

ΤΟ ΕΥΔΑΙΜΟΝ ΤΟ ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΟΝ, ΤΟ ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΟΝ ΤΟ ΕΥΨΥΧΟΝ.

Facing the gathering storm of our era

A dark cloud has been gathering over Europe, and indeed over the whole world, since 2014, or perhaps even earlier. The well-prepared Russian invasion of Crimea took European governments by surprise. Moreover, it was only the beginning of a series of ominous events orchestrated by Moscow in other countries, particularly in Europe and America. Worst of all, it didn't succeed in shaking us out of our complacency, indecision and political short-sightedness. Eight years later, the full-scale and unprovoked war against Ukraine has revealed the truth, even to those who were still in denial, about what exactly is happening on our continent.

Russia's reckless megalomania is not a phenomenon confined to that country and therefore isolated in Europe. It is a sign of a deeper and universal malaise. The mentality and methods of the Russian regime have found supporters all over the world. One might ask what the autocratic kleptocracy of Russia, the theocratic intolerance of countries that finance terrorism around the world or the grotesque communist dictatorship of North Korea have in common. The answer is simple. The utter contempt for human dignity, the absolute refusal to perceive the human being as a value. It goes hand in hand with hatred for those who defend these principles, for the countries that struggle every day to be democratic, and for the effort to build a whole international system, based on the rule of law, which has cost so many lives, so much blood and so many sacrifices for humanity over the centuries.

For us Greeks, the menace to freedom and democracy, to fundamental human rights such as the right to life, to dignity and to prosperity, is not just a political choice, an economic necessity or an ideological position, as it is for most European and American peoples. For us, these values have a Greek birth certificate. Formulated in Greece, adopted by Rome, enshrined in the original teachings of Christianity, asserted by the Renaissance, proclaimed by the Enlightenment, reaffirmed in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they have fundamentally shaped the political, economic and cultural evolution of the world as we know it.

This is not the first time the world has faced a similar threat. All the more reason why we should have known better how to read the signs. In 1933, when Hitler came to power and began to implement his aggressive policies, Western

European governments showed complacency and lack of judgement, culminating in the Munich Agreement, similar to the inability of many political leaders today to learn from history. The signs of the gathering storm are there. Unprovoked use of military force, heinous crimes of war, constant threats against Western countries, including nuclear threats, physical elimination of opposition leaders, continued policy of ethnic cleansing in occupied Ukrainian territories and, of course, efforts to subvert European and American elections, influence our political parties, exploit pacifist tendencies, manipulate our news agencies, exacerbate our internal or external problems and spread Internet propaganda on a frightening scale. All this combined with an ideological attack on democracy, which is denounced as a failed and irrelevant political system.

In this respect, recent history could help us to identify the threat we now face on a global scale. History should also give us an idea of how to deal with it, avoiding the mistakes made almost a hundred years ago, mistakes that cost so many lives around the world between 1933 and 1945. But there is another answer to our conundrum, which is much more than an empirical conclusion based on a specific precedent. Rather, it is an attempt to identify values that transcend time, to understand the reasons why human beings inevitably seek a life of freedom. Once again we must turn to history, albeit a much older history, but this time to a particular historian who so succinctly answered the question 25 centuries ago. Of course as classicists, you know better than I, that Thucydides is no ordinary historian. A keen observer of human nature, he theorises like a true Greek, and often introduces philosophical observations, referring to principles that guide human behaviour, not so much as individuals, but as groups, peoples, ethnicities, and even in a broader sense, simply as human beings.

"You must now aspire to the example of these men," writes Thucydides in his second book on the history of the Peloponnesian War. He is referring to a commemoration of the dead Athenians, and it is one of the greatest political statesmen, Pericles, who is speaking. And he goes on to say: *"Understand that happiness is freedom and freedom is courage, and do not shrink from the dangers of war. For it is no real sacrifice for the disheartened to lay down their lives, for they have already given up hope. Rather, the best sacrifice comes from those who risk their continued happiness and have the most to lose if they fail"*. Το εὐδαιμον το ελευθερον το δ' ελευθερον το εὐψυχον. In these three words, Thucydides sums up what was at stake in that era, and what is at stake in our era and in every era, when facing an enemy that wants to destroy democracy and freedom. At the same time, he guides us to find the path to freedom through courage.

Some studies of this famous passage, so difficult to translate, find it strange that Thucydides uses neuter adjectives instead of nouns. Το Εὐδαιμον instead of

ευδαιμονία, Το ελεύθερον instead of ελευθερία. These studies claim that this is a stylistic choice. I think it is rather an attempt to rise above the level of facts by defining concepts in their full scope, without being too philosophical, but rather seeing them from a more practical angle, which has to do with the role they play in human history. The one is not simply a condition for the other. In fact, these concepts are so inextricably linked that they practically overlap. He wants to emphasise as much as possible the connection between happiness in the full range of the term and political freedom in the full range of the term, as well as between political freedom and courage in the face of the dangers of war. What he is really trying to do by using this particular syntax is to establish a relationship of identity between concepts. Thucydides uses the realm of logic to lead us to an understanding of human behaviour with this essential, if simple, sentence.

Let me say at this point that I have always disliked the distinction between ancient and modern Greek. To my mind, there is only one Greek language that has been spoken for 30 centuries. A living, breathing language that evolves over time like any living organism. Being Greek is not a question of race or DNA. Language is the basic foundation of our national identity, transcending time, religion, statehood or political systems. On the one hand, I remember my father praying in Greek, using the exact words drafted by the first ecumenical synod of 325 AD in Nicaea, a few kilometres outside Constantinople. The "Nicene Creed", common to all Christians. On the other hand, every time I attend an Easter mass in a tiny white church on a Greek island, I am never sure whether it is Christ or Dionysus who is being resurrected. And when my school teachers referred to the concepts of good and evil, they always said το καλό, το κακό, or for just and unjust το δίκαιο, το άδικο, using these neuter adjectives and never the corresponding nouns. That is why this syntax of Thucydides seems so natural to me, and why I cannot agree that it is just an elaborate stylistic choice.

Courage as the basis of freedom, and above all freedom as the basis of happiness or prosperity, is not just an idea we find in one famous author. These principles permeate ancient Greek thought. We find them in Plato's philosophy, in the tragedies of Aeschylus or the comedies of Aristophanes, in the speeches of Demosthenes, in the famous epigrams of Simonides, in the epic poetry of Homer, even in the lyric poetry of Pindar. They correspond to a very fundamental value which lies at the heart of Greek civilisation, which was in fact its most original innovation, namely the concept of perceiving the human being as the supreme value. In politics, in art, in knowledge, in ethics. Undoubtedly, the necessary condition of the anthropocentric principle was the freedom of the individual.

It is this concept of the value of the human being, and therefore the desire for individual freedom, as a basis of ευδαιμονία (prosperity or happiness) for every individual, that was destined to prevail overwhelmingly throughout the world. It released human creative potential, opened new fields for science and research, generated new avenues for trade and commerce, unleashed innovation for artistic creation, led to new institutional ways of improving our quality of life through the rule of law and political systems based on equality and justice. It is no mystery that this principle lies at the heart of the universal elements of our modern civilisation.

To all those who oppose our Western democracies and point to our faults and shortcomings, I would like to point out their utter inability to explain the desire of most people in the world to imitate us, to live like us, to live among us. Even illiterate immigrants, trying to escape a life of oppression and misery in their countries, know deep in their hearts where they would like to find refuge. It is to Europe and America that they want to come and build a new life. As far as I know, no one dreams of moving to Russia or other authoritarian regimes. I don't think this is a coincidence. Ultimately, freedom, as the foundation of prosperity, has stood the test of time and prevailed against all odds, against tyrants and dictators, not because Thucydides understood and clearly described the specific merits of the Athenian achievements, but because he correctly identified the tendencies of human nature itself, transcending time and ethnicity.

But most importantly, it is the second part of Thucydides' logical equation that I believe is critical to remember in order to deal with our current predicament. Courage is a prerequisite for freedom. It is a virtue that is increasingly difficult to find today, even in democracies, where half-measures or inaction because of political cost and complacency are often the usual political reflexes. I remember President Zelensky in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, persistently repeating "don't be afraid, don't be afraid of threats, don't be afraid of Russia". Fear is the most natural response to threats, but it is also the worst counsel in charting the course to be followed, as Churchill points out in his History of the Second World War. It is no coincidence that throughout history, autocratic regimes have used constant threats to instill fear in their opponents and implement their ruthless policies. A quick look at the Nazi German propaganda films of 1933-39 will give you a typical example. They were designed to frighten others, paralyze resistance and lead to a policy of appeasing Hitler. And in the reaction of the democratic governments of the time, it is easy to see how the councils of prudence and restraint can become the agents of mortal danger. How the middle way, chosen out of fear or the desire for security and a quiet life, can lead directly to disaster.

