



THUCYDIDES AND BREXIT: PARALLELS AND FUNCTIONAL PRINCIPLES

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Abstract:

When the majority of UK citizens voted to exit the EU almost nobody could tell the main impact of the most important event in global politics in the beginning of the 21st century. Two years after the referendum none is sure what exactly Brexit means, especially on the relationship the UK will have with EU in the future. The UK invoked the Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty and until 1 January 2021 there will be a transition period which is necessary for both parts to prepare and strike their own new trade deals. What lessons can a modern political thought learn from antiquity? According to Thucydides, the inventor of political science, and theorist of political and financial autonomy, there might be a new set of ways of thinking and values, for both UK's major political parties. Through his political view of the cultural and institutional explanation of the democratic Athenian paradigm we could find some of the fundamentals of the first known democracy in the world and transfer them to our times. How could an observer conceive the risks and the opportunities of the future UK role after Brexit putting Thucydides' theory into praxis? What is the relationship between modern UK politics decisions with the strategies of Pericles, Cleon, and Alcibiades, during the Peloponnesian War?

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1. Introduction

Since British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was London's Mayor he used to speak of the value of the classics in understanding modern politics, having written a book comparing the European Union with the Roman Empire (Rohrer, 2008 May, 13). However, Roman political philosophy and praxis, in so far as "*it was civic and republican, was certainly not democratic*" (Cartledge, 2009, p.134). In the present crises of (legitimacy and under-representation confronting) Western democracy, many scholars think the Greek political and philosophical thought could yet have something to teach us. John Dunn has commented ironically for the Western political theory: "*If we are all democrats today, it is not a very cheerful fate to share. Today, in politics, democracy is the name for what we cannot have, yet cannot cease to want*" (Dunn, 1979, p.28). Nietzsche would indeed suggest that "*the classicist is the great skeptic in our cultural and educational circumstances*", since "*if we understand Greek culture, we see that it is gone for good*" (Williams, 1993, In Cartledge, 2009, p.131). In case of Brexit could the modern political thinking draw any significant lessons from the classical historian and the inventor of political science Thucydides? Are there any similarities or analogies between the meaning of the speeches of the leaders and generals of (the ancient Greek) Peloponnesian War and the positions of major political parties in the UK today?

During the last months of 2018 and the first half of 2019, the UK has been going through one of the tensest and contested political periods in its post-World War II history, facing the challenge of Brexit. It is known that the predecessor of the present economic and political Union of 28 European countries was the European Economic Community (EEC), created in 1958 as a community of six countries: France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Their governments decided to foster their economic cooperation, in the aftermath of World War II. Furthermore, it seems that they had been convinced that by enhancing cooperation and coordination among them and by trading with one another they could become "*economically interdependent and so more likely to avoid conflict*" (European Union: The EU in brief, 2018). In other words: "*to avoid wars*"; the Brexit decision may be seen as placing a question mark next to this arrangement, if not now, perhaps later in the history of the continent. Although the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson had previously spent the Referendum campaign talking about 'Project Fear' as the tactic used by those wishing to remain in the EU, his advocacy of the study of classics suggests he was well aware of lessons from Greek and Roman history (Rohrer, 2008 May, 13).

The "Politico" magazine published an article (Oliver, 2019 February, 23) proposed that Britain needs a last-minute Greek lesson, because ancient history offers "*cautionary tales about states that hit the self-destruct button*". It recommends everyone in UK to study a masterpiece of strategy and political psychology, the *History of the Peloponnesian War* of Thucydides, written 2,500 years ago, on the war between the *poleis* (city-states) Athens and Sparta. The article underlines similarities between Greece of the 5th century BC and

the “Brexitland”, as it notes that the Greek historian was expert in allocating disinformation and demagoguery in periods of crisis for democracy. So how fair is such a comparison? A comparison between the tussles of modern-day Greece and Britain with the EU seems a good starting point which arguably sets the scene for where the UK stands now.

