THIS ARTICLE INVESTIGATES SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN THUCYDIDES’ HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR. TWO FAMOUS THUCYDIDEAN EPISODES ARE IN FOCUS: THE MYTILENEAN DEBATE IN BOOK III AND THE MELIAN DIALOGUE IN BOOK V OF THE HISTORY. THESE EPISODES ARE INTERPRETED HERE AS INQUIRIES ASSUMING THE SHAPE OF SUBVERSIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL CRITICISM: IMMANENT CRITIQUE. IMMANENT CRITIQUE AIDS AT SHIFTING HORIZONS OF MEANING IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS, AND THE PHILOSOPHERS PRACTICING THIS KIND OF SOCIAL CRITICISM UNDERSTAND THEMSELVES AS PHYSICIANS OF A FAILING SOCIETY. IN THUCYDIDES’ WORK, A PARTICULAR OBJECT OF CRITICISM IS FORMED BY VARYING DOMINANT SOCIAL AND MORAL ORDERING PRINCIPLES. IN THE MYTILENEAN DEBATE, IT IS THE PRINCIPLE OF EXPEEDIENCY (τὸ ἐξυμφόρον) THAT RULES, WHEREAS IN THE MELIAN DIALOGUE THE GOVERNING NORMATIVE ORDERING PRINCIPLE IS THAT OF SAFETY AND SURVIVAL (σωτηρία). IN EACH EPISODE, A CONTENDING PERSPECTIVE IS INTRODUCED FOR THE PURPOSE OF UNDERMINING THE DOMINATING PRINCIPLE.

KEYWORDS
Thucydides; classical greek social criticism; immanent critique; ancient greek social philosophy; ancient and modern moral philosophy

INTRODUCTION: THUCYDIDES’ HISTORY AS IMMANENT CRITIQUE

This article focuses on the History of the Peloponnesian War: the ancient Athenian historian Thucydides’ account of the war between Athens and Sparta, which involved also many other Greek city-states, and lasted between 431 and 404 BCE. The purpose of this investigation is to add to the inquiries addressing episodes in Thucydides’ History as disclosing and reflecting on issues of a moral and socio-political nature. Particularly, this study will investigate aspects of social critique inherent in Thucydides’ work. In the context of this article, social critique refers to the type of investigations that social philosophers term ‘immanent critique’; i.e. a sort of reflexive self-transcending social practice, aiming at effecting social change by refashioning generally accepted norms and values.

In Thucydides’ work, explicit reflections on moral and political matters occur particularly in the various debates included in the History. Typically, these debates revolve around certain social ordering principles, which the participants in the discussions acknowledge, or have been forced to recognize, as their guiding norms. In the wider Thucydidean narrative,
as this work will show, these principles are also presented as the actual limits of social and political reality, while strategies to undermine them are nonetheless continuously employed. As will be seen, at times it even seems that Thucydides’ himself, through his narration, would have taken part in the “immanent critique” practiced by his characters.

To be sure, Thucydides’ work does not include much in terms of an outspoken conception of society as a sickly organism, which modern social philosophers have conceived of as the ontological point of departure for immanent critique. However, even though an explicit discourse on social pathologies is largely lacking, the History may still evidence what has been singled out as a defining feature of immanent critique: moral investigations geared towards effecting a shift in horizons of meaning in social contexts; philosophy as the curer of a defect society. In other words, the practice of immanent critique would presuppose what Arvi Särkelä has termed a ‘radical readiness for transformation’ (radikale Transformationsbereitschaft). Can we identify something of this sort in Thucydides’ History, or elsewhere in Classical Greek literature?

Undoubtedly, the locus classicus for modern considerations of immanent critique (or of the lack thereof) in a Classical Greek setting is Hegel’s discussion of Sophocles’ Antigone, carried out in chapter VI of the Phenomenology of the Spirit. In Sophocles’ play, the heroine Antigone opposes the edict of king Creon by burying her brother, and the play may thus be seen to deal with the conflict between two sets of laws: those of the family and those of the state (or the tyrant). More recently, Molly Farneth has interpreted this passage in terms of Hegel’s criticism of Classical Greek morality (Sittlichkeit) as such – conceived of by Hegel as clinging to a preconceived normative order and being thus destined to remain in a condition of “tragic conflict”; i.e. in a state characterized by unsolvable disagreements between one-sided ethical positions.

The above may well amount to a more or less adequate depiction of the mental infrastructure underlying popular Classical Greek morality in general. Indeed, as will be seen, the Thucydidean narrative, too, evidences a conception of social norms as fixed and unalterable (and thus extremely difficult to transform). To avoid a too one-sided view of ancient Greek politico-ethical thinking, however, it should be observed that investigations bearing evidence of a willingness to alter commonly accepted norms and principles do in fact figure among extant Classical Greek texts. Particularly, reflections of this kind are encountered in the bulk of Classical Greek political philosophy.

Thus in book VII of his Politics, Aristotle explicitly states that even the seemingly best governed Greek societies (ἄριστα δοκοῦντες πολιτεύεσθαι τῶν Ἑλλήνων) have not been arranged in such ways that they would meet the requirements of the best end (οὗτε πρός τὸ βέλτιστον τέλος φαίνονται συντάξαντες). In Book V of the Republic, Plato, again, offers his readers the model (παράδειγμα) of the supremely virtuous man (ἄνδρα τὸν τελέως δίκαιον), so that he may stand as an example for those who have failed to govern themselves and their societies well enough. Underlying both of these conceptions is the assumption that visions of radical socio-individual change may be a necessity even to begin approaching an ideal order for society – and that not any one of the established social norms may be embraced without criticism. What seems to be presupposed here, in other words, is exactly the radical readiness for transformation allegedly characterizing social philosophies of an immanently critical kind.

To determine the extent to which the work of Thucydides, too, may be shown to contain investigations akin to the modern practice of immanent critique, I have turned to the
evidence provided by two well-known episodes in the History: The Mytilenean Debate in Book III and the Melian Dialogue in Book V. As mentioned, the Thucydidean accounts typically revolve around some ruling socio-moral ordering principles. In the Mytilenean Debate, the established principle that serves as the leading reference for the whole discussion is that of τὸ ξύμφορον (‘expediency’). The first aim of this article is thus to scrutinize how the contesting of the principle of expediency is carried out in the Mytilenean Debate. Thereafter, the Melian Dialogue in Book V of Thucydides’ work is considered. Here, a similar dominant normative principle is first placed down and then undermined – namely, σωτηρία (‘safety and survival’). In the conclusion, the discussion returns to the question of to what extent Classical Greek literature may be interpreted as containing investigations of the kind that modern social philosophers label as immanent critique.

The Mytilenean Debate and criticism of the principle of τὸ ξύμφορον

The background to the Mytilenean Debate (with a dramatic date in and around 427 BCE) is the following. Mytilene – an oligarchic city–state that belonged to the (first) Delian League, which Athens had established in the wake of the Persian Wars (490-480 BCE) – were planning a revolt. The Athenians were informed of the expected rebellion, however, and sent forces against the Mytileneans. After having been encircled by Athenian soldiery, the Mytileneans soon surrendered and tried to settle for truce. However, as news of the mutiny reached Athens, an extremely raw resolution was reached in the Athenian assembly. It was decided that the whole of the male population of Mytilene would be killed and all the women and children taken as slaves.¹⁰ To execute the decision, a trireme was dispatched to Mytilene, but the following day the Athenians decided to try the case one more time. In the debate that followed, the main demagogue of the “post-Periclean” Athenian democracy, Cleon, spoke first.

As accounted for by Thucydides, Cleon’s main argument revolves around the necessity stemming from Athens’ rise to dominance among the Greek city-states.¹¹ Due to their empire, the Athenians, as Cleon would have it, had to choose between suppressing their enemies or surrender their rule:

… against what may seem reasonable, it is expedient that these men too are punished (καὶ τούσδε ξυμφόρους δεί κολάζεσθαι), or else we must give up our dominion, and out of lack of danger play the honest man (ἐκ τού ἀκινδύνου ἀνδραγαθίζεσθαι).¹²

However, after having thus proclaimed his allegiance to the principle of expediency, Cleon actually finishes his speech by deviating from it. Interestingly, the concluding supplication of Cleon is delivered in form of an appeal to the Athenians’ former, not-yet-depleted, selves:

