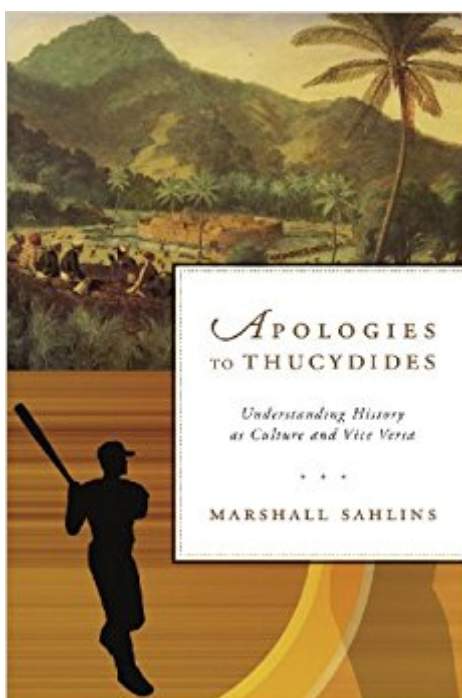


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# Apologies To Thucydides: Understanding History As Culture And Vice Versa



## Synopsis

Thucydides' classic work on the history of the Peloponnesian War is the root of Western conceptions of history—including the idea that Western history is the foundation of everyone else's. Here, Marshall Sahlins takes on Thucydides and the conceptions of history he wrought with a groundbreaking new book that shows what a difference an anthropological concept of culture can make to the writing of history. Sahlins begins by confronting Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War with an analogous "Polynesian War," the fight for the domination of the Fiji Islands (1843-55) between a great sea power (like Athens) and a great land power (like Sparta). Sahlins draws parallels between the conflicts with an eye to their respective systems of power and sovereignty as well as to Thucydides' alternation between individual (Pericles, Themistocles) and collective (the Athenians, the Spