Thucydides, translated by Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, Vols. I–II, London: Bohn 1843.
 PW I–IV = Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War I–IV*, London: Heinemann, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956–1959.

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