Do not become betrayers of yourselves (προδόται ὑμῶν αὐτῶν). Rather, by bringing your judgment as close as could be to what you were about to suffer (ἐγγύτατα τῇ γνώμῃ τοῦ πάσχειν), as well as to how above all else you valued to have them in your hands, pay them back right away without softening in their presence (μὴ μαλακοθέντες πρὸς τὸ παρόν), and without forgetting the danger once hanging over you. Punish them as they deserve (κολάζεστε δὲ ἐξίως), and set down a clear example (παράδειγμα σαφὲς) for the other allies, that were they to rebel (ὅς ἂν ἄφιστήται) we would retaliate with death (θανάτῳ ζημωσόμενον).¹³
Thus Cleon wraps up his speech with a lofty plea to rightful punishment (κολάζειν ἀξίως, ‘to punish worthily’; an imperialist version of lex talionis), but nevertheless maintains that it is the expedient value of his proposal – the laying down of an effective warning παράδειγμα – that should be deemed most important by the Athenians in the process of their political decision-making.

In the main argument of Cleon’s antagonist, Diodotus, on the other hand, the core seems to be Diodotus’ complete denial of Cleon’s conviction as to how Athens’ power might be upheld, and the principle of τὸ ξύμφωρον maintained. Like Cleon before him, Diodotus begins by paying his allegiance to the principle of expediency, or to the advantage of Athens. However, he then argues for the exact opposite of Cleon’s proposal regarding what actually would be most expedient for the Athenians.

By slaying the whole demos in Mytilene, and thus killing without regard to class, the very own divide and conquer strategy of the Athenians would be undone. The consequence would be that the masses could no longer be relied upon in the conquered city-states; Athens’ “only remaining ally” (ὁ μόνον ἐπὶ ξύμμαχόν) in her imperial dominion would be lost. In truth, it seems natural to assume, also, that Diodotus’ argumentation is limited to proposing different maneuvers from those suggested by Cleon; i.e. an alternative set of means by which τὸ ξύμφωρον could be more efficiently sustained. Diodotus’ reasoning thus appears to be a sincere argument from expediency, but should it be taken at face value?

In the opening part of his speech, Diodotus had stated that no one who speaks honestly to the assembly can expect to win a debate. Perhaps we should look for Diomedes’ actual argument between the lines of his speech, then, or at least turn our attention to the more subtle strategies of reasoning he applies. In all actuality, the uncompromising principle of justice with which Cleon had wrapped up his speech – the advisability of a punishment “worthy of the crime” (κολάζειν ἀξίως, ‘to punish worthily’) – seems to be dismissed by Diodotus as well, albeit more implicitly:

For my own part, neither did I stand up for the purpose of counter-arguing in the business of the Mytileneans (παρῆλθον οὔτε ἀντερῶν περὶ Μυτιληναίων) nor to accuse any man (οὔτε κατηγορήσω). For we contend not now, if we are wise, about their injustice towards us (περὶ τῆς ἐκείνων ἀδικίας ἡμῖν), but about the wisest counsel for ourselves (περὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας εὐβουλίας). What Diodotus does in the above lines is to set himself as an example before the assembly. This he does, I would conjure, to undermine the legitimacy of the principle of τὸ ξύμφωρον that he and Cleon – as well as the rest of the Athenian assembly – adhere to in what they state explicitly. Although thus remaining outwardly compliant to the supremacy of expediency, Diodotus manages to implicitly introduce and defend an alternative moral perspective – one calling for the counterbalancing of ἀδικία (‘injustice’) through εὐβουλία (‘wise counsel’). In effect, this means that Diodotus’ true appeal is for a form of justice – or, more pointedly, that he calls attention to the fact that it is more harmful to do injustice than to suffer it.

In truth, the combination of an external devotion to the principle of expediency, together with an implicit raising of a conflicting moral point of view above the former, could have been exactly what Diodotus needed to win over (enough of) the minds of his fellows in the assembly. Because after all, the reason the Athenians had decided to reconsider their previous decision was precisely that after deciding to kill or enslave
everyone in Mytilene, they had come to realize that they might have done something to innocent people that simply was unjustifiably wrong. Consequently, the Athenians may actually have been more disposed from the outset to disregard the principle of expediency than what the explicit arguments set forth by both Cleon and Diodotus suggest.

