

THINKING WITH THUCYDIDES ON CLIMATE CHANGE GEOPOLITICS

THE MELIAN DIALOGUE, LOW-LYING ISLAND STATES, AND THE ANTHROPOCENE AS “THE GREATEST MOTION”

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ABSTRACT: This article uses Thucydides to frame the Anthropocene as “the greatest motion” in order to consider the magnitude and urgency of climate change for thinking about geopolitics today. His Melian Dialogue, the debate between the Athenians and the Melians over the neutrality of the island of Melos, is revisited with a mind to consider the plight of low-lying island states in a time of climate change and the unwillingness of great powers, like China and the United States, to act in accordance with the climate justice standard of keeping temperatures from rising 1.5°C above the preindustrial average. With climate justice appeals failing to convince great powers in their actions, this article raises the prospect of how interest-based reasoning could align itself with appeals to justice, with the intent of overcoming indifference toward the plight of the inhabitants of low-lying island states. The key is to move great powers in the direction of taking an active interest in upholding their climate pledges so that they do not ring hollow. Recalling Thucydides’ placement of the Melian Dialogue before the disastrous Athenian-led Sicilian expedition could serve as a cautionary tale for great powers in the context of climate change geopolitics.

KEYWORDS: Thucydides; Melian Dialogue; Low-lying island states; Climate change; Geopolitics; Anthropocene

“It is the very distinction between an organism and its environment that the Gaia theory calls into question. Here again we have the problem of gauging the selfishness—still just as ‘sacrosanct’—not of organisms, now, but of the Great Powers. In the context of the Theater of Negotiations, what the emergence of Gaia obliges us to reconsider is the distinction between a nation-state and its environment. That nation-states and genes have something in common can no longer surprise us.” – Bruno Latour¹

¹ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures On The New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Polity Press, 2017), 271.

INTRODUCTION

“What is war?” With the rising of the world’s oceans and seas on a warming planet, Anote Tong, the former President of Kiribati, asks this question in the face of what he sees as the inevitable loss of his homeland, a low-lying island state in the Pacific Ocean. Does the burning of fossil fuels constitute “an act of war”? In the documentary *Anote’s Ark*, Tong makes the case that the carbon-intensive activities of countries threaten the existence of island states like his own. He argues, “If the countries know that their act is detrimental to the health and the life of our people, yet they continue to do it, what is that? This is ‘an act of war,’ and we don’t have the means to counter it.”² This “situation of war” in our times, as the late Bruno Latour describes it, is both “declared and latent.” He states, “Some people see it everywhere; others ignore it entirely.”³ And those who ignore it, do they adopt what Amitav Ghosh calls the “tactic of conflict through inaction”?⁴

Whether or not one concedes that climate change is an “act of war,” the goal of this essay is to offer some preliminary thoughts on this “situation of war” through thinking with Thucydides about claims of justice, appeals to interest, and to the state of indifference in the context of the Anthropocene discourse. To achieve this end, a good point of departure would be to build on the familiarity that many students of International Relations have with Thucydides’ Melian Dialogue, which is often assigned in introductory courses.⁵ To be clear, my goal is not to appeal to Thucydides’ authority for my preferred theory of international relations⁶ or to contribute to the “Thucydides Industry” per se,⁷ but rather I am

² *Anote’s Ark*, directed by Matthieu Rytz (EyeSteelFilm, 2018), <http://www.anotesark.com/>.

³ Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter. (Polity Press, 2018), 90; see also Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 73.

⁴ Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (The Chicago University Press, 2021).

⁵ Johnathan Kirshner, “Handle Him with Care: The Importance of Getting Thucydides Right,” *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 1–24; see also Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Orders* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 65.

⁶ David A. Welch, “Why International Relations Theorists Should Stop Reading Thucydides,” *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2003): 301–319; cf. Johnathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics*. (Princeton University Press, 2022), 6.

⁷ Timothy Ruback, “Thucydides Our Father, Thucydides Our Shibboleth: The History of the Peloponnesian War as a Marker for Contemporary International Relations Theory,” in *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides*, eds. Christine Lee and Neville Morley, Oxford: (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015); Timothy Ruback, “Ever since the days of Thucydides: on the textual origins of IR theory,” in *Modern Theory*,

most interested in seeking to orient our attention toward claims like Tong's and the predicament that low-lying island states face as a result of anthropogenic climate change. Linking climate change geopolitics with the most often taught section of Thucydides' *History*, which so happens to focus on the relation between a weak island city-state and an imperial city-state,⁸ appears both promising as well as practical. In other words, one need not become a scholar of Thucydides to relate the Melian Dialogue to the plight of low-lying islands states today.

To this end, I provide a careful reading of the Melian Dialogue while briefly discussing Thucydides' description of Athens' Sicilian expedition in an effort to show how Thucydides could be useful in thinking about the language of interest, along with its associated words or paired concepts, such as justice, in the context of climate change geopolitics. Before turning to this discussion, I set the stage in building on the Anthropocene discourse in order to frame matters using Thucydides' phrase "the greatest motion."

THE ANTHROPOCENE AS "THE GREATEST MOTION"

The "human impact" on the planet is, to be sure, experienced differently around the world. What is the best way to describe, generally speaking, these times characterized by such an impact? Some have argued the history of the Earth has emerged from the Holocene epoch, beginning approximately 11,700 $\pm$ 100 years before the year 2000 CE. They proposed we have entered into the Anthropocene epoch, an "epoch" being the second smallest unit on the geological time scale and "Anthropocene" simply meaning "new human."⁹ While the International Commission on Stratigraphy rejected the formalization of the geological definition of the Anthropocene epoch, the definition nonetheless can still do work in theorizing the planetary crisis.¹⁰ Operating from the geological definition, the Anthropocene represents a time marked by "Anthropos" when

Modern Power, World Politics: Critical Investigations, eds. by Scott G. Nelson and Nevzat Soguk (London: Ashgate Press, 2016)

⁸ On this relation in the inter-polis world, see John G. Zumbrennen, *Silence and Democracy: Athenian Politics in Thucydides' History* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 154

⁹ Erle C. Ellis, *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 2-4, 32-33, 38-39, 47-48, 70-71.

¹⁰ Jan Zalasiewicz, Julia Adeney, Colin N. Waters, Simon Turner, and Martin J. Head, "What Should the Anthropocene Mean?", *Nature* 632 (August 20, 2024): 980-984.

humanity as a species is cast as a “global force,” one that leaves in its wake stratigraphic signatures on planet Earth, or Gaia. To get a sense of what it means to be a global force, consider how collectively humanity annually moves more of the earth than not only all the rivers on the planet but “all natural processes combined.”¹¹ Such a feat is staggering, perhaps even inconceivable, to the imagination. Indeed, the geohistorical narrative of the Anthropocene is reminiscent of the gigantomachy in Greek mythology—the war between the Giants and the Olympians. While Greek myths abound with lessons for our times,¹² the Anthropocene discourse has all the makings for a new gigantomachy myth, that is, the planetary war between Anthropos and Gaia, which has grown to such proportions that it would seem to warrant the description of “the greatest motion.”

Thucydides uses the wondrous phrase the “greatest motion” to set the tone in his description of the war between the Spartan-led Peloponnesians and the Athenians, which lasted from 431 to 404 BCE. This war was for him the “greatest motion yet known in history.” The Spartans and the Athenians were both at the peak of their powers. The rest of the Hellenes felt compelled to take sides and “those who delayed doing so at once having it in contemplation.” Thucydides’ inquiry leads him to believe that in the history up until his time “there was nothing on a greater scale, either in war or in other matters.”¹³ During the twenty-seven years of the war, there occurred more “disasters of a kind and number that no other similar period of time could match,” including “banishing and bloodshedding, now on the field of battle, now in political strife,” unparalleled earthquakes, numerous eclipses, great droughts and famines, and “that most calamitous and awfully fatal visitation, the plague.”¹⁴ Was Thucydides’ narrative placement of human events alongside earthquakes, eclipses, drought-induced

¹¹ Goudie, Andrew S. Goudie and Heather A. Viles, *Geomorphology in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 33, and Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, Mark Williams, and Colin P. Summerhayes, eds., *Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit: A Guide to the Scientific Evidence and Current Debate* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 71, quoted in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 7.

¹² Richard Seaford, *Ancient Greece and Global Warming* (Remous Ltd., 2009).

¹³ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (Free Press, 1996), 1.1.1-2. My only adjustment to the translation is that I use “greatest motion” instead of “greatest movement,” following Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 140.

¹⁴ Thucydides, 1.23.1-3.

famines, and the plague done for dramatic effect?¹⁵ Did he intend for his readers to reflect on the role of “nature, chance, and the divine” with regard to both natural and human disasters, along with recognizing the limits of human reason?¹⁶ To be sure, the magnitude of these events is on display in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, allowing him to draw the attention of his readers to the magnitude of change within the inter-*polis* realm, as the Spartans and the Athenians began to quarrel, that meant sooner or later “all the Hellenes” would be drawn in, even if at first they remained neutral.¹⁷

If we view the “situation of war” today in terms of “the greatest motion,” as the gigantomachy of the Anthropocene, it can hardly be deemed a “conventional” war, even though these wars also belong to it. One only needs to consider the energy politics of the on-going Russo-Ukraine War.¹⁸ To think of the Anthropocene as “the greatest motion” calls to mind Thucydides’ *History* not because his work reflects, or even resembles, what is happening today.¹⁹ Rather, it suggests that thinking with Thucydides in relation to climate change geopolitics might be useful in seeing more clearly “the situation of war” resulting from anthropogenic climate change in terms of “the greatest motion,” especially in that, like the Peloponnesian War, everyone must come to face it, whether one is a great or small power.

Thucydides contemplated war and human things in parallel with nature and natural disasters, including human responses to both of the latter.²⁰ We would do well to follow his model of inquiry, along with recognizing an added complication, namely, how humanity is now a global force that plays a role in precipitating what could present itself as “natural” (such as climate change, heatwaves, hurricanes, wildfires, famines, etc.) but is more and more being

¹⁵ Martinho Soares, “Nature and Natural Phenomena in Thucydides’ The Peloponnesian War: Physis and Kinesis as Factors of Political Disturbance,” in *Crises (Staseis) and Changes (Metabolai): Athenian Democracy in the Making*, eds. Breno Battistin Sebastiani and Delfim Ferreira Leão (Firenze University Press, 2022), 56.

¹⁶ Bernard Dobski, “A Naturally Disastrous War: Nature, Politics, and Historiography in Thucydides’ History,” in *Classical Rationalism and the Politics of Europe*, ed. Ann Ward (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 36–37, 49.

¹⁷ Thucydides, 1.18.3.

¹⁸ Michael J. Albert, *Navigating the Polycrisis: Mapping the Futures of Capitalism and the Earth* (MIT Press, 2024).

¹⁹ Cf. Thucydides, 1.23.4.

²⁰ Dobski, “A Naturally Disastrous War” and Soares, “Nature and Natural Phenomena in Thucydides’ The Peloponnesian War.”

qualified as anthropogenic—at least partially. We might wonder what Thucydides would have thought of the Anthropocene discourse—that the cumulative actions of human beings have reached such a magnitude that humanity is now conceptualized as one of the main forces on Earth enacting planetary change. What would he have thought about the state of human things in light of the significant alteration that humankind has had on the more-than-human condition?

In discussing the Anthropocene as “the greatest motion,” the goal is to draw attention to the need to reflect on what the “situation of war” discloses about the relations among human beings and sovereign states in the context of a planetary war between *Anthropos* and *Gaia*. To be clear, to view climate change as an “act of war” is a broad way of thinking about war. For some, this claim is understandably too abstract to be meaningful, as it does not readily correspond to concrete wars of the past, including the Peloponnesian War, and present. And yet, our times are in need of trying to grapple with humanity’s cumulative impact on the planet while also concerning ourselves with what climate change means in the context of an international system of sovereign states. It requires coming to terms with Francis Bacon’s orienting of science toward the “conquest of nature,” which entailed facilitating peace among human beings around the common task of “turning with united forces against the Nature of Things, to storm and occupy her castles and strongholds, and extend the bounds of human empire....”²¹ And then it requires addressing “the great schism” between Baconian “scientific-technological modernity” and “scientific-technological Earth modernity,” where the latter seeks “an overall human arrangement as unlike previous iterations of modernity as [scientific-technological modernity] is unlike traditional civilizational predecessors.”²² Thinking through “the situation of war” in the Anthropocene entails putting forth an effort not to ignore the plight of others, including human beings and nonhumans. As such, it would seem that a civil war

²¹ Francis Bacon, *Of the Dignity and Advancement of Learning*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, Vol. 4., eds. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, Douglas Denon Heath (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 372-37; Laurence Berns, *The Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, eds. Martin Yaffe and Nathan Dinneen (Political Animal Press, 2024), 128-148.