2. On similarities and analogies between Brexit and Thucydides Peloponnesian War

According to the “Politico” article (Oliver, 2019) there are two useful parallels between Athens of the 5th century BC and the modern UK, after 2016:

- a) the populism of ancient Athenians before the Sicilian campaign and the disastrous invasion in 415 BC and many of UK former ministers promising that the governments of Germany and France will fight each other to have deals with Britain,
- b) the failed negotiation of the Greek island of Melos’ inhabitants with the haughty Athenian empire, where “*the plucky Brexiteers on Melos*” (ibid) stood up to the imperialists, with non-realistic argumentation, which led to the massacre of them.

In our opinion the author of the article mentioned above is very keen to provide these parallels trying to persuade the modern politicians in UK to read (again) the Thucydides’ work. But are these examples really useful, valid and capable to connect the historical events and the meanings the great historian provides with the importance of Brexit?

Thucydides (460-400 BC), the most famous historian writer of ancient Greece, creates a monumental work (*History*), intending to leave an enduring monument to the mankind (*ktēma es aiei*: 1.22.4). He seeks historical truth through facts, but he also tries to understand what indicates the will and the motives of the leading actors of the first two decades (431-411 BC) of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC). He tries to dive into historical necessity and what navigates his thought is the effort to understand human nature (*to anthropon*: 1.22.4), “*an acute perception into historical necessity*” (McGlew, In Hose and Schenker, 2016, p. 82). He draws mostly the decision-making process, because it is important for him as a historian to determine the behavior of leaders, persons or groups, political or military factors etc.

All the protagonists of his *History* speak, think and act in accordance with their current ideological and political principles, doctrines and well known habits, using contemporary rhetorical schemes. The leaders and speakers express the ideology of their political party or they come across treaties, deals and decisions of their own *poleis*, illustrating the culture and traditions of people. In his work he illustrates antithetical positions of the protagonists, incorporating matters of principles, intensions, wills, specific decision making processes, and crucial interpretations of the people’s motives behind historical speeches. Every time these debates take place in the assemblies (e.g. the Athenians’ ecclesia) they give him the chance to analyze the constitution of each city (for example Athenians were the only ones who had created and chose to have Democracy as constitution and system of government of their own *polis*).

It is obvious that Thucydides wouldn't have asked anyone whether the Brexit referendum was inadequately deliberated or not. Perhaps he would have written for the most important debates that took place between the Brexiteers and the Remainers very carefully, with many details, describing characters' appearance, thoughts, intentions, manners, aims and plans. Also he would have described how plenty of the citizens voted in too much hurry and with passion and how only a few of them were well informed or totally ignorant for the purposes of the first referendum. Thucydides says (1.22): "*Different eyewitnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or out of imperfect memories*"; and that is why he would have proved that the majority of the voters were far away from being so well informed as they supposed themselves to be of all the Brexit parameters and consequences (Mueller, 2019).

Thucydides analyzes democratic and oligarchic constitution in action through the behavior and the decisions of the Athenians and the Spartans, revealing constitutional and ideological matters in each society or poleis, power politics, strategic schemes, foreign relations etc. One of his most powerful questions he sets in his Histories is: how did Athenians succeed in gaining and building up so much power, magnificence and splendor of their city that Spartans began to fear of it and decided for a wild civil war as the only means to stop them?

The truest explanation, although "*it has been the least often advanced, I believe to have been the growth of the Athenians to greatness, which brought fear to the Lacedaemonians and forced them to war*" (Thucydides, 1.23.6, also see: 1.89.1, 1.118).

3. Taking the longer view: Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War

The *History of the Peloponnesian War* of Thucydides reveals some startling parallels between the modern-day context which is the focus of this article and the struggles of would-be independent states from an expanding state project. In general, there is a long tradition of very important men, since Thomas Hobbes (who translated the *History of Thucydides* in 1629 expecting to learn in this way how to solve the problems of modern politics) up to our contemporary political science theorists, feeling that they recognize their own times in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War (Morley, 2017). For example, President Theodore Roosevelt's appetite for the Histories of Thucydides was omnivorous and insatiable, as scholars say (Morris, 2010), and the historian's application to the modern world could be found through further examples in many books, articles and blogs throughout the web (i.e. <https://thesphinxblog.com/>).

In the 5th century BC Athens was the greatest sea power in Greek world (a parallel of the European Union nowadays) before the Peloponnesian war, in which the Athenians had created the first democratic political system and their leader was a creative and capable politician, the famous Pericles. During his leadership (495-429 BC), Athens flourished and this period is known as the golden age of ancient Greece. Their opponents, the Spartans, the most powerful land force, were coming from the southern peninsula of Greece, Peloponnesians, to stop or to control the racing expansion of the Athenian influence on other cities (see "*The parallel of a second referendum*" section, in this paper). This war,

the *Peloponnesian War*, ripped the Greek World apart and destroyed many places and people. The famous historian is well-known as an observer of human behavior, a researcher of the patterns of decision making, a very critical and accurate author of facts and human condition in the time of the war. Among other interesting information on how Thucydides' writings reflected on modern political thought, many historians have shown that the Lincoln's "*Gettysburg Address*" is a compressed, skillful adaptation of *Pericles' Funeral Address*, just like the debate presented by Thucydides (Rorty, 1996).

However why should we go so far back in history to understand the consequences and the reasons behind the Brexit referendum result? The western modern world has traditionally tried to see the past in the present through the study of Greek and Latin classics. An action or an event described in the classics does not belong solely to its era alone, but can be seen to resonate in every period of humanity, thus endowing it with certain meaning and value. In other words, "*our desire to see the past in our present is matched by the ancients' desire to see the future in their present*" (Bakker, 2007). Thucydides' work consciously is intended to be "*an everlasting possession*" (see: Raaflaub, 2006, p. 191).

But Thucydides (460-400 BC) provides the next generations and his readers as well, with a rational explanation for Athens' failure during the Peloponnesian War, focusing on the flawed relationship between democratic political orators or leaders and the Athenian citizens. Their decisions and *hybris* led inevitably to disastrous policies and catastrophic effects that unavoidably triggered more and more civil conflicts and wars in Greece and caused finally the end of democratic Athens.

In this paper we rehearse our speculation on how Thucydides could have explained and have evaluated many of the recent positions on Brexit, their causal nexus and the potential consequences for the citizens of UK and democracy as well. Readers of this paper should keep in mind that the authors are not in favor of Brexiteers or Remainers; on the contrary, we aim to evaluate the intention of Brexit agents and their results, through the validity of Thucydides' logic, as anticipating some key ideas of democratic procedures in order to contribute to the dialogue about the future of EU and UK capacity.

4. From Grexit to Brexit

The word Brexit rose in the same roots as 'Grexit' - a term used for Greece's momentous early exit from the Eurozone in 2012. It is well known throughout Europe that the Greek financial crisis (2010-2018) showed that the EU focuses on continuous growth of economic indicators and the achievement of annual budget surpluses, without leaving breathing room for the real life (Raj & Panda, 2015; Mavridis, 2018). EU shows the strongest face in the modern history of Europe. After almost nine years of Greek bailout crisis and tough austerity-driven policies it is finally revealed that the Eurogroup's decisions have been taken "*behind closed doors, a scandal in terms of democratic processes*" (Michalopoulos, 2017). It is a scandal for democratic procedures and the essence of democracy, because EU decides for each state member in this way, by imposing its will on pensions, the labor market etc.

“The decisions were made by technocrats and are not transparent and accountable to any parliament” (Pierre Moscovici, Economic Affairs Commissioner, interview with Corriere Della Sera, 2/9/2017, In Michalopoulos, 2017, euroactiv.com)

Well, that is a huge problem for the EU structure, in the post-Greek crisis era. Euroscepticism has already been spreading and it could be found as *“a factor behind Brexit and the rapid popularity of xenophobic far-right parties across the continent”* (Prentoulis, 2018, In theguardian.com). By imposing the austerity as the only solution for the southern European countries, after the crisis of 2008, when other countries like Germany continued to prosper, doubts have been consecutively provoked as regards to the entire European project.

4. Who’s UK’s favorite Greek hero? Pericles or Alcibiades?

In contrary, in Thucydides’ political view of the cultural and institutional explanation of the democratic Athenian paradigm we could find some of the fundamentals of the first known democracy in the world. Pericles, the eminent Athenian leader, eulogizes Athens itself in his famous funeral oration (431 BC), a speech at the annual public funeral for the war dead, claims:

“Just as we conduct our political affairs in respect to the community in a way that is characterized by a spirit of liberty, so too is our everyday conduct of affairs with one another ... And we are very different from our opponents ... in various ways. For example, we openly share our polis as a common (koinē) possession. And we have no need to engage in periodic expulsions of foreigners aimed at preventing someone from learning or seeing something secret that might be of advantage to our enemies, since we don’t depend on advance preparation or deception, but rather upon our own genuine courage. Meanwhile, in terms of education (paideia): our rivals seek after manliness by instituting a painful discipline that begins at childhood. But we live exactly as we please, and yet we are just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger.” (Thucydides, 2.39, 1, In Ober, 2009)

Pericles could have referred not to the Athenian exceptionalism but to modern UK, describing the pro-Brexit era and its famous cultural environment, well known throughout the world. In his speech mentioned above, Pericles demonstrates that democratic Athens in his era had grown to a position of greatness in the ancient world. His policy combined rational individual-good-seeking and political common-good-seeking, because *“the Athenians proved capable of identifying and consistently capturing the benefits of social cooperation among a population of free citizens, each of whom was rationally seeking his own advantage and making choices accordingly”* (Ober, 2009).

In many of his interviews, Mr. Boris Johnson accepted that he admires his hero, Pericles and he also declared that *“he gets the most pleasure from knowing the classics because he knows them”* and that he was able *“to recite the first 100 Lines of the Homer’s Iliad before*

becoming Prime Minister” (The Classical Difference, 2019). In contrary, Simon Jenkins, a Guardian columnist disagrees, saying that the prime minister has a bust of his Greek hero on his Downing Street desk, but the PM is no Pericles:

“Johnson is no Periclean. For all his faults, Pericles respected the balance of Athenian democracy, cultivated a broad appeal and demanded tolerance of “our private differences”. He would never have insulted those sensibly nervous of hard Brexit...” (Jenkins, 2019).

Thucydides in his narrations recognizes that political culture is a learned behavior through *paideia*, and in Pericles’ times it arouses from the Athenians’, social political and legal institutions and the political praxis (see: Ober, 1996, ch. 3). Perhaps the Guardian columnist accuses Prime Minister for creating *“sensibly nervous of hard Brexit”* citizens *without telling them the truth about it. In his oration Pericles asserts that the Athenians weigh what they undertake and apprehend it in their minds, “not accounting words for a hindrance of action but that it is rather a hindrance to action to come to it without instruction of words before”* (Hobbes, 1843).

“We cultivate refinement without extravagance, and we cultivate knowledge without becoming soft; ... Here [in Athens] we assume responsibility both for our own private affairs and for public matters ... For we alone judge someone who assumes no share in the public sphere, not as just ‘apolitical’ but useless. And we ourselves can [collectively] judge rightly regarding affairs, even if [each of us] does not [individually] originate the arguments; we do not consider arguments to be an impediment to actions, but rather [we regard it as] essential to be previously instructed by speech before embarking on necessary actions. We are distinctive also in that we hold that we are simultaneously persons who are daring and who vigorously debate what they will put their hands to. Among other men ignorance leads to rashness, while reasoned debate just bogs them down.” (Thucydides, 2.40, 2-3 In Ober, 2009)

We don’t think that anyone could prove that the UK political parties intended to create ignorant citizens informing them over the Brexit case. But it seems that Pericles’ democracy created a unique conjunction of governance and political culture environment that could flourish the public and private interests. Democratic institutions facilitated the Athenians to deliberate thoughtfully over policy as an ongoing process of teaching and learning for their own good. But the Guardian columnist, Simon Jenkins, strikes again:

“Johnson’s real model is not Pericles but his ward and brief successor as Athenian leader, Alcibiades. A talented, handsome and vain playboy, he could never kick the vices of his youth or rise to the tasks later entrusted to him. (...) Alcibiades was far more Johnsonian. He plotted his return to Athens through proroguing its democratic assembly, the Pnyx, and welcoming oligarchy. His oratory was infused with Johnson’s chauvinist energy. He deplored inaction. ..He said, “We must scheme to extend it. If we cease to rule others, we

are in danger of being ruled ourselves." Athens must take back control. In the event, Alcibiades lost it." (Jenkins, 2019)

Let's get back to the Thucydides' narration. Just before the Athenian navy's expedition to Sicilian Syracuse (415 BC), the Athenian assembly willingly bought into Alcibiades' egoistic claim that Athenians must be focused on their imperialist projects. While Nicias is the war-hardened general, Alcibiades is an aspiring, aristocratic general, so *"he argues at length on why he claims to be the right person to lead the expedition"* (Thucydides, 16.1-17.1, In Kremmydas, 2017). During their debate (Thucydides, 17.2-18.3), Alcibiades argues that the Athenians should not leave anyone to change their minds about the expedition against Syracuse.

"An argument from past experience ("our ancestors...") leads Alcibiades to the conclusion the Athenians should place their trust on their navy on this occasion, too (Kremmydas, 2017). It reminds the argument of PM's member of his cabinet "the blood and sacrifice of our ancestors." (Jones, 2019)

"Alcibiades made the most spirited case for the [Sicilian] expedition, partly because he wanted to cross Nicias (with whom he had other political differences), and because Nicias had made a slanderous reference to him [in his speech to the Assembly opposing the expedition]. Mainly, however, he desired to take command [of the expedition], hoping that it would be because of himself that Sicily and Carthage would be conquered—successes which would at the same time bring him personally both wealth and fame. For because he was highly esteemed by the citizens, he had desires that were too vast for his actual estate to support, both for horse-breeding and for other luxuries as well. Later on, in fact, this had not a little to do with the downfall of the city of Athens. For the common people were frightened (...) by the ambition he showed in absolutely everything he undertook." (Thucydides, 6.15.2–5. Transl. Paul Woodruff, In Reeve, 2011)

The contrast between Nicias and Alcibiades is crucial. Even it is not easy to find similarities between Corbyn's positions and Nicias' ones, we can assert that the spirit and the strategic selections of Nicias are standing for the survival of the Athenians' navy:

"Nicias came forward, willing to speak against the Sicilian expedition, which he believed was an attempt, under minute and superficial pretenses, to conquer all of Sicily." (Thucydides, 6.8).

"He realized that the Athenians could not be restrained, at this point, from "wanting more" (pleonexia). Thus, he attempted to show the Athenians that it was the wrong time to attempt a conquest and that Sicily would not be easy to conquer. In his speech, he warned the Athenians that by undertaking the Sicilian expedition, they would leave many enemies behind them and make many more enemies, and that the treaty they had with the Spartans was a firm one." (Thucydides, 5.23-24, In Park, 2008)

The Sicilian expedition failed primarily because the Athenians “recalled the most capable general Alcibiades and instead appointed the too-inactive Nicias” (Ahrendsdorf, 1997: 256). But, they made their decision consciously “because it made the maintenance of democracy a priority, even before making guaranteed gains through imperial expedition” (Reeve, 2011).

4.1 The parallel of a second referendum

In 428 BC the city of Mytilene launched a revolt against the Athenians and invited the Spartans to send them assistance. The plans were reported to the Athenians (Thucydides, 3.2), who sent a force against the city. The Mytilenians asked for help from the Spartans (3.4.5–6), but the fleet they sent arrived too late to help the city (3.26.4). The revolt appears to have been the initiative of the city’s wealthier citizens.[...] The government was powerless to stop them and decided it was best to come to terms with the Athenians. It was agreed that the Athenians would have the power to act as they wished with the city and that the Mytilenians would have the right to send envoys to Athens to plead their case before the Assembly (Thucydides, 3.2,1 – 3.26,4, In Harris, 2013).

It could be easy to replace the imperialistic power of the Athenians with the EU’s officials of Brussels who have the power to decide against the Brexit and the British people, as it is to name British populist politicians who persuaded the majority of UK to vote Brexit. But Thucydides underlines two major issues:

- 1) The *hubris* of the imperialistic forces throughout history, which are ready to punish everyone else in order to establish and enlarge their own leadership.
- 2) The power of the Assembly (*ekklesia*) in the first direct democratic institution of the Athenians, who were able to change their decision within 24 hours.

When the Athenians first met to decide about the fate of Mytilene, Cleon persuaded them to put the adult males to death and to enslave the women and children; a trireme was sent to inform Paches of the decision (3.36.2). On the next day, however, the Athenians changed their minds and found the decision to put everyone to death, not just the guilty, harsh and excessive (3.36.4). They therefore persuaded Athenian officials to hold another meeting to reconsider the decision (3.36.5) (Harris, 2013).

In these historical events is there of political relevance for Brexit case? Castoriadis (1991) argues that what is exceptional about the Greek *poleis* is not a Greek model of democracy and politics (we are able to reject it), “but the ongoing instituting activity it fostered for four centuries”. In their decisions the Athenians were able to change their minds and to make another decision. That is because in ancient Athenian democracy the people have the power in all of its forms, as they are able to participate directly in the Assembly and the decision making process. An Athenian citizen of the 5th century BC wouldn’t be able to understand the meaning of the phrase “Eurogroup’s decisions have been taken behind closed doors” (see Pierre Moscovici, in: Michalopoulos, 2017), because this procedure could not be in accordance with democratic institutions.

4.2 Cleon and the EU's will to punish UK

At the second meeting of the Assembly on Mytilene, Cleon felt obliged to defend his proposal (3.37–40) and was opposed by a man named Diodotus (3.42–8). Thucydides gives a version of these speeches describing a real *agon* of “*demegoriae*” (speech on debate), in a non-typical contest to determine public policy of Athens and take the best decisions for their community. Cleon says that “*those who speak in the Assembly should not be overcome by their own impressive talents and this competition to show off one's intelligence*” (3.37.5 In Harris, 2013), and that is a real populist argument, because in his speech he uses the language of justice, wrongdoing and punishment.

Cleon, like a prosecutor in a court, asserts that the defendants do not deserve forgiveness, because that fairness, like pity, is against the interests of those in power. Only those who will be friendly to Athens in the future, not those who will remain their enemies, deserve fairness (Thucydides, 3.40,3).

Here is an analogy with Brexit and the EU's will to punish and humiliate UK:

Polish MEP Ryszard Legutko blasted: “*My concern is the EU. The bad news is the EU still seems to still continue pursuing the same policy of deterrence, which roughly speaking consists of two elements. First, to punish the UK by a no deal so that no one in the future would dare to follow their footsteps. And secondly, to humiliate the UK by inducing them to undo Brexit by organizing, for instance, another referendum using the argument that it was a very small majority that decided to Brexit.*” (Jordan, 2019 March, 27. express.co.uk)

Also see the maxim:

“*They want to punish Britain and make sure that non-one else is leaving the European Union.*” (Mr Henkel, the deputy head of the European Parliament's industry, research and energy committee. In Merrick, 2017 July, 19. independent.co.uk)

5. Political realism in Corcyra stasis and danger after marches on Brexit

Thucydides offers Corcyra stasis, the most gruesome massacres of the whole Peloponnesian war, as a case study of the disintegrative process of a civil war. He realizes that the burgeoning conflict between democratic-modernism and oligarchic-traditionalism exacerbated conflicts within Greek states transformed into a struggle between political communities and groups of communities (see Ober, 2006):

“*Stasis was born of the modern/traditional conflict afflicted communities throughout the Greek world. The phenomenon of stasis exposed another dynamic interaction, between the sociopolitical system pertaining in a given community (and its moral and cultural underpinnings) and the demands of human nature. Thucydides supposed that stasis undermined the social structures that ordinarily constrained people's actions. Freed from the constraints of social structure, people tended by nature to act selfishly. That is, they sought to promote their own interests in competition with others rather than cooperating with people different from themselves on common projects. This tendency to self-*

aggrandizement contributed to the degeneration of existing social structure and thus of civilization itself.” (see Thucydides, 3.80,1 – 3.81, 5, In Ober, 2006)

On Saturday, 19th October 2019, hundreds of thousands of people marched through the streets of London, waving flags of the EU and pro-EU slogans, to protest PM’s Brexit EU divorce deal asking for a second referendum.