Speaking in favour of the latter possibility is certainly also the fact that the Mytilenean episode takes place towards the beginning of Thucydides’ narrative. The story thus falls in the first phase of the Peloponnesian War (the so-called Archidamian War 431–421 BCE), when Athens and Sparta were still content to skirmish in each other’s territories, and Athens had yet to experience its most devastating defeats (e.g. the loss against Sparta at the Battle of Mantinea 418 BCE and the Sicilian Expedition 415 BCE). At this stage, then, the Athenians had probably not yet come to conceive of the war as a true fight to death, and this may certainly have contributed to their relatively humanitarian handling of the Mytileneans.

Be that as it may, it is through his speech that Diodotus manages to win a bare majority of the votes, and another trireme is hastily dispatched with the purpose of chasing down the first. The second trireme arrives just in time to prevent the execution of the first decision, and thus a whole society may be saved from extinction.

The Melian Dialogue and criticism of the principle of σωτηρία

The Melian Dialogue (ca. 416 BCE) is Thucydides’ account of the debate between two Athenian ambassadors, Cleomedes and Teias, and the oligarchic elite, αἱ ἱαρχαὶ καὶ οἱ ὀλιγοί (‘the leaders and the few’), ruling Melos: another revolting city-state that the Athenians thought they needed to subdue. Most modern readers have interpreted this debate in terms of the relation between power and weakness – particularly that pertaining between strong and weak states. To cite an example of this customary scholarly view, the Melian Dialogue has been described as.

the outcome of Thucydides’ private meditations on the morality of power, illustrating in the privacy of a closed conclave the timeless truth that great powers in fact pursue their own interests.

In truth, this interpretation of the motive underlying the inclusion of the episode in Thucydides’ work echoes in the statements of the Athenian side in the Melian Dialogue. For in their argumentation against the Melians, the Athenian ambassadors twice take recourse to the view that justice and rightfulness can only prevail between equals – whereas between unequal subjects, the less powerful always has to yield to the stronger party.

Underlying the Athenians’ rejection of all forms of rightfulness, however, lies the assumption that in the kind of predicament facing the Melians, a fundamentally different principle ought to be given precedence. In fact, also the statement regarding which principle should be given the most weight by the Melians is twice repeated by the Athenians; the first time when the Athenians enter into the debate, and the second time when they withdraw.

In the Melian Dialogue it is the principle of σωτηρία (‘safety and survival’), which is placed down as the same kind of overriding norm as we witnessed τὸ ἔμφορον being singled out as in the Mytilenean Debate. By thus nailing σωτηρία into the very frame of the debate, the Athenians give themselves free hands to disqualify any argument that could be count against the prospect of maintaining safety and ensuring survival.
The Athenians then proceed to counter what they conceive of as indefensible attempts to break the frames of the debate by classifying the Melian views and arguments as useless hopes, resting on false assurances of divine intervention. Particularly noticeable in this regard is the countering argument the Athenians deliver after the Melians have revealed their trust in divinely sanctioned τύχη (‘fate’), and their confidence in an ensuing rescue operation delivered by the Spartans.27 The Athenians disclaim this reassurance as follows:

