

The Melian Dialogue 2.0

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Abstract

The Melian Dialogue 2.0 is introduced as an expanded role-play methodology for leadership education and community organizing. Building on the traditional use of Thucydides' Melian Dialogue, the article addresses the limitations of the original exercise when applied in contexts shaped by war, displacement, and extreme power asymmetries. In response, a second role-play phase is proposed that incorporates the historical failure of the Athenian Sicilian Expedition and the subsequent reversal of power relations. In this extended format, Spartans, defeated Athenians, and the Melians engage in a trialogue or tribunal that highlights the temporal and relational dynamics of power. Observations from university seminars show that the two-part dialogue deepens participants' understanding of power as contingent and ethically charged. The approach fosters critical reflection on means and ends in political action and supports value-based, responsible uses of power in contemporary organizing and conflict-related learning contexts.

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Introduction

The “Melian Dialogue” is familiar to anyone who has participated in training by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), as well as in other organizing networks. In this role-play exercise, the goal is that participants learn how to negotiate, to anticipate the viewpoints and reactions of the opponents, and to exercise power in a responsible way. It is based on a story in ancient Greece, where Athens is regarded as the hotbed of democracy. The Melian Dialogue is a part of a book on the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C) by the ancient historian Thucydides, in which the Athenians demanded a merciless choice: surrender your independence or we will kill your men and enslave your women and children. In the training, IAF leaders and future organizers experience the difference between “having power” (as the Athenians) or “having no power” (as the Melians) and discuss how to think strategically from a vantage-point of pride and powerlessness.

Practicing this role-play showed its limitations during an organizing training in Paris in 2022. A migrant person from Syria was in the audience who had entered Europe in 2015. He remembered situations where people in Syria found themselves in negotiations and related their situation to those of the Melians. It is hard to negotiate while one side carries weapons, and the other side does not. We asked ourselves also, how would Ukrainians receive our role-play on the Melian Dialogue, given the current aggression by Russia? In reflection on this experience of the Melian Dialogue, we considered the methods of “Forum Theatre” according to Augusto Boal (1998). In this method, participants have the possibility to change their roles during a play, and members of the audience have the possibility to access the forum and replace the players.

Re-Reading Thucydides

So, we re-discussed the methods of role-plays and we reread Thucydides. We found out that the “Sicilian Expedition” of the Athenians – of which the violent occupation of the Isle of Melos was a part – was not only an exciting adventure. It failed in the end. The Athenian democracy was destroyed, and “Magna Graecia” fell into tyranny. The hubris of the Athenians was punished by Nemesis, goddess of retribution. We discovered that Thucydides critically described only the beginning of the adventure before he died. The second part of the history of the Peloponnesian War is reported by Xenophon and others. At the beginning of the war, the Athenians were on the seaway to Sicily with an imperialistic mission. They needed support from the inhabitants of the island of Melos, which was located half of the way to Sicily. The Melians were allies to the people of Sparta, which were the enemies of Athens at that time. Years after the Melian Dialogue, the Athenians were beaten in Sicily by the Spartans who followed their own imperialistic agenda in “Magna Graecia.” Thucydides tried to tell us that power is not a God-given eternal property and that it can be lost at any time. After the Athenians were defeated in Sicily, the power relations fundamentally changed: The Athenians lost their lead in the “Attic Sea Federation” and were forced to join the “Peloponnesian League” instead, surrendering to Spartan rule. This league was necessary at the time to defend Graecia against Thebes. So, years later, the Athenians found themselves in a situation where they had to fear retribution by the Spartans for their previous actions.

Creating and testing the Melian Dialogue 2.0

Therefore, we created a new, additional role-play, the Melian Dialogue 2.0. This new role-play considers the fact that the "Sicilian Expedition" ultimately failed, and the Athenians lost their power and found themselves under the rule of Sparta. The main goal of this the second play will then be to expand the reflection on power by integrating power dynamics over time and possible power shifts in the future.

The Melian Dialogue 2.0 should be played as second part after the Melian Dialogue 1.0 played and discussed. An important difference is that Part 2.0 consists of three groups or parties: the Spartans (who were in power), the Athenians (who lost their power), and the Melians (who were witnesses of the massacres which took place in Melos). The Melian dialogue is transformed into a Trialogue or a Tribunal on the Athenians. Combining Part 1.0 and 2.0 will enable the players to reflect and value the different means of power and to find a critical, value-based and ethical judgement on means and ends. In this way also, the idea of something like "International Laws" or "Universal Ethics" is anticipated. Also, the participants will learn about the difference between the Melian Dialogue and a relational conversation.