“Brexit has turned into something of a national crisis and it is the people - who started this process in 2016 - who should be allowed to end it, too”, said Mr Thomas Cole, a spokesman for the People’s Vote campaign that organized the 4th protest calling for a final referendum (Stefanello, 2019 October, 19. Euronews.com).

The crowd’s mood ranged from anger to despair, and it was waiting to begin the march at Hyde Park by the time others had reached parliament as lawmakers held the first Saturday session since the 1982 Falklands war. Some of them talked about, *“A national disaster waiting to happen and it is going to destroy the economy”* while *“Brexit has divided families, parties, parliament and the country”*. (MacAskill et al., 2019 October 19, Reuters.com)

It seems that during the previous months the people of UK lived historic moments and the Brexit “deal or no-deal” could shape the fate of the United Kingdom. *“Democracy seems to be a tragic regime”,* according to Castoriadis (2010, p. 193), and there is no happy ending in its way throughout the history of the communities. Thucydides gives two examples of the Athenians’ *hubris* (*hybris* is a Greek word which means transgressive excess, exaggerated self-pride that defies the norms of human behavior or challenges the gods’ will) referred to actions that humiliated the victims or which were merely brought the downfall or the retribution of *nemesis*, during the Peloponnesian War: the defeats of the Athenians in 413 in Sicily and 406 in Arginusae (*Thucydides*, 6.1, 6). There have been all these huge emancipatory movements for centuries Castoriadis (2010). *Hubris* exists where self-limitation is the only “norm,” where “limits” are transgressed which were nowhere defined (Castoriadis, 1991).

6. Corinthians criticize the two major ways of political thinking in UK

In the 1st book of the Histories (1.70), Corinthian people demonstrate the differences between the Spartans and Athenians’ way of living:

“[2] For they [the Athenians] love innovation and are swift to devise and also to execute what they resolve on. But you [the Spartans] on the contrary are only apt to save your own, not devise anything new, nor scarce to attain what is necessary. [3] They again are bold beyond their strength, adventurous above their own reason, and in danger hope still the best. Whereas your actions are ever beneath your power, and you distrust even what your judgment assures, and being in a danger never think to be delivered. They are stirrers, you studies; they love to be abroad, and you at home the most of any. [4] For they make account by being abroad to add to their estate; you, if you should go forth against the state of another, would think to impair your own. (...) [6] and as for their bodies, they

use them in the service of the commonwealth as if they were none of their own; but their minds, when they would serve the state, are right their own. (...)" [Thucydides (1.70). Thomas Hobbes (translation), 1843]

Thucydides portrays two different ways of living, the democratic (Athenians) versus oligarchic (Spartans): The Athenians are innovative, having celerity in execution; they dare beyond their strength, extremely adventurous, and they hope the best when in danger; instigators, they love to live abroad to add estate and fortune. They judge and decide rationally using their own minds as a service of the commonwealth. The Spartans prefer the simple way of living, they attain what is necessary; they act beneath their power, they distrust even their judgment assures. They love to live at home and even they are not very keen on travelling abroad they could hazard their own fortune. Ober (2009) portrays schematically the Corinthian assessment of the 'modern' (5th century BC) Athenian exemplary in the context of Thucydides' narrative:

| I. 'Modern' Athens: Strong performance | II. Traditional Sparta: Weak performance | III. Negative side of Athenian 'modernity' |
|--|---|---|
| Agility • Speed • Innovation • Flexibility/versatility across domains | Clumsiness • Slowness • Conservatism • Domain-specific expertise | Decision gridlock, as a result of too much information, conflicting information |
| Ambition • Hard work • Risk taking • Future orientation | Complacency • Laziness • Risk averse • Past orientation | Rashness, failure to calculate downside risk. Over-ambitious Leadership |
| Common-ends seeking • Public goods • Long-term goals | Narrow, short-terms self-interest seeking by groups and individuals | Free-riding, factionalism |

Nobody could claim that there are certain similarities between the ancient Greek political conservatism or the Democratic Party and the contemporary homonym ones. Generally we can only find common modes and ways of thinking between us, as citizens, and ancient Athenians or Spartans according to the previous part of Thucydides' Histories.