With regard to the goodwill of the gods (πρὸς τὸ θεῖον εὐμενείας), we do not think we have worsened our prospects at all (οὐδ᾽ ἡμεῖς οἰόμεθα λελείψεσθαι). Neither have we formed any judgments nor have we committed any deeds that would not be in accordance with what humans believe about the gods (τὸ θεῖον νομίσεως) and practice among themselves (σφάς αὐτῶν βουλήσεως). Our belief about divinity and our assured idea about humanity (ἡγούμεθα γὰρ τὸ θεῖον δόξῃ τὸ ἀνθρώπειον τε σαφῶς) is that by a necessity of nature anyone will rule over anything he has in his power (διὰ παντὸς ὑπὸ φύσεως ἀναγκαίας, οὐ ἂν κρατῆ, ἄρχειν). And this law has not been placed down by us and we are not the first to make use of it, but as it was given we took it to ourselves (ὅντα δὲ παραλαβόντες) and as it shall always remain we pass it on to others (ἐσομένοις ἀεὶ καταλείψοντες) and so make use of it now (καὶ χρώμεθα αὐτῷ). Because we know that you as well as anyone else who would come to possess the same power we hold now (ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ δυνάμει ἡμῖν γενομένους) would do as we do (δρώντας ἂν ταύτῳ). Thus, it is reasonable for us not to fear that we would be treated unfavorably by the divinity (πρὸς μὲν τὸ θεῖον ὃς οὐ φοβούμεθα ἑλασσόσεσθαι). As regarding your belief about the Spartans, that they would come to your help out of shame (τῆς δὲ ἐς Λακεδαμονίους δόξης, ἂν διὰ τοῦ αἰχμῶν δὴ βοηθήσειν ὑμῖν πιστεύετε αὐτῶν), we consider you blessed because of your innocence (μακαρίσαντες ὑμᾶς ἀπειρόκακον), but we do not envy your foolishness (οὐ ζηλοῦμεν τὸ ἄφρον).

In the above lines, the contempt inherent in the two concluding sentences is certainly noticeable (πρὸς μὲν τὸ θεῖον […] τῆς δὲ ἐς Λακεδαμονίους δόξης […] οὐ ζηλοῦμεν τὸ ἄφρον “regarding the divinity […] and your belief about the Spartans […] we do not envy your foolishness”). In effect, the Athenians here relegate the Melians’ trust in divine justice to the same kind of ἄφρον (‘foolishness’) that they deem to be intrinsic in the conviction that Sparta would be prepared to aid Melos. None of these futile reassurances, so the Athenians judge, is supported by what ought to be the overriding concern for the Melians: σωτηρία.

In the argumentation building up to this ruthless closure, special attention ought to be paid to how the Athenians draw on the notion of an universal “will to power”, which the Athenians conceive of as having been given by “a necessity of nature” (ὑπὸ φύσεως ἀναγκαίας).29 In fact, by having laid bare this “law of nature” the Athenians think they can counter just about any normative claims that may be derived from religious beliefs – alternatively, from any kinds of beliefs, which cannot be reconciled with the clear and distinct knowledge of the workings of human nature the Athenians think they possess:

ἡγούμεθα […] τὸ ἀνθρώπειον […] σαφῶς διὰ παντὸς ὑπὸ φύσεως ἀναγκαίας, οὐ ἂν κρατῆ, ἄρχειν

our assured idea of humanity is that by a necessity of nature anyone will rule over anything that is in his power.30

However, here as in the remainder of the dialogue, the Athenians fail in making the Melians succumb to their view of how – in the given a state of nature and with the
current situation at hands – the sole relevant principle of σωτηρία may best be fulfilled. The dialogue concludes with the continued refusal of the Melians to give up their trust in the goodwill of τύχη, and to abandon their assurance of the rescuing power of the Lacedaemonians. And of course the Athenians for their part are unable tolerate the Melian leaders’ refusal to follow what the Athenians deem to be the only path towards safety and survival for the entire Melian city–state – i.e. to surrender and become part of the ἀρχή (‘dominion’) of those in possession of κράτος (‘power’).

Thucydides then concludes the episode with laconically stating the outcome of the perseverance of the Melians:

οἱ δὲ ἀπέκτειναν Μηλίων ὅσους ἡβώντας ἔλαβον, παῖδας δὲ καὶ γυναῖκας ἧνδαπόδισαν.

They [the Athenians] killed all adult male Melians they could catch, and they turned the women and the children into slaves.

Hence, the Melians met the fate the Mytileneans had managed to escape, exactly, as it seems, because of their refusal to accept the moral frames placed down by their Athenian rulers. The usual reading of the Melian Dialogue as giving expression to Thucydides’ reflections on the dynamics between power and weakness thus finds strong support in the cruel end of the story.