²² Daniel Deudney, “The Great Schism: Scientific-Technological Modernity Versus Greenpeace Civilization,” in *Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order*, eds. Daniel Deudney, G. John Ikenberry, Karoline Postel-Vinay (Oxford University Press, 2023), 243, see also 236-240.

exists within Anthropos itself, which is why calls go out to rename our times the Capitalocene,²³ the Eurocene,²⁴ and the Chthulucene²⁵ in order to emphasize the problem with the notion of a generalized humanity as the unifying cause of global environmental change. And yet, perhaps couching matters as a civil war within Anthropos is too abstract, even if theoretically poignant.²⁶ To ground the sentiment of such an idea entails that we try to think about climate change as “an act of war” between sovereign states. Tong’s claim that climate change is an “act of war” does just that, and it is low-lying island states that stand to lose. In calling climate change an “act of war,” the question of “climate injustice” arises, encouraging parties to, at least, reflect on the matter of responsibility, along with the corresponding calls for “climate justice.” But what does “climate justice” among sovereign states entail?

As Tong’s comments above suggest, it is reasonable to imagine that many low-lying island states simply feel trapped in a world not of their own making. The Anthropocene as the greatest motion brings to mind how anthropogenic climate change leaves no place untouched. What defenses do the islanders have against what Isabelle Stengers calls “the intrusion of Gaia”?²⁷ What alliances, what aid, can they call upon? Should they hold out hope that great powers, like China and the United States, which have contributed the most to climate change, will bear both morally and legally the political responsibility of their deeds and intervene in time to keep temperatures from rising 1.5°C above the preindustrial average? Or in the face of geopolitical rivalry, is this goal “meaningless”? It is notable that the “High Ambition Coalition,” a group of low-lying island nations, put forth the 1.5°C goal during the Paris Agreement discussions. States who abandon, or contemplate abandoning, this goal leave themselves open to being “skewered by small-island nations and developed nations alike.”²⁸ Many Pacific

²³ Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (Verso, 2015).

²⁴ Grove, Jaius Victor Grove, *Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World* (Duke University Press, 2019).

²⁵ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

²⁶ Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Polity Press, 2017), especially 76-111.

²⁷ Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (Open Humanities Press, 2015), 43; cf. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 40-44.

²⁸ Shannon Osaka, “The World’s Most Ambitious Climate Goal Is Essentially out of Reach—Why Won’t Anyone Admit It?”, *Grist*, April 8, 2022, <https://grist.org/climate/the-worlds-most-ambitious-climate-goal-is-essentially-out-of-reach/>.

Island nations, “which on average sit no more than 2 meters (6.56 feet) above sea level,” would be served a “death warrant” were temperatures to increase 2°C, which is why they advocated for the 1.5°C threshold.²⁹ Does climate justice demand that this threshold not be transgressed? Whatever the case, the 1.5°C threshold was breached in 2024 for the first time, even though the ten-year average is 1.3°C above the preindustrial average (1850-1900), which means “it could be several more years before 1.5°C is well and truly breached.” The initial breach “should serve as a wake-up call for political leaders.”³⁰ What remains to be seen is whether this “wake-up call” will motivate nation-states to heed the call from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change for “state parties to protect the planet’s climate system ‘on the basis of equity and according to their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.’”³¹

It is difficult for many to envision great powers seeing the 1.5°C threshold as a meaningful and enforceable normative and material limit to their “national interests,” especially since the United States military, “the single largest institutional consumer of [fossil fuels] on the planet,”³² would not reduce its use of fossil fuels if it placed them at a strategic disadvantage. Even when a feeling of concern is invoked for the plight of those most vulnerable due to climate change, the feeling of helplessness often surfaces in terms of being able to make things better. Do not the islanders appear to be doomed when it comes to climate change geopolitics? While the “Thucydides’ trap” is used to describe the likelihood of a war between a rising power and an established great power,³³ another sense of the “Thucydides’ trap” presents itself in this context in terms of states feeling trapped in lacking the influence to bring about change that aligns with their political objectives, both domestic and foreign. When Tong says that his country lacks “the means to counter” what he interprets as “an act of war,” Thucydides’ Melian Dialogue comes to mind as an example that elucidates in a

²⁹ Christina Gerhardt, *Sea Change: An Atlas Of Islands in a Rising Ocean* (University of California Press, 2023), 5.

³⁰ Jeff Tollefson, “Earth Breaches 1.5°C Climate Limit For The First Time: What Does It Mean?”, *Nature*, 637 (Jan 23, 2025): 769-770.

³¹ Steve Vanderheiden, *Environmental Political Theory* (Polity Press, 2020), 228.

³² Albert, *Navigating the Polycrisis*, 185; see also Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, 124-131, 147.

³³ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

way “the situation of war” that low-lying islands states face as a result of climate change.

CLIMATE CHANGE GEOPOLITICS AND THE MELIAN DIALOGUE

The Melian Dialogue is one of the more memorable moments of Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian War, despite the end result, where the imperial Athenians are ruthless in sowing devastation on the island of Melos. It was an event in itself that had no apparent consequence for determining the course of the war but nonetheless revealed how war could “lead to the crumbling of the thin layer of civilization,”³⁴ along with illustrating “radical departures from rational self-interest.”³⁵ In a similar vein, it is not difficult to imagine well-heeled moderns who hold the view that the inundations of low-lying island states, or low-lying lands in general, are merely the costs associated with efforts to spur economic growth. Some might temper callousness of this sort in holding that such anticipated loss is unfortunate but necessary in the grand scheme of things. Whatever the sentiment, it is convenient to write off the plight of low-lying island states, never mind that such a loss is a symptom that the Baconian modern scientific “war against nature” is not going as planned. Suppose the future scenarios regarding the inundation of low-lying island states turn out to be correct, will the lands and their peoples be remembered, or will they be entirely forgotten, not even serving as a lesson to reflect on? Thucydides’ approach to history, at the very least, demonstrates how, even when feeling a general sense of helplessness, tempering this feeling is key to preventing a slide into utter indifference. The merit of such a path is that it allows one to face crises and to render accounts of what both has unfolded and is unfolding. This activity is not for its own sake. Not only does it preserve the memory of events and peoples. It both provides the basis for reflections on wiser courses of action and for calling out the ruthlessness of nations, be it the act of genocide or the “slow violence” associated with the pursuit of economic growth regardless of social and environmental costs. As such, the Melian Dialogue still remains instructive, especially with how it foregrounds the language of morality and expediency

³⁴ Jonathan Kirshner, “Handle Him with Care: The Importance of Getting Thucydides Right,” 10-11, 22.