In UK as for the recent general election of the 12th of December the Conservative Party stands for Mr. Johnson's "do or die" decision. His party anticipates having the majority in the new Parliament to start the "get Brexit done" policy. The Labour party would like to renegotiate PM's Brexit deal and put it to a new referendum, like the Remainers of SNP party prefer. The Liberal Democrats wanted to cancel Brexit if they won on 12 December. Democratic Unionist Party want Brexit, the Independent Group for Change are Remainers etc. All these parties mentioned above were ready to expose the valuable future of the UK's people to danger or even harm on day one after the general election. But nobody could ensure the voters whether the Brexit could help or harm the UK in the future. The political parties have indications of their own will according to their traditional and/or contemporary beliefs. They hope that their decision could lead UK to

good outcomes, but their decision could not be based on a sure knowledge basis. Instead of avoiding the discomfort of bad outcomes how ready they are to welcome total failure in the future from the choices they make? What is the end they divide UK people to Brexiteers vs. Remainers? The way parties stand on Brexit is not a matter of gambling for the next Parliament leadership; it is a matter of UK's or even EU's survival.

Back to the narration of Thucydides [1.70, 6], the Athenians are ever risking that their judgment denies them to venture on; the Spartans hesitate to follow the sure indications of their own judgment and will. Furthermore the Athenians give their lives just as much as the Spartans for their city-state, but the Athenians use their intelligence in the service of their city, and for that end they cultivate their minds, whereas the Spartans neglect them (Marchant, Commentary on Thucydides, book 1).

"[4] Here, therefore, give a period to your slackness and by a speedy invasion of Attica, as you promised, relieve both Potidaea and the rest, lest otherwise you betray your friends and kindred to their cruelest enemies, and lest we and others be driven through despair to seek out some other league. [5] Which to do were no injustice neither against the Gods, judges of men's oaths, nor against men, the hearers of them. For not they break the league who being abandoned have recourse to others, but they that yield not their assistance to whom they have sworn it. But if you mean to follow the business seriously, we will stay; [6] for else we should do irreligiously, neither should we find any other more conformable to our manners than yourselves. [7] Therefore, deliberate well of these points, and take such a course that Peloponnesus may not by your leading fall into worse estate than it was left unto you by your progenitors." [Thucydides (1.70). Thomas Hobbes (translation), 1843]

7. Concluding remarks

As of the "get Brexit done or not" case, the UK government (until December, 2019) and the majority of the opposition party both agreed that Brexit will happen but there are millions of people in the UK who are Remainers demanding the Brexit process to be halted. In addition, there is a group called "the People's vote" who "are calling for the public to have the final say on the Brexit deal" (Hunt & Wheeler, 2018). Many politicians do not want another referendum because they argue that the British people have already decided and have clearly voted to leave the EU, others prefer general election in the UK. In conclusion, according to the final results of the EU Referendum (2016), leave won the majority of votes (by 52% to 48%), but this result does not reflect exactly the will of the UK voters, because people weren't told about the Brexit consequences in 2016. Democracy entails understanding, knowledge and consciousness of what you are voting for and what do you stand for.

To be realistic it is very important for EU countries to have leaders who have been taught and learnt history and philosophy of the political thinking. But, accurately, it is more important to understand that always "*the state teaches a man*", just like the ancient *paideia* (see "Pericles' funeral oration", in the beginning of this paper) and *polis* teach how

to become a conscious political animal, instructing people to think and act like real citizens (Simonides, quoted by Plutarch, *Moralia* 784b, In Campbell, 1991, p.517). Democracy needs social cooperation and democratic management of useful knowledge by the citizens, so that to give them the enhanced capacity to decide efficiently for the future of the state. In our opinion, Thucydides would rather have recommended a second referendum and not general election to be held before the UK leaves irrevocably the EU.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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