However, at this point in the History, the self-assured political thinking of the Athenians – which previously had acquitted the Mytileneans, but which now decided on the opposite fate for the Melians – had certainly already begun to run amok; i.e. it had become incapable of correcting its own faulty decisions. For what the Athenian ambassadors in the Melian Dialogue seem unable to understand, but what was seen clearly by the Athenian assembly as it reached its second decision in the Mytilenean case, was that for the greater part of the Melian society there never was any choice. The fate they had to suffer was the one imposed on them by their elite leaders, and these, in their turn, had to choose between their own misguided conceptions, and the externally imposed principles laid upon them by their Athenian overlords.

**Conclusion: Thucydidean immanent critique**

Following the philosophical tradition of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Alexei Procyshyn has strived to explicate the conditions for immanent critique. According to his account, the three overarching aims of immanent critique consist (1) of the offering of a possible account of social transformation, (2) of the showing that the proposed transformation is necessary and (3) of the addressing of the agents supposed to undertake the transformation in question. Now, if we reconsider the calls to social improvement by Plato and Aristotle mentioned in the introduction – the Platonic model of the supremely virtuous man, and the Aristotelian suggestion that all prevalent social systems fail to meet the standards of the best end – we may conclude that already in these short passages, conditions (2) and (3) seem to be met. Indeed, Plato and Aristotle take pains to make their audience aware of just how badly their social lives need to be transformed. However, it could perhaps be maintained that the ideal alternative models for the structuring of society, which Plato and Aristotle in the remainder of their works offer as replacements for the malfunctioning reality, actually fail to meet condition (1). For in all
actuality, the social utopias envisioned by the Classical philosophers were probably never even intended to be realizable in practice.35

In this regard, it seems that Thucydides’ *History* actually comes closer to meeting all three conditions of a properly functioning immanent critique acknowledged by Procyshyn. Because as we have seen, the Thucydidean social criticism takes the form of critique directed against the dominant normative principles guiding the political actions of the society. In the Mytilenean Debate, the criticism of the main socio-moral principle adhered to by the Athenian political community (expediency) then actually succeeds. The effective counter-arguments are here delivered by a member of the in-group of enfranchised citizens, Diodotus, who still outwardly shows himself adhering to the dominant principle of expediency. Indeed, Diodotus manages to replace Cleon’s retaliation-based vision of how best to realize expediency, at the same time as he subtly leads the assembly towards a radically alternative point of view: one that raises the value of self-care in the opting for wise and just decisions over and above expediency. Thus it seems that Diodotus, at least for a short while and at least in Thucydides’ rendering of the events, actually manages to bring to completion the social transformation which he first had made his peers realize was necessary.

In the Melian Dialogue, on the other hand, there is no substitute for Diodotus, no one to lead the Athenians – represented by their ambassadors Cleomedes and Teisias – towards transforming their moral outlook. In truth, the Melians themselves never even attempt to deliver their counter-arguments in a form that could persuade the Athenians to change their minds. Rather, the Melians altogether disregard the normative framework the Athenian have determined for them. In Thucydides’ staging of the Melian Dialogue, we thus encounter exactly the kind of “tragic conflict” which in the Hegelian view (see the introduction above) characterizes Classical Greek morality in general. Indeed, the Athenians and the Melians seem to be locked in an unresolvable conflict – one in which both reconciliation and social and moral amelioration are made impossible by the total one-sidedness of the respective positions. Nevertheless, I would claim that the Melian Dialogue, too, bears evidence of a social criticism akin to immanent critique. This is the social critique practiced by Thucydides himself in his role as narrator of the episode.

Indeed, it seems to me that Thucydides with his Melian episode not only places before his audience the picture of a weaker city–state at the mercy of a stronger, as the common scholarly view maintains – but also, and even more pointedly, that of a subdued people imprisoned by their weak leaders. If this interpretation were correct, there would be more to be learned from the Melian Dialogue than what the effects of power in politics are or might be. To be found here in particular would be the further lesson applying specifically to clashing societies, the one of which is not only weaker than the other, but also follows a radically different principle of rule. What Thucydides was aiming at in the Melian Dialogue, then, may actually amount to the very same thing he had Diodotus say more explicitly in the Mytilenean Debate: that the wise chooses what is best for him, and that such a choice precludes vanquishing others.

