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Just as in nature, where the isolation of small island populations results in the evolution of features in miniature, some academic sub-disciplines and methodologies develop into forms suited to their own specialised context, fascinating but bewildering to outsiders. Straussian political philosophy, especially as evidenced through the re-reading of classical texts, displays such traits. Its intricate products, of which this is an interesting example, participate in a dialogue that can seem closed off to other methodological traditions, and reluctant to engage with them except to dismiss them. Thucydides’ histories have long been a key text for Straußians, and shifting the accepted view of this key author would be a major evolutionary step.

There are, therefore, two distinct questions to ask of this book; firstly, what does it contribute to the Straussian tradition of political philosophy, and secondly, what does it have to offer the wider academic world, whether that of political theory or of classical scholarship and ancient history?

Nichols makes a provocative claim about this key text, following the Straussian tradition in revising the master’s assessment of Thucydides (as noted at p. 48, n. 50, on Strauss’ own corrections of his earlier work on Thucydides), but offering a new direction for that tradition, one perhaps more in tune with contemporary political interests (if the Straussian project can be contextualised in such a way). Taking Strauss’ insight that the histories are organised around the exploration of abstract concepts and universals, she suggests that freedom is the key concept at play in the histories, elaborating a point that underlies Strauss’ own analysis of the author as a philosophical historian, and the identification of the Athenian empire as a project freely undertaken. This is not a cautious re-treading of the footsteps of past masters, but a bold new direction for the Straussian reader of Thucydides, based on an ebullient re-evaluation of Thucydides’ own project in writing his histories.

At times Nichols’ confidence in explicating the motives of one of historiography’s more reticent authorial personas (as noted on p. 181) seems misplaced; can one really claim, as she does in her opening statement, that Thucydides has a ‘commitment to the cause of freedom’ (p. 1), and that he ‘himself is taking freedom as his cause’ (p. 2)? This interpretation strains the more familiar reading that Thucydides is exploring the constraints that previous freely made choices have placed upon the present and future action of his characters; these perhaps emerge as the ‘limits and dangers that arise in [freedom’s]
defense’ (p. 3). Through her rather dense and occasionally disjointed reading of Thucydides, Nichols concludes that he demonstrates that some limits must be set on freedom for it to be an achievable goal. Once the opening fanfares have subsided, this is an argument for a change of emphasis in the Straussian reading of the text, rather than the major departure that was initially threatened.

Strauss’ reading of Thucydides in *The City and Man* (1964) accepts that Thucydides is working his way through the darkness of the non-ideal city, ‘immersed in political life at its most intense’, showing us ‘harsh grandeur, ruggedness and even squalor’ (p. 139). He emphasises Thucydides’ exploration of contrasting political characters in extreme circumstances, under pressure from the constraints of *dikē* and *anankē*. If Thucydides succeeds as a political philosopher rather than a political historian, it is because he abstracts universals from his dark materials, enabling the reader to understand that a sacred ideal city underlies the less attractive reality.

Nichols’ focus on freedom promises to deliver a more optimistic reading of Thucydides than that of Strauss, or even Clifford Orwin with his emphasis on Thucydides’ humanity, downplaying the importance of *anankē*, compulsion and constraint. But freedom is a complex and contested concept, and with other methodologies, one might expect some kind of *Begriffsgeschichte* of freedom, both in current scholarship and in the ancient Greek context. That ‘freedom’ means different things in different contexts and for different ideologies is a familiar theme for non-Straussian political theorists; they might express worries about slipping between liberty ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ (with Constant), or wonder whether the collective freedom of the Greek polis can be aligned with contemporary models, negative, republican or positive. (Readers looking for an account of Thucydides’ treatment of freedom in its historical and historiographic context will find it addressed in Melina Tamiolaki’s 2010 monograph, *Liberté et esclavage chez les historiens grecs classiques*, a book that Nichols does not cite.) Nichols does acknowledge the Greek distinction between freedom at the level of the polis and at the level of the individual (p. 3), around which Tamiolaki organised her account, but loses sight of it after the introduction, after which different senses and aspects of freedom tend to be conflated and collapsed into a Straussian universal. Thucydides’ authorial ‘freedom’ to pursue digressions in his text (pp. 169-79) and the ‘freedom’ from constraint exemplified by the Athenians at Melos (pp. 114-120) are not quite the same thing (Nichols does, however, note the non-metaphorical slavery facing the Melians, but could have explored this sense of un-freedom further).

Perhaps the most positive consequence of Nichols’ emphasis on freedom is the opportunity it provides to re-evaluate key Thucydidean characters,