³⁵ Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 126.

within a moment of crisis.³⁶

In 416 BCE, the Athenian empire continued to expand its reach. The island of Melos had up until that point remained neutral and wished not to take part in the conflict between Sparta and Athens. When the Athenians arrive at the island, the Melian leaders begin by pleading for their lands and freedom, hoping to remain outside the sphere of the Athenian empire. Ignoring the safest, or the most expedient, course of action of yielding to the Athenians, the Melians hold out that justice is on their side.³⁷ The Athenians counter their claim to justice, saying, “you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”³⁸ This well-known “Athenian thesis” is often taken to be the fundamental outlook of classical realism in International Relations theory.³⁹ Apparently, between such unequal powers there is no sense of inter-*polis* justice,⁴⁰ and it is best simply to think of what is in one’s own *interest* given the present circumstances. Foreshadowing the disastrous fate of the Sicilian expedition, the Melians, nevertheless, argue that it is both expedient and in their interests to invoke justice in the face of danger and that someday the Athenians themselves might profit in seeking to persuade others through appealing to justice and what is right, especially since their “fall would be a signal for the heaviest vengeance and an example for the world to meditate upon.”⁴¹ The image of the Athenian empire falling does not faze the Athenian spokesmen who attempt to find the silver-lining in the prospect of having Spartan rule imposed on them were their empire to collapse. They deem such a prospect to be better than being ruled by their own subjects. By inference, the Athenians appear to be suggesting that the Melian leaders should be honored to have such generous overlords as themselves. It is

³⁶ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, Fourth Edition (Basic Books, 2006), 3-20; see also, Robert Howse, “Thucydides and Just War: How to Begin to Read Walzer’s Just and Unjust Wars,” *The European Journal of International Law* 24, no. 1 (2013): 17-24.

³⁷ Thucydides, 5.84.1-5.114.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.89.

³⁹ Thomas Pangle and Peter Ahrens Dorf, *Justice Among Nations: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace* (University Press of Kansas, 1999). The phrase “Athenian thesis” first appears in Strauss, *The City and Man*, 183; it is employed in Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton University Press, 1994); for a critique of the “Athenian thesis” framing, see Zumbrunnen, *Silence and Democracy*, 78, 128-132, 139-141.

⁴⁰ Thucydides, 1.76.2-3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.90.

easy to glimpse how the Athenians are trying to appeal to the better judgment of the Melian leaders through using an argument that they think will appeal to their sense of honor. They encourage the Melian elite to reorient their love of honor and learn to recognize, given the circumstances, what is in their best interest.

In the context of geopolitics, it is difficult to convince states to act or not to act a certain way through an appeal to justice. Interest-based reasoning is more often than not the coin of the realm. Simply consider the legacy of appeals to the “national interest.”⁴² Yet, the Melians are suggesting that much more can be done with this coin, implying that the Athenians have debased its value to the point of making it worthless, or rather meaningless.⁴³ In connecting claims of justice to their interests, they are making the case that the Athenians should not act unjustly as it would appear not to be in the *best* interest of the Athenians, especially if they found themselves one day in a similar situation as the Melians. In other words, they should entertain more “enlightened conceptions of interests” instead of blindly following “a narrow construction of interest.”⁴⁴ Following this line of reasoning, the plight of low-lying island states might serve as the basis whereby great powers and wealthy elites could reflect on how they, too, might not be as immune as they think to the negative consequences of human-induced, global environmental change.⁴⁵ Perhaps it would encourage them, at the very least, to consider a “globally constructive politics in the national self-interest” that takes into consideration the plight of “the wretched of the earth” and “the global strain on the environment.”⁴⁶ After all, what if one day they were in need of aid? Consider simply that nearly half of the US population lives in coastal counties, where climate change poses a significant threat.⁴⁷ Yet, like the Athenians here, who were at the peak of their power, the threat of the fall of a superpower fails to hit home, leaving the impression that it will take numerous climate catastrophes

⁴² W. David Clinton, *The Two Faces of the National Interest* (Louisiana State University Press, 1994).

⁴³ Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 124-126.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 133-134, 141-143.

⁴⁶ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 183-184.

⁴⁷ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), “What Percentage of the American Population Lives Near the Coast?”, <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/population.html#:~:text=Though%20home%20to%20almost%2040,the%20entire%20population%20of%20Japan.>

in order to bring about a change of mind (*metanoia*). The misguided hope, it seems, is that even after such catastrophes it would not be too late to change course. But why run such a risk with civilization?

When discussions of the plight of Western civilization arise they usually only refer to a demise brought on by way of an ideology, not one that is ecological in nature. Both, however, are discussed in Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway's *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*.⁴⁸ Oreskes and Conway envision through the eyes of a future historian the time of the "Great Collapse" when many regimes, notably the United States, fell into ruin as a result of an ideology blinding many from recognizing the climate change crisis. In such a small book, they effectively capture how terrible the prospects for both great and small powers might be during the Anthropocene. What occurs in their imagined scenario are failures on a number of fronts. Scientific elites, for instance, committed the "fallacy of Baconianism." They believed that the acquisition of scientific knowledge would "empower its holder," thereby making it possible "to effect meaningful action." Instead, the case of climate change demonstrated, according to the imaginings of a future historical account, the "powerlessness of scientists...despite their acute knowledge [of climate change]."⁴⁹ Knowledge and power did not meet in one as *Baconianism* projected. Such a knowledge-power convergence failed as a result of the "*carbon-combustion complex*." This complex with its powerful, petro-moneyed interests funded "think tanks" to deceive the public that the knowledge claims of climate researchers were "uncertain" and thus unfit to serve as the basis for regulatory acts of political power.⁵⁰ Another failure was how the perspectives of Baconianism and the moneyed interests portrayed the public as passive and manipulable, a war on democracy itself.

The lack of authority among the ruled is certainly on display in the Melian Dialogue. The Athenians connect the argument from interests to what is good, or advantageous, both for them and the Melians, arguing, "Because you would have the advantage of submitting before suffering the worst, and we should gain

⁴⁸ Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 35-37.

by not destroying you.”⁵¹ Such an argument from “self-interest” fails to convince the Melian rulers, who are at a loss as to why they cannot remain neutral.⁵² They do not grasp how it could be good for them to serve and for the Athenians to rule. It stands to reason, however, that the Athenian envoys were as “humanitarian” as they could be, especially, with the understanding that the democratic assembly voted on the Melian expedition, and they would abandon its instructions “at their peril.”⁵³ One could imagine the Melian *demos* preferring the rule of the Athenians as opposed to trusting in the hope the Melian leaders place in Sparta to come to their aid, if only for the sake of survival and not being sold into slavery. These are choices, unfortunately, made in a time of dire straits, that is, choosing between suffering death or becoming a tributary ally of Athens. Nonetheless, that the Melian leaders seal the fate of all Melians should not go unnoticed. It is important to note how the dialogue opens with the Athenian spokesmen not being granted an audience before the people in carrying out their negotiations,⁵⁴ which reminds of what Pericles did in not granting a Spartan herald an audience with the Athenian assembly, who wished to see if the Athenians were “more inclined to submit on seeing the Peloponnesians actually on the march.”⁵⁵ Why would the Athenian envoys think they could treat with the Melian *demos*? Perhaps, they were indicating that the best path forward for the Melians was to put the people in charge. Regardless, the Melian leaders and the oligarchs, nonetheless, cling to their honor but especially to their positions of power within their city in the hope that they will be saved.⁵⁶ They thus keep the *demos* in the dark. What this exchange presents is how the people are excluded altogether from a fate that imminently concerns them.⁵⁷

In general, then, but especially with a mind to the problems of the Anthropocene, how could more authority be granted to the people in the face of

⁵¹ Thucydides, 5.93.

⁵² Ibid., 5.94.

⁵³ Albert Bosworth, “The Humanitarian Aspect of the Melian Dialogue,” in *Thucydides*, ed. Jeffrey S. Rusten, (Oxford University Press, 2009), 315-318, 335; cf. Zumbrunnen, *Silence and Democracy*, 141.

⁵⁴ Thucydides, 5.84.3-5.85; Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 124; Bosworth, “The Humanitarian Aspect of the Melian Dialogue,” 317-318, 320.

⁵⁵ Thucydides, 2.12.1-2; Strauss, *The City and Man*, 184.

⁵⁶ Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 144.

⁵⁷ Zumbrunnen, *Silence and Democracy*.

looming crises? Are elites and political leaders sealing the fate for a bad, or even terrible, Anthropocene in not responding with a greater sense of urgency and muffling the call to collective action and the demands of public work? How might a greater awareness of the plight of low-lying island states induce great powers to recognize that what is needed is assistance, not indifference to whether they are inundated? Such an intervention could even shore up new strategies for mainland countries, especially with regard to making coastal cities and regions more resilient. One must, nonetheless, be concerned with how the intervention could be conducted, so that it does not take on the sense of being an intrusion, which risks undermining the dignity and security of those being aided.

The concern for security necessarily plays a role in a regime's course of action, regardless of its status in geopolitics. The imperial Athenians, for instance, argue that they gain in security the more they are able to extend their power and appear both stronger and less weak to those whom they oppose who are both strong and independent, such as Sparta.⁵⁸ So when the Melian leaders appeal to their trust in both the gods and the Spartans, whom they hope will come to their aid, the Athenians are not convinced. They are fazed neither by the argument that the gods protect the just party nor by the prospect that the Spartans will be moved by a sense of shame on account of Melos being a former colony of theirs.⁵⁹ The Athenians counter the Melian appeal to the gods. They begin with saying that they believe that gods, but know that men, "follow the necessary law of their nature [in that] they rule wherever they can." Such a law has existed before them, they say, and will forever remain after their rule. The Athenians argue, "all we do is to make use of it, knowing that everybody else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do."⁶⁰ In both the divine and human realms of the cosmos, when the strong pursue their interests, indifference is displayed toward the weak and their claims of justice are simply downplayed or altogether overlooked as a matter of necessity. As for the Melian leaders' appeal to the Spartan sense of shame, the Athenians reduce Sparta's reputation for justice and

⁵⁸ Thucydides, 5.95-5.97.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 5.104.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 5.105.1-2; see David Bedford and Thom Workman, "The Tragic Reading of the Thucydidean Tragedy," *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 62-63.

what is honorable to what is most agreeable and expedient to their interests.⁶¹ After conferring among themselves about their options, the Melian leaders, nonetheless, foolishly cling to their honor as well as trust in both the gods and Sparta against all reasonable considerations.⁶² Departing, the Athenians assess the decision of the Melians as placing too much emphasis on the future and what is out of sight as opposed to what is in front of them and coming to pass. Moreover, they claim the Melians are most deceived in their trust and hope in the Spartans coming to their aid, while they remain altogether silent about the gods at this point, as they previously asserted their belief that the gods rule where they can. The Athenians proceed to besiege Melos in the summer of 416 BCE, capturing it by winter and putting all of the grown men to death, along with selling the women and children into slavery. The Athenians end the whole affair by settling the island with five hundred colonists.⁶³

Another parallel can be drawn here, one between the seizing of Melian lands and neocolonial land grabs in the context of climate change geopolitics. Lands within sovereign nation-states are being purchased outright by other countries with the goal of securing access to agricultural products for their own people, who are increasingly unable to produce enough food from their land to live. As global temperatures increase, establishing food security through land grabs seems inevitable.⁶⁴ The inundation of islands and coastal regions in various ways due to geoeconomic competition among nations has some of the markings, as Simon Dalby provocatively suggests, of Nazi geopolitics of *lebensraum* but applied to consumer entitlement.⁶⁵ And of course, as the push for renewable energy increases, the neocolonialism of extractive industries for critical minerals cannot go overlooked either.⁶⁶

The parallels drawn between the Melians and people living in low-lying

⁶¹ Ibid., 5.105.3-4.

⁶² Bosworth, "The Humanitarian Aspect of the Melian Dialogue," 322, 327, 331, 335.

⁶³ Thucydides, 5.112-5.114; 5.116.2-4.

⁶⁴ Simon Dalby, *Anthropocene Geopolitics: Globalization, Security, Sustainability* (University of Ottawa Press, 2020), 109, 136.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 59-60, 63-64, 70, 136-137.

⁶⁶ Martín Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction Under Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2020); Thea Riofrancos, "Why Onshoring Critical Minerals Mining To The Global North Isn't Climate Justice," *Foreign Policy* (February 7, 2022), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/07/renewable-energy-transition-critical-minerals-mining-onshoring-lithium-evs-climate-justice/>.

island states and the Athenians and today's great powers are, of course, not perfect. Nonetheless, it is not unreasonable to imagine how the hope that China or the United States will act on behalf of low-lying island states reminds of the Melians' misplaced hope in Sparta. I do not mean to imply that someone like Tong has such a hope. He seems to believe things are already too late for the Republic of Kiribati. Hence his concern appears to be no longer with the future of the island but with the crisis the current situation presents. As a responsible leader, he seeks solutions for relocating his people as a way to provide them with better security. With this in mind, how much faith should be placed in the great powers providing adequate aid, or reparations, for the loss and damage as a result of the climate crisis, especially without attaching any strings in the process? Dalby argues, "In the case of the island-state inundation, the failure comes from abroad, from the failure of advanced industrial states to address climate change and by their explicit failure to live up to their implied responsibilities to at least not harm others, if not actually protect citizens of other states."⁶⁷ With such a claim in mind, ought the U.S. and other advanced industrial states not feel some sense of shame, or accountability, for the fate of islanders in the face of climate change? Or is shame, along with justice, not a factor if the standard by which they are measured is merely their own interests, following the Athenian critique of Sparta's reputation for justice?

The more we come to believe that critique of justice, the more any moral arguments fail to convince, an all-too-unfortunate tendency in international politics. One wonders if the moral motive must become more implicit in seemingly amoral arguments grounded in interests.⁶⁸

OF INTERESTS AND INDIFFERENCE, BOTH HUMAN AND NONHUMAN

In a spirit reminiscent of Thucydides, Latour argues that the study of interests, along with tracing their limits, "is the most directly political activity there is." For Latour such a study raises the "question of the distribution of agency." If we take into account the epigraph, he broadens the focus beyond a narrow understanding of human interests through resorting to Earth system science. The common

⁶⁷ Dalby, *Anthropocene Geopolitics*, 64.

⁶⁸ See Diodotus' speech appealing to Athenian interests during the Mytilenian affair (Thucydides, 3.42-3.48), which carried the motion of the day to spare those Mytilenians deemed to be innocent (Thucydides, 3.49).

language of interest has the merit of bringing both humans and nonhumans into a closer view, as opposed to one that maintains a great divide between the two realms.⁶⁹ While Thucydides only focused on human interests, we might wonder, as the Melians did in their circumstances, as to whether the coin of the realm in international politics can be extended in a planetary manner to counter some of its past abuses. While it is not within the scope of this essay, these statements, along with the thinkers who inquire into the concept of the “planetary,”⁷⁰ invite a renewed inquiry into the idea of “the planetary interest”⁷¹ and whether such a notion can offer guidance for the “national interest” or the ambitious goal of “planetary governance.” What can the “clash of interests” or “symbiotic relationships” at all levels of life teach us about the geopolitics of the Anthropocene? Does it reveal that at our own peril we “heavily discount” the interests—envisioned and real—of both future generations and those who are distant?⁷²

Concerning the problem of moral indifference or the sense of political responsibility limited to one’s own people, however understood, how does one proceed in the face of an indifferent Gaia? Isabelle Stengers says,

Gaia, she who intrudes, *asks nothing of us*, not even a response to the question of ‘who is responsible?’ and doesn’t act as a righter of wrongs—it seems clear that the regions of the earth that will be affected first will be the poorest of the planet, to say nothing of all those living beings that have nothing to do with the affair. This doesn’t signify, especially not, the justification of any kind of indifference whatsoever on our part with regard to the threats that hang over the living beings that inhabit the earth with us.⁷³

While, scientifically speaking, Gaia appears indifferent toward humanity in general, one could imagine that to many who are suffering under Gaia’s intrusions, “she” is experienced as more wrathful and vindictive, even unjust and imperial, than indifferent. It certainly seems that fortune favors the powerful. Can Gaia’s intrusions even be said to reveal a “planetary interest”? As we continue to

⁶⁹ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 271.

⁷⁰ Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*; Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse*; James Bridle, *The Ways of Being—Animals, Plants, Machines: The Search for a Planetary Intelligence* (Picador, 2022); Yuk Hui, *Machine and Sovereignty: For a Planetary Thinking* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024).

⁷¹ Kennedy Graham, *The Planetary Interest* (Routledge, 1998).

⁷² Dale W. Jamieson and Marcello Di Paola, “Political Theory for the Anthropocene,” in *Global Political Theory*, eds. David Held and Pietro Maffettone (Polity Press, 2016), 277.

⁷³ Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*, 46.

fail in our efforts to address climate change, we cannot neglect to raise the question, albeit briefly, as to whether the reduction of the issue to a matter of mere interest would not continue to make things worse.⁷⁴ Does interest-based reasoning serve to lessen the cultivation of a moral orientation, even to the point of veiling how such an orientation might be in our *best* interest? Or does it help us to approach various predicaments more thoughtfully, thus lessening the temptation to moralize?⁷⁵

Now, if “the Athenian thesis,” that is, the argument that the stronger rules where it can according to their interests, is applied to humanity as a whole, it stands to reason that human indifference should be the counter-response to Gaia’s response to our cumulative actions. Whether we make gains or losses, these only follow from the “necessary law of nature” governing the dynamics between the stronger and the weaker. So if Gaia inundates low-lying areas, these events are simply a matter of necessity, namely, of thresholds being crossed and the ensuing consequences being suffered. Yet, as we have come to learn, these changes are often the consequences of human deeds, largely those of wealthy and moderately well-off nations and individuals, namely, the powerful within the realm of humanity. To return to Tong’s claim that climate change is an “act of war,” the difficult issue of assigning responsibility is raised.⁷⁶ How does one think about Gaia’s intrusion in this regard? Is it a consequence of the modern “war on nature”? If so, are low-lying island states better understood as unintended casualties, or collateral damage, of this planetary war rather than as deliberate targets? However that may be, Gaia’s indifference, as Stengers notes, does not justify human indifference. The atrocities stemming from war, political strife, earthquakes, famines, and the plague do not make Thucydides indifferent to human suffering. He studies carefully how human beings in times of war and crises are put to the test, where in no deterministic manner do some engage in great deeds of generosity while others become despairing, even to the point of

⁷⁴ Cf. Zumbrennen, *Silence and Democracy*, 137-138.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of “interests” in the context of the Anthropocene discourse and broadened so as to be applicable to nonhumans, see Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 98, 101-102, 142, 149, 238, 248, 260, 262, 263, 265, 268, 270, 271, 273. See also Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 42.

⁷⁶ See Jamieson and Di Paola, “Political Theory for the Anthropocene,” 264-269; Vanderheiden, *Environmental Political Theory*, 129-154.

engaging in base depravity.⁷⁷ Likewise, we should not fail to inquire into the agencies at work that precipitate Gaia's intrusions during the gigantomachy of the Anthropocene. How can we, be it humanity in general or nation-states, come to recognize the dynamic between calculating our interests and actively displaying a concern for justice for the plight of humans and nonhumans who are threatened the most by climate change?

"THE GREATEST REVERSE": A CAUTIONARY LESSON

Turning our attention back to the Peloponnesian War, what took place on the small island of Melos, as noted above, was a minor affair when it came to determining matters of war and peace. Many mainland nations seem implicitly to think the same regarding the plight of low-lying islands states. Thucydides, to his credit, discusses the events at Melos just prior to the Sicilian expedition, an Athenian planned campaign, despite many of the Athenians being ignorant of both the size and the inhabitants of the island of Sicily. He assessed the undertaking as being "not much inferior to that against the Peloponnesians."⁷⁸ Blinded by their might and ignorance of all kinds, the Athenians fail in their offensive strategy and suffer the most devastating losses of the entire war.

In many ways, the Athenians were their own worst enemies. Thucydides describes the Athenian campaign in Sicily as follows:

Moreover their disgrace generally, and the universality of their sufferings, although to a certain extent alleviated by being borne in company, were still felt at the moment a heavy burden, especially when they contrasted the splendor and glory of setting out with the humiliation in which it had ended. For this was by far the greatest reverse that ever befell an Hellenic army.⁷⁹

Thucydides held the overall event as the "greatest Hellenic achievement of any in this war, or...in Hellenic history; at once most glorious to the victors, and most calamitous to the conquered."⁸⁰ Compare this account with the scenario developed in Oreskes and Conway's *The Collapse of Western Civilization*. One can only wonder if the United States will prove to be its own worst enemy, not to mention that of low-lying island states. But in general, we should be critical of

⁷⁷ Thucydides, 2.49-53, 3.82; Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 144-145.

⁷⁸ Thucydides, 6.1.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 7.75.6-7.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 7.87.5; Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future*, 29-30.

any empire that brings about desolation on planet Earth and calls it peace, especially the Baconian “Human Empire” with its goal of conquering nature and providing “new mercies,” or inventions, to humanity.⁸¹ As matters stand, this goal seems more on the verge of bringing not *relief of* but *grief to* “man’s estate”⁸²—which is to say “the collapse of civilization” but should not be read simply in terms of material collapse.

The placement, then, of the Melian Dialogue within the greater narrative indicates how Thucydides did not think the sufferings of the Melians to be insignificant. The placement itself makes his history read like a tragedy, where after attaining the peak of success a tragic fall from grace ensues—“the greatest reverse.”⁸³ Thus even the most seemingly minor events have the potential to reveal the character of matters as well as the shape of things to come, a worthy insight to be sure. In his characteristic subtlety, Thucydides makes the reader put two and two together, wondering about what is in their *best* interests as they reflect on the clash of interests during the Peloponnesian War.⁸⁴ Moreover, a reader might be led to wonder, “How can the imperial expansionism of the Sicilian expedition reconcile itself with the limiting of political power within the polis?” This is the question that Giorgos Kallis’s study on limits evokes. Kallis goes so far as to say, “More troubling for my argument, I confess, the imperial overreach of Athens may have been a corollary of its democracy: internal limitations were sustained and subsidized by an external, ultimately self-destructive, expansion.”⁸⁵ And yet this balance between internal limitations and external expansion was disrupted when in the wake of the Athenian defeat at Sicily an oligarchic coup in Athens was successfully carried out, albeit short-lived, in 411 BCE.⁸⁶ It would seem that the problem of imperialism reveals that interests in the long run are

⁸¹ Francis Bacon, “The Great Instauration” and *Novum Organon* in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, Vol. 4, eds. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, Douglas Denon Heath (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 21, 113–115.

⁸² Cf. Francis Bacon, *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning Divine and Human* in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, Vol. 3, eds. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, Douglas Denon Heath (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 294.

⁸³ Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 126–141; see also Hayward R. Alker, Jr., “The Dialectical Logic of Thucydides’ Melian Dialogue,” *The American Political Science Review* 82, no. 3 (1988): 806, 816–817; Bedford and Workman, “The Tragic Reading of the Thucydidean Tragedy,” 58, 64–66.

⁸⁴ Strauss, *The City and Man*, 192–209.

⁸⁵ Giorgos Kallis, *Why Malthus Was Wrong And Why Environmentalists Should Care* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 109–110.

⁸⁶ Thucydides, 8.47–54, 8.63.3–8.98.

not best served through failing to heed concerns for justice, at least in that such concerns call to mind the arrogance that accompanies the actions of a grasping great power.

Prior to the launch of the Sicilian expedition in 415 BCE, Alcibiades was the strongest advocate within Athens for it and in turn went on to serve, initially, in the role as one of the three Athenian generals to lead it. He was undoubtedly the ablest among the three to carry out the grand task. Soon after the expedition was launched, he was recalled on charges of impiety, demonstrating that it is difficult for even the Athenians to keep to arguments pertaining only to mere interest.⁸⁷ Such an action reveals how a sense of the sacred⁸⁸ can emerge at the most unexpected moment, bewildering any pedigree of cold, calculating self-interest. No matter how grand the goals of the Sicilian expedition were, it is completely impractical and self-defeating when viewed in the light of strategic, national interest to recall someone with Alcibiades' military genius on an appeal to the sacred. Anticipating his fate at the hands of the Athenian people, he defected to Sparta. There he revealed how truly grand his plans were, since after conquering Sicily first, he envisioned the Athenians continuing on to conquer Italy and Carthage, all with a mind to bring the entire conquered force to bear upon the Peloponnesus⁸⁹—a plan akin, albeit on different scales, to Bacon's strategy of uniting all of humanity in one empire and then "turning with united forces against the Nature of Things." No longer looking to the interests of the Athenians, he aids Sparta in devising a strategy to harm Athens, one that proves so successful that Thucydides says that it did the most harm to Athens during the war.⁹⁰

A lesson of the Sicilian expedition is that no matter how established some interests appear to be, they can prove to be an unstable standard. As circumstances change, new interests readily emerge and clash with the old ones.⁹¹ Supposing circumstances remain relatively the same, there is always the question of whether what is held to be in one's interest is truly in one's interest. When we ask whether something is truly in our interest, are we not asking whether or not

⁸⁷ Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *Justice Among Nations*, 23-32.

⁸⁸ Cf. Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 237-240.

⁸⁹ Thucydides, 6.90.

⁹⁰ Thucydides, 6.8, 6.16-6.18, 6.27-6.29, 6.53, 6.61, 6.88.9-6.93.

⁹¹ Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future*, 15-16, 24-25.

it is good for us? But then in the context of geopolitics, what is truly good? Interest-based reasoning in politics in general orients the question of the good to discussions of what is useful or advantageous. And when it comes to geopolitics, what is deemed to be in the national interest varies based on the country and its identity, not to mention the “clash of interests” and identities within countries.⁹² Interest-based reasoning is either explicitly or implicitly appealed to in international politics. Even when a moral argument is made at this level, concern for the national interest is often discerned to be the implicit motive for various moralistic phrases that politicians invoke in their speeches. So much so that often it is difficult to take moral arguments in world politics seriously. It is as if interests ought to have nothing to do with moral reasoning.

What Thucydides’ careful study of politics helps the reader to observe is how in a relatively short period of time what is deemed to be in one’s interests can radically change as perspectives shift due to the unfolding of events. Thucydides observed this change linguistically during the Peloponnesian War. He notes how in Athens words changed along with the times, so when war and sedition replaced peace and cooperation the customary use of a word was altered: reckless daring became recognized as courage; prudent caution as cowardice; moderation as unmanliness; openness to multiple viewpoints as incapacity to act on any; frenzied violence as manliness; cautious scheming as self-defense; advocating extreme measures as a sign of trustworthiness; opposing extreme measures as courting suspicion; coming up with a plot and executing it as shrewd; guarding against shrewd plots as being afraid of one’s enemies.⁹³ The acceptance of the change in the meaning of words seems to be an expression of one’s interest, be it of an emerging or previously latent quality. Recognizing the change in the circumstances is key for tracing how interests change. One begins to see how for Latour the study of interests is “the most directly political activity there is.” And with Thucydides, one recognizes the challenging task that the study of interests presents is in a time of the “greatest motion.”

When reading Thucydides’ thoughts on language and politics in the context

⁹² Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 122-126, 159-167.

⁹³ Thucydides, 3.83.4-5; Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 146-147; Bedford and Workman, “The Tragic Reading of the Thucydidean Tragedy,” 60-61; Nicole Loraux, “Thucydides and Sedition Among Words,” in *Thucydides*, ed. by Jeffrey S. Rusten (Oxford University Press, 2009), 261-292.

of climate change, one cannot help but to think of the “hypermasculine tendencies” of far-right responses aligned with the fossil fuel industry.⁹⁴ And of course the heirs of Baconianism, especially the ecomodernists⁹⁵ and the transhumanists,⁹⁶ come to mind with their calls for proactionary boldness in order to achieve a “good, or even great, Anthropocene”⁹⁷ and transcendence via technoscience.⁹⁸ From these points of view, it would seem that climate change activists appear cowardly, too open to the concerns of others, untrustworthy, unreasonable, and afraid. Unfortunately, it is difficult to see how a shared perspective could be attained in order to work together to address the consequences of climate change. Working toward such an end, however, is what is needed, which is to say it is in our best interests. Otherwise, regimes that are unable to rise to the challenge run the risk of losing legitimacy and unleashing “savage and pitiless excesses” of “revolutionary passions.”⁹⁹ And yet as “communities that are vulnerable to climate change face significant or even total territorial loss,” be it from rising sea levels or desertification, one wonders if a “post-territorial mindset” for nation-states will eventually become necessary.¹⁰⁰ In the meantime, the climate security dilemma becomes more intense and urgent than ever.

CONCLUSION

Rereading Thucydides in the context of climate change geopolitics provides some perspective on how the politics of language underwrites values that orient or challenge global climate policy today. While a strategy that balances the interest-

⁹⁴ Albert, *Navigating the Polycrisis*, 58-60, 136.

⁹⁵ John Asafu-Adjaye, Linus Blomquist, Stewart Brand, Barry Brook, Ruth Defries, Erle Ellis, Christopher Foreman, David Keith, Martin Lewis, Mark Lynas, Ted Nordhaus, Roger Pielke, Jr., Rachel Pritzker, Joyashree Roy, Mark Sagoff, Michael Shellenberger, Robert Stone, and Peter Teague, *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* (2015), www.ecomodernism.org; Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, 24, 26-27.

⁹⁶ Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipinska, *The Proactionary Imperative: A Foundation for Transhumanism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Steve Fuller, *Nietzschean Meditations: Untimely Thoughts at the Dawn of the Transhuman Era* (Schwabe Verlag, 2019); Max More, “True Transhumanism: A Reply to Don Ihde,” in H± *Transhumanism and Its Critics*, eds. Gregory R. Hansell and William Gassie, (Metanexus Institute, 2011), 136-145.

⁹⁷ Asafu-Adjaye et al., *The Ecomodernist Manifesto*.

⁹⁸ More, “True Transhumanism, 124; Meghan O’Gieblyn, *God, Human, Animal, Machine: Technology, Metaphor and the Search for Meaning* (Anchor Books, 2022), 56-57.

⁹⁹ Thucydides, 3.84.1-3.85; Jamieson and Di Paola, “Political Theory for the Anthropocene,” 276.

¹⁰⁰ Vanderheiden, *Environmental Political Theory*, 170.

based reasoning with concerns with justice is not failsafe, calling attention to actions that seem not to be in one's *best* interest, including those that display an indifference toward the plight of others, will serve to indicate the looming tragedies that seem fated to unfold, that is, unless we can learn from thinkers who like Thucydides so elegantly make the case for prudence and moderation in geopolitics.

In viewing the Peloponnesian War as the greatest motion up until his time, Thucydides recognized that such a motion was revealing in what human beings are capable of during both times of war and peace. As long as human nature remains the same,¹⁰¹ he held that his account documenting the highs and the lows of the human character would remain “a lasting possession” for resembling or reflecting “the course of human things.”¹⁰²

As moderns, however, do we think human nature has changed, that is, if we still believe there is such a thing? Moreover, do we think we are wiser than those who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago? Have the lessons drawn from Thucydides' work expired and thus, accordingly, warrant being tossed into the dustbin of history? I think not.

Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War remains a masterful example of how the craft of writing for the sake of clarity and for inspiring thoughtful reflection, as opposed to winning applause, can produce a work that provides insight into how understanding the past acts “as an aid to the understanding of the future.”¹⁰³ Indeed, this sentiment is represented in Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, which in many ways captures the vital concern that Thucydides demonstrates in describing historical events, especially in how Ghosh reflects on how a largely forgotten event (the Dutch massacre of the inhabitants of Selamon, a village in the Banda islands, in 1621) could reveal the character of the times as well as the things to come on a planetary scale.

The legacy of Thucydides' work throughout the ages attests to it providing a compass of sorts for those who take political thought seriously. Indeed, his example remains instructive as we seek to navigate climate change geopolitics, especially in focusing the mind on the hubris of great powers who believe “the

¹⁰¹ Thucydides, 3.82.

¹⁰² Ibid., 1.22.4; Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 128, 144-145; Dobski, “A Naturally Disastrous War,” 47.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 1.22.4.

strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” To counter this belief, “prudent caution” and “moderation” need to be reaffirmed, not mocked. In other words, it is in our best interest to reaffirm our humanity in the face, as well as in the wake, of catastrophic climate change, that is, if we desire to cultivate a peace of mind within a time of the greatest motion.

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