In truth, the above interpretation of the aim of Thucydides’ “immanent critique” is in line, too, with the reality of the interstate relations the Athenians had to deal with. As a democracy in a world dominated by oligarchies, Athens faced a continuous challenge in maintaining her own constitutional order. In such a situation, the Athenians, as has been aptly pointed out by Anna Missiou, were forced to break away from the old aristocratic
principle of creating ties of friendship only with the strong (or with rich and politically powerful families), and instead adopt a fundamentally diverging principle: that of helping the weak (or the disenfranchized populace). Because only through acts aimed at consolidating democracy abroad could the democratic order at home be secured.36 (Missiou 1992: 119-120). Consequently, the Thucydidean practice of immanent critique may be seen to boil down to an exposure of the counter-productive nature of the principle of safety and survival (in practice: full recognition of the will of the stronger) that the Athenians impose on the Melians.

The possibility of socio-moral transformation that Thucydides contemplates in the Melian episode would be of a kind, then, which would agree more strongly as well with the Athenians’ self-interest and advantage as a democratically ordered political community. Moreover, it would be an envisioned state that the Athenians in the recent past had actually already adhered to, which is of course exactly what Thucydides had shown earlier in is narrative, namely in connection with his account of the Mytilenean case.

Notes

1. Bodin, “Diodote contre Cléon”; Treu, “Athen und Melos”; Romilly, Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism; Orwin, “The Just”; Ober, “Thucydides and the Invention”; Wohl, “Thucydides on the Political”; Cankurtaran, “This is Africa”.
2. Cf. Särkelä, Immanente Kritik, 130-138.
3. Särkelä, “The (Meta)Physician of Culture”. Although the Classical Greek term for bodily weakness or sickness, ἀσθένεια, is sometimes employed in the History to express the conceived-of political infirmity of societies: see e.g. Thucydides, History 5.95.1: οὐ γὰρ τοιούτον ἡμᾶς βλάπτει ἡ ἐχθραὶ ὢμών ὄσον ἡ φιλία μὲν ἀσθενείας, τὸ δὲ μίσος δυνάμεως παράδειγμα τοῖς ἀρχομένοις δηλούμενον “No; for your hostility cannot hurt us as much as your friendship will prove to be an example for our subjects of our weakness/sickness, and your enmity of our power”. Moreover, the idea of the political order determining the well-being of society at large is encountered already in the Archaic Age of Greece. In a fragment ascribed to Alcmaeon of Croton (ca. 500 BCE), e.g., it is stated that monarchy (μοναρχία) is the cause of illness, whereas “equal order of powers” (ἰσονομία τῶν δυνάμεων) is what maintains health (Alcmaeon of Croton B4 (Diels & Kranz)).
4. Cf. Särkelä, “The (Meta)Physician of Culture”; Procysshyn, “Immanent Critique”.
5. Särkelä, Immanente Kritik, 130.
6. Farneth, Hegel’s Social Ethics, 34.
7. Aristotle, Politics, 7.1333b.5-11
8. Plato, Republic, 472c-d
9. Cf. Linderborg, Herodotus and the Origins, 141.
10. For a description of the events forming the background to the debate, see Thucydides, History, 3.2-6, 3.8-15, 3.27-28 and 3.35-36.
11. Bodin, “Diodote contre Cléon”, 40
12. Thucydides, History, 3.40.4.
13. Thucydides, History, 3.40.7.
14. Thucydides, History, 3.44.2.
15. Thucydides, History, 3.47.1-4.
16. Thucydides, History 3.43.2: δεῖν [...] τὸ πλῆθος [...] ψευσάμενο πιστὸν γενέσθαι “the people’s trust is to be gained through lying”.
17. Thucydides, History 3.44.1.
18. Cf. Orwin, “The Just”, 489.
19. Of course we cannot know what factors actually turned the votes in favor of Diomedes’ proposal. Sungwoo Park has proposed that it was Cleon’s unwillingness to please the assembly
that was the decisive reason. Park, “Thucydides on the Fate”, 102. Clifford Orwin, on the other hand, concluded that because the vote was close (Thucydides, History, 3.49.1) and the Athenians had already altered their decision once (Thucydides, History, 3.36.4), Cleon must have changed more minds than Diodotus. Orwin, “The Just”, 492.

