

Association of Ancient Historians, Princeton University, May 5, 2007

Fellow Ancients and likable colleagues:

When I was invited to interrupt your dessert and your pleasant conversations, I thought I'd better have something to say. Otherwise I'd just be a nuisance. So I opened my copy of Thucydides, knowing that author would never fail me. What a mind he had for the understanding of history! Everywhere in his work there's something wonderful. I could be sure I could pick out a page at random and find something to get me going. Here, for instance, we have him on page 389 telling us about that famous defection of Alcibiades (5.46.4ff.):

"Alcibiades now came forward and inflamed and stirred up the Spartans by speaking as follows: -- 'I am forced to speak to you of the prejudice with which I am regarded...' -- and so on.

You remember the moment. He'd been suspected by his fellow Athenians of wild impiety and conspiracy to overthrow the *demos*. They'd impeached him and he fled to Athens' enemies.

To explain such a remarkable event, Thucydides puts a long speech into the man's mouth -- and I won't go into the question, quite unanswerable, whether it is the truth or a fiction. It represents what the historian thought was to be believed. It tells us about motivation, which is my target. In it, Alcibiades explains how he had long been a friend to the Spartans, but they had "dissed" him, they had not honored him as he had reason to expect according to customary moral norms. He so resented this *atimia* that he joined his countrymen in the war against Sparta. He had acted out of a sense of justice, he says: *dike*. Nevertheless, he concedes that Spartans may have felt some rage or passion against him, some *orge*. They may feel he did wrong. If they do, he wants to talk them out of it. At the same time, he wants to explain how it is that he has turned against his own country.

Well, the explanation for that is the action of the Athenian mob, the *ochlos* as he calls it, misled by wicked politicians. They have inflicted on him an injustice, an *adikema*. an action contrary to *dike* (92.4); so he has been un-citied, deprived of his *polis*, unjustly, *adikos*. He wants to regain that city in any way he can, impelled by longing, strong desire, *epithymia*. Only, the *polis* he loves -- he calls himself a *philopolis* -- must be the one that he once knew, in which a *demos* rules as a *demos* should, according to moral norms, and is led by such men as himself. Notice how the speech that begins with the inflaming of the audience is shot through with words of feeling, and the feelings arise from values, and they energize the speaker. They supply the motive for the individual in Thucydides as they do for whole communities -- the Athenian *demos* or the Spartans listening to Alcibiades.

To digress for a moment, however: when I say -- in tribute to Thucydides -- that he'll give you a start even if you pick out a passage at random, of course I'm telling the truth. He will. Why would you doubt me? Aha! you weren't born yesterday. You've been around, you know the scholarly tricks by which, with little or no danger of being shown up, the scholar can show off. "At random"! Who ever offered anything that way? Far too risky. You know very well that anyone claiming this actually hunted through the text in his hands, and found only one

passage that could serve the purpose of his otherwise foolish conjecture; so he pushes it at his readers with a cute little "e.g." in front of it, *exempli gratia*, which, being Latin, no one can argue with, just as scholars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries said whatever foolish thing they wanted to in their text and then added a footnote that proved it, the footnote reading simply "q.v.c" -- which you may not be familiar with. You never see it today. It was a usage misused or abused, and exposed, and alas, long ago abandoned. *Q.v.c.* meant *quibusdam veteribus codicibus*, telling the reader that the needed proof will be found in -- as the Latin says -- "certain ancient bookes". Who then could doubt the scholar's argument? His defense was in LATIN! and the books were ANCIENT.

To gain the same force in argument we still make a show of the Greek and Latin that nobody else knows, unless they're in the club. What a Masonic lodge we live in, we practitioners of classical historiography! We use these dead languages to set ourselves apart, to distinguish who's one of us. The languages are our armor against the rest of the world, we fight our battles in them. They are who we are. So naturally I referred to "opening my text of Thucydides". Did you notice, "my" text? You can almost see in my hand that well-thumbed tattered Teubner text with much marginal annotation in tiny writing, and my excited comments also on the *conspectus siglorum* in the preface or *praefatio*. And a moment ago, I proved my membership in the club by dropping a few words of the Greek into my quoting of the passage, too. I was not -- I am not -- such a beginner as to tell you, straight out, I was reading from the Modern Library translation of 1934.

Let me, however, return to the text for an illustration of how to handle group or national motivation. Here we have at page 310:

"at the request of Nicias" (that's how this page begins, in mid-sentence) -- "at the request of Nicias, who feared to return without having accomplished anything and to be disgraced; as was indeed his fate, he being held the author of the treaty with Sparta. When he returned, and the Athenians heard that nothing had been done at Sparta, they flew into a passion, and deciding that faith had not been kept with them -- *euthys de orges eichon, kai nomizontes adikeisthai...* they ... made a treaty"

This was the treaty to enroll new allies and resume fighting. And this is how the Peloponnesian war took a second deep breath, and went on.

I notice in this account, just as in the treatment of Alcibiades, the words in Greek, *orge*, "passion" or sometimes more specifically "anger", and *dike*, "justice". As to *orge*, its presence was essential to Thucydides' inquiry, because, through his observation of this passion, his analysis could penetrate into the depths of causation. That depth is what he reveals and reports. But how did he know that *orge* gripped the Athenians? We suppose he was personally present at the Athenians' debate that led to the new treaty and the resumption of war. Or it's the same thing if he learned about it from someone else who was there. *Orge* could be known to the observer by people's actions, including demeanor and words spoken within a given situation. No Athenian, it's safe to say, stood up and said, those Spartans are bastards and I hate them, I am furious at them. No, nobody said that any more than some citizen or senator today would express himself in such words about some important, controversial matter. Tone of voice, however, and the shading of vocabulary would reveal what lay behind the

sentiments being expressed. We have no trouble measuring emotion, nor did Thucydides. We know.

To a still deeper level of understanding, beneath *orge*, we also have access thanks to Thucydides. Passion was felt by the Athenians from injury. Feelings is where the action is. Injury was felt from a breach in tolerable behavior, meaning whatever people thought was just and civilized and promised to them by the social contract -- in short, *dike*. And *dike* -- what shall we call *dike* but a moral value? A people's value system is defined and activated by feelings. Exactly there is my first point, the first of two: a value system is defined and activated by feelings.

Feelings take us not just into the angry heart of Alcibiades -- not just into the Athenian *ecclesia* -- but into the citizens' very heart or the gut or wherever else in our anatomy the center of feeling lodges. And here I remind you of the discovery by Richard B. Onians in his work of 1953, that, for Homer, the soul was in one's knees. Extraordinary! You've all read this fine work, Onians on knees. But what perhaps you haven't considered is the question, whether Homer was perhaps right? That's one of the things I really don't know. But it is a digression.

Now, not just Thucydides but all ancient historians take his approach to motive and cause. Were they right? I may be allowed to refer to my book of a few years ago, titled FEELINGS IN HISTORY ANCIENT AND MODERN. I would sound ridiculous praising my own work but there's no harm in confessing, this one is easily my favorite. I start it with Thucydides and give him some of the ten thousand pages he really deserves, and then I move on to other ancient historians, and so into the subject of motivation, where these writers have a lot to teach us. They assume that events of significance, meaning those actions that jerk us out of our ordinary paths into some new path, individually or as collectivities -- those actions originate in strong feelings. They don't originate in straight-line calculations of material benefit.

Granted, we may calculate how to attain the objectives toward which our feelings direct us -- toward revenge or adventure or profit or love of our country. Modern psychology accepts this calculation, this mental activity. We call it cognitive as opposed to affective. But so far as modern psychology is concerned, even the cognitive is affective. How so? We figure out how to proceed to our objective, we envision it, we assess how it would feel -- let me repeat, how it would feel -- and then we pursue that objective, or not, depending on just that feeling. The process may take a fraction of a split second -- it would not feel good to be burned to death, for instance -- or it may take weeks and weeks. Still, it is basically emotional or affective in its operations. The fact can be shown in lab experiments which I don't need to go into.

Just to be up-to-date, here from the New York Times six weeks ago is a primatologist from Emory University, Professor Frans de Waal, telling us (3/20/07 F3), "Human behavior derives above all from fast, automated, emotional judgments, and only secondarily from slower conscious processes... However much we celebrate rationality, emotions are our compass." So then: if de Waal is right, we feel our way toward what we do; you and I today don't think our way there. No more did the actors in the past. Thinking is a choice of means to an end, not a choosing of ends in themselves. So the historian today has to feel

like the actors if he wants to understand them. Call this the doctrine of feelings, if you will.

Beyond that, now, a second proposition -- starting from the assumption that significance in history must involve lots and lots of people. Surely that's beyond question. Next, I apply the doctrine of feelings. I ask, Can we identify and understand the feelings of the masses that drive change? Let me repeat: "understand the feelings of the masses that drive change". Modern historians can do this. They have the sources. But can we in ancient history do so likewise?

I approach this through another digression. Back in the 1950s when I was in graduate school there was a fellow, Dick, a graduate student with me, maybe a year ahead of me, and one of those types that always knows what's in and what's buzz and where the profession is at. He told me he was focusing on prosopography. First time I'd ever heard the word. What was this excellent thing? It was what Roman historians, first in Germany and then in Britain led by Ronald Syme, had turned into the mainstream of historical inquiry. Everyone was into it. First, the students of the Roman Republic, then of the Empire. But what did we end up getting out of fifty years of prosopography? We got the fasti, and who married the third cousin of the adoptive son of some Cornelius, and who got elected to the Arval Brethren, and who was suffect consul, and who was greatly honored in the court of Marcus Aurelius. Call it "celebrity" history, the ancient equivalent of People Magazine, Ted Turner, Donald Trump, Jennifer Lopez, all those glittery folks. So important! We only think their ancient equivalents were important because they tell us so. They and no one else produced the historical record. How can we contradict them? Besides, they are all so ancient, so classical! Why not go with their flow? Yes, yes! that was the answer back in the 1950s and for decades afterwards. Yes! Prosopography!

I'm not saying the elite strata are like stage furniture, just a part of the setting or landscape, like their estate tenants and their slaves and urban artisans and commercial folk. No. The elite can initiate significant changes in the population and history of which they are a tiny part. Of course they can. Caesar could, Constantine could. But how? By reaching down to touch and enlist the masses. The apparent exceptions prove the rule. It takes lots and lots of people to produce anything we can call significance.

And this is why historiography as it is practiced in the most approved, the most modern fashion, spends so much time and effort on what the mass of any population respond to, what their expectations are, what they think is right and proper, what their civilization is. It is with those values that their leaders must engage in order to lead. So, for example, if you want to understand the Russian revolution, you have to spend as much time on the society and rules of life among the peasantry under the Czars, as on the violence that overthrew the Czars. This is how Orlando Figes handles his subject. At one point he reminds his readers of what he's doing. "History," he says, "has long ceased to be the record of the achievements of extraordinary men: we are all social historians now."

You can say that we too in ancient history have turned ourselves into various sorts of social scientists in recent decades, looking at "culture" in a German sense, and way-of-life questions in an anthropological sense, and multipersonal intercommunication in a sociological sense. We too have our studies of the

family, women's history, neighborhood patterns in cities, tabus and shame, attitudes toward money or sex or popular entertainment or aggression, the prevailing sense of style, of justice, of respect, of what is due to a beggar, a neighbor, a stranger, a child, a rich man, a spouse, an adulteress or an adulterer.

True, we study such subjects. But notice, they are treated as stage furniture, in an antiquarian fashion -- not as dynamic elements in historical change. This would be OK for social scientists, but for historians -- for us, change is the target of study *par excellence*. The amount and speed of change defines significance. Our natural view as historians is diachronic. So all those subjects of study that I just named are fair game for us. They do have a history, they do change, even if change is all slo-mo or, as the French say, *de longue durée*.

Can they be studied? Are there any dynamic elements discoverable in them, which would make for history?

I once made an attempt at such a study, narrowly focussed on judicial savagery. Of course everybody thinks of ancient savagery in the context of gladiatorial combats. In fact, however, as these performances got too expensive and faded away, displays of bloodshed in public were becoming more common than ever, everywhere. Cruelty that we will conventionally call medieval took hold for a thousand years. How did this ever happen? Because this was, or represented, a receding of empathy, it seemed to me an excellent case study, surely of interest to historians.