Here we briefly report about the outcomes of our experience holding a combination of the new "Two-Part-Melian-Dialogue." Students with different life-experiences participated in the role-plays in three seminars on Community Work at the University of Applied Sciences in Hannover, Germany. As preparation for Part 1, facts on beginning of the Sicilian Expedition and the intentions of the Athenians were given. A map of the Attic Sea was shown and the strategic necessity for the Athenian warships to get water and food from the Melians, who were allied to the Spartans. As preparation for Part 2, participants are informed that Athens lost their ships and thousands of soldiers and was defeated by Sparta in Sicily and they must join the Peloponnesian League against Thebes.

First seminar:

- In Part 1, the Athenians asked for wine, women and olives and the Melians said: "Ok, we can talk on wine and olives!" The differences were solved violently with weapons.
- In Part 2, the Athenians felt uncomfortable and were sure to be punished. Despite that, Sparta needed the Athenians as allies against Thebes.

Second seminar:

- In Part 1, a male student from Syria representing Athens began the dialogue with the words: "We come in Peace and ask only for wine, bread and olives. You will have no damage." The Melians agreed to give the proviant without long negotiations.
- In Part 2, a female student from Iran took the lead for Sparta and strongly demanded a price "for every single olive" the Athenians took from her Melian brothers and sisters. The Melians were rebuked because they did not show their loyalty to Sparta.

Third seminar:

- In Part 1, the Athens and Melians met and a female Islamic student from Germany negotiated unexpected successfully for Melos. The Melians would change sides and

became allies of Athens, in return this new alliance was sealed by a marriage. The Athenians returned to Athens and fetched a beautiful princess who married the handsome prince of Melos in a romantic way.

- There was no Part 2, the tribunal was skipped, because of the unexpected happy end in Part 1. This outcome was obviously influenced by a reading of parts of a medieval text on the rise and fall of civilizations one week before. It was the *Muqadimma* written by Ibn Chaldun (1332-1406), a famous historian of the Convivencia in Al Andalus. There, he described especially the role of the *Asabiya*, which justifies cohesion in tribal communities by blood relations or religion. Also in European history, we find that a union of different clans or noble families was regularly justified or consolidated by marriages.

What would Alinsky teach us?

After these more or less random outcomes of role plays some important questions on the use of power are still left unanswered. So, what was Alinsky trying to teach us?

Alinsky loved Socratic questions. A colleague in Germany read the Melian Dialogue in the light of the Ukraine War and pointed out to some parts of the Gorgias Dialogue by Plato. In this dialogue Socrates was questioning Calicles on means and ends. He concluded that people are using the means of which they think were good, but they do not really know what is good and desirable. This judgement would apply to Calicles, the Athenians, the Russians and others as well (Bauer 2022).

Alinsky's thoughts on means and ends were inspired by the outcomes of the Dewey Commission into the charges against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow trials. According to Trotsky, during a revolution the end would justify every means. Sacrifices must be accepted. Dewey contradicts this. Finally, Alinsky writes: "Not every end justifies every means. THAT PERENNIAL QUESTION 'Does the end justify the means?' is meaningless as it stands; the real and only question regarding the ethic of means and ends is, and has always been, 'Does this particular end justify this particular means?'" (Alinsky 1989 [1971], 24).

Final Thoughts

Creating a Melian Dialogue 2.0 we extended the political horizon to the wars in Syria and Ukraine. If we take the methods of the "Forum Theater" serious, we have to respect the life-experiences of the players and the audience as well. During our reflections, we did not yet touch the Palestine Question which rose up sharply on Oct. 7, 2023. Therefore, we have to discuss some additional positions before we could think to apply the Melian Dialogue to this problem.

Alinsky was a de-colonial thinker. His beloved quote "Let them call me rebel and welcome I feel no concern from it; I should suffer the misery of devils were I to make a whore of my soul...". It was taken from Thomas Paine's *Crisis*, written during the war of independence and directed against the colonial powers of Great Britain. The quote continues "... by swearing allegiance to one of whose characters is that of a sottish, stupid, stubborn worthless and brutish man." We must admit that Alinsky did not see himself as part of colonial power. In contrast, we must recognize him as someone who was fighting for independence and rebelling against stubborn and brutish men. He would never ever sell his soul to a brutish power which follows wrong ends with wrong means. He was one of those who wanted "to breathe free," as is written on the pedestal of the Statue of

Liberty. And as is written in the Declaration of Independence, he believed certain “truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. -- That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their powers from the consent of the governed.”

In the context of unsolved conflict all over the world, we cannot stop after a Melian Dialogue 1.0. We must go further to avoid a new “Melos” anywhere else and to exercise power in ethical and value-based ways of mutual respect.

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