20. Thucydides, History, 3.36.4.
21. Thucydides, History, 3.49.1.
22. Thucydides, History, 3.49.4.
23. For the full Median episode, see Thucydides, History, 5.84-116. For the debate, see Thucydides, History 5.85-113. Thucydides claims that the Melians were “neutrals” (πρῶτον οὔσετέρων ὄντες “belonging to neither”) (Thucydides, History, 5.84.2) to begin with, and then compelled to war by the Athenians, but this can hardly be taken as a historically exhaustive account of the events leading up to the Melian dialogue. Because we know that some 10 years before 416 BC, Melos was among the city-states forced to pay tribute to the Athenian empire (IG1 5 (71)). In truth, since Thucydides had brought up an earlier expedition by the Athenians against Melos in 426 BC (which is likely to have been motivated by the Melians refusing to pay tribute), one may ponder over what took place between 426 and 416. Cf. Thucydides, History, 3.91.1-3.

24. Bosworth, “The Humanitarian Aspect”, 30. The German counterpart is to read the work as a study centred on “die Frage, ob irgendein ideeller Wert, ob irgendwelche Imponderabilien noch relevant sind für die zwischenstaatliche Politik oder ob alles nur Macht und Despotie der Macht ist, sein muß und sein kann”. Treu, “Athen und Melos”, 271.

25. Thucydides, History, 5.101, 5.114.4.
26. Thucydides, History, 5.87, 5.111.2.
27. Thucydides, History, 5.104.
28. Thucydides, History 5.105.1-3.
29. See the discussion of this passage in Fischer and Hoekstra, "Politics of Necessity", 376-378.

30. Cf. Bosworth “The Humanitarian Aspect”, 40: ”For the Athenians the subjugation of the weaker by the stronger is no injustice but a categorical imperative of nature.”

31. Thucydides, History, 5.112.2.
32. Thucydides, History, 5.116.4.
33. Thucydides, History, 3.36.4: τῇ ὑστεραιᾳ μετανοιᾳ τις ευθὺς ἦν αὐτός καὶ ἀναλογιμὸς ὠμὸν τὸ βουλευμα καὶ μέγα ἐγνώθη, πόλιν ἄλλην διαφθείραι μᾶλλον ἢ οὐ τοὺς αἵτιους. “The next day, reflection and reconsideration came to them and they thought of how truly raw their decision had been, to destroy a whole city other than the guilty ones”. Procyshyn, “Immanent Critique”, 2-3.
34. Procyshyn, “Immanent Critique”, 2-3.
35. παραδείγματος ἄρα ἔνεκα, ἦν δ′ ἐγὼ, ἐξητούμεν αὐτῷ τε δικαιοσύνην οἶν ἔστι, καὶ ἄνδρα τὸν τέλειον δίκαιον εἰ γένοιτο, καὶ οίκος ἄν εἰ γενόμενος, καὶ ἀδικίαν αὐτῷ καὶ τὸν ἀδικώτατον, ἵνα εἰς ἐκεῖνος ἀποβλέποντες, οἴοι ἂν Ἑμῖν φαίνωνται εὐδαιμονίας τε πέρι καὶ τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ, ἀναγκαζόμεθα καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν ὁμολογεῖν, ὡς ἂν ἐκεῖνος ὅτι ὁμοιότατος ἦς, τὴν ἐκείνην μοίραν ὁμοιοτάτην ἔχειν, ἀλλ᾽ ὁ τούτου ἔνεκα, ἵν᾽ ἀποδείξωμεν ὡς δυνατὰ ταύτα γίγνεσθαι. “For the sake of a model, I said, did we look for the nature of righteousness, and for the perfectly righteous man if he were to be, and if indeed he were of which kind he would be, and for unrighteousness and for the unrighteous person did we look for in the same way, so that by gazing at them, that is, at how they turned out to be in our view with regard to happiness and the opposite, therewith would we also be forced to agree with regard to ourselves, meaning that whoever would resemble these the most, should also have to be considered to have the portion in life most resembling them, but this we did not do in order to show that these could actually come to be just so” (my italics. Plato, Republic, 472 c-d.
36. Missiou, The Subversive Oratory, 119-120.

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