I may say, incidentally, that the lack of any study on the transition of what we may loosely call "civilization", from the ancient world to the Dark Ages and beyond, seems to me perfectly amazing, though I do think I can explain it.

A digression, however. Excuse it. I return to my second proposition: that we apply an empathetic approach to changes across time -- changes touching entire populations.

Among the possibilities that occur to me -- and I can suggest several beyond judicial savagery -- there is one that quite intrigues me. You can pick up a hint of it from Paul Veyne of the Collège de France -- in my view, the best teacher we have had, over the past fifty years, about both the Greeks and the Romans. In *L'empire gréco-romain, The Greco-Roman Empire*, he points to one tiny clue in the Latin word *malignus*. He reproaches his dictionaries for failing to notice that the word means not only "malicious" or "hostile", but also "money-grabbing", "mean about money". He sees implications here which are useful to some particular point he's making; but we can look at the word more broadly.

We can ask, how did people feel about someone else's handling of money? What provoked hostility between classes? Would it be a rich person who was hurt by money-grubbing and reacted indignantly? No, it would be someone in a more vulnerable class. But there was a time when *malignus* meant nothing but malicious and hostile, and then it took on this second meaning. The Latin language reflected a social fact, a value set upon it, and the attendant feelings, which were indignant. We can read people's minds in semantic change. We can better understand the general structure of morals at a given time -- the prevailing sense of right and wrong within which people identified *dike* or good conduct, or the opposite.

Which people? Where do semantic shifts take place, or take hold? I don't know. Still, I assume that this shift was the work of the commercial and artisan classes, especially in Rome itself. I learn from James Adams that this sort of question isn't studied. It's history of meaning. What is apparently studied is not semantics but morphology and orthography. [ck Dionisotti, JRS 1982].

Or take the Latin word *simplex* (and here I get into material I've covered in 1993). Once it meant "straightforward", "candid", "transparent". By Cicero's day it had taken on the sense of "naive" -- which in English also has two meanings, and the bad one has gradually come out on top. The history of *simplex* shows us a shift in values, from the mid-second century B.C. to the late first. Someone who was *simplex* was no longer admired. He was a fool. Admiration for cleverness and deceit appears in Roman commanders' conduct of foreign affairs. And that's history. The word is useful to us.

Again, Latin *elegans*, meaning "picky and pleasure-loving" in a bad sense, in the second century B.C., but later, "discriminating and tasteful". Romans had learned how to enjoy themselves, you could say. Notice the term "learn". The Greeks got to them. The Romans went to school at the Greeks' feet -- or knees, perhaps, as Homer might have said. Their feelings about pleasure and its permissibility had changed and so the language changed. The boundaries of shame or disapproval had changed. Behavior changed. All that was important.

One more illustration: Latin *suffragium* -- once meaning "vote" but coming to mean also the exercise of patronage in purely personal affairs. De Ste Croix pointed this out, long ago. The change shines some light on political behavior and the perception of it. From a later period we have Latin *solemnis* and *solemnia*, which in a particular context no longer meant "usual" but rather, "bribes". Doesn't this tell you a lot about attitudes toward official conduct? -- and about what was acceptable, about values, the moral world, *dike*? Semantic shift is very slow and gradual but it is undeniable.

Finally, arriving at the later Roman empire, we have bits of Greek: *makarios* means "happy and well-off" but it also means "martyred" and for that reason blessed. We have *philosophia* meaning "disciplined intellection" but also, by the turn of the fourth century A.D., "ascetical practice" including the resolute denial of intellection and even of literacy. We have bishop Evagrius, in contemplation of someone of such practices, a *philosophos*, exclaiming, "Blessed, *makarios*, is he who has attained infinite ignorance!"

Slo-mo history may not look like where the action is. No, the action is in wars and politics. Historians in antiquity from Thucydides on through Plutarch and Procopius certainly saw it that way. But as Figes reminds us, that's not where scholarly action is today, because that's not where the unexplored and profitable questions are the most obvious -- questions like, Where did the Dark and Middle Ages come from, and how and why?

Are there useful approaches to such questions? Would semantic, lexical evidence help much? It seems so indirect a means of measuring beliefs and values among the great voiceless majority of the ancient population. How useful can it be? It would take a classicist to say. Myself, I don't know.