It is especially in difficult times that I envy those of you who study and teach Greek literature. In such times we always need moral principles to refer to, beliefs from which we can draw strength. The study of the classics, whether Greek or Latin, provides us with an incredible range of tools for remembering our cultural identity, for reflecting on our intellectual and ideological origins. It is not about learning the grammar, syntax or vocabulary of a dead language. It is about finding conviction in times of peril, when our achievements are challenged by external or internal political, ideological or military forces. The decline of Classics in most of the Western world, both in number of students and in resources, is an unfortunate development that we must reverse. These challenging times may be an opportunity to do so.

Usually, even for those of us interested in the classics, it's hard to say for sure why the Greeks came up with the concept of human nature as the measure of all things. Why it was by the Greek civilisation that the human being was considered to be the most important value in the great scheme of things, a perception that explains, better than most other, the evolution of humankind.

The shaping of the Greek landscape has certainly played its part. Landscape is not just a collection of land, vegetation and water. It is a projection of a people's soul onto matter, defining who we are over the centuries. Tall, steep mountains, that hide what lies on the other side, capture the imagination, hundreds of islands nestled on the horizon inspire curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. Barren land and poor agriculture create an impetus for colonisation and the exploration of other places. And all these elements of nature bring man closer to his true dimensions. Above all, the difficulties of communication led to the creation of city-states. The Greeks were forced to invent all kinds of political systems in each city, that had one thing in common. They were based on the citizens, on their decisions, their labour, their ingenuity, their ability to defend their city. There was no pharaoh, no prophet, no high priest to reveal to them the supreme and unquestionable will of an all-powerful God. The individual had to take responsibility. The concept of the citizen led to civic duty and democracy.

But there is another element, of a more metaphysical nature, which might be useful to mention. A number of Greek poets and philosophers observe that in our culture an idea becomes a material element with astonishing ease. That under the clear, dry Greek light one becomes friendlier, more familiar with the universe. In this small rocky corner of the Mediterranean, concepts seem to take shape almost naturally, leading to an anthropocentric view of the cosmos. There seems to be an element of incarnation in the Greek light that transforms human laws almost into physical laws, as Heraclitus first perceived: *Ἥλιος οὐχ υπερβήσεται μέτρα. Εἰδεμῆ, Ερρινύες, μιν Δίκης επικουροὶ ἐξευρήσουσιν.* This means that not

even the sun can exceed the measure. Otherwise the Furies, the helpers of justice, will punish him. A human idea, a moral principle, becomes a natural law. Such an audacious notion is not to be found in any other culture before the Greeks.

Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides understood and responded to the elements of nature as we all do, but they built the moral and philosophical balance of their plays around the same key idea, including the terrible mechanisms of justice, hubris and nemesis, supreme moral laws that become natural laws, surpassing even the power of the gods and permeating all human destiny. When I read the first verses of Oedipus Rex, which describe the natural disasters that have befallen the city of Thebes because of the terrible crimes committed by Oedipus, and especially when I reach the famous verse “ὕβρις φυτεύει τύραννον”, which means arrogance breeds tyrants, I feel a sense of reverence for justice in the sense of an inevitable retribution that pervades both gods and men. A sense of a collective moral code in the workings of the universe.

The current situation in Europe is indeed difficult, but I feel that I should end my speech with a positive thought, which is only a natural conclusion to what I have said before. Despite the uphill struggle that democracies have to face in order to defend their freedom both abroad and within their borders, despite the political prospects in some Western countries that often seem bleak, despite those who prefer to close their eyes and ears to reality in search of easy, populist solutions, I would like to express my belief that the natural tendency of human beings towards freedom of thought, political freedom and prosperity in life will ultimately prevail. All other regimes, all other political solutions are contrary to the nature of our being. It is not by chance that the Greek model has prevailed so far. Even if authoritarianism in the East and the West is quicker in making decisions, more ruthless in implementing them and disregards any human cost, it is still the opposite of what Thucydides conceived as a regime of prosperity, το εὐδαιμον, which practically coincides with το ελευθερον, freedom. Authoritarianism is doomed to failure, sooner or later.

And so I stand before you today, in one of the oldest universities in the world, which has been a beacon of light even in times of darkness, with the sense that I am addressing some of the worthy heirs of Greek civilization, with these words of caution, but also of hope. Allow me to place them to your care, with humility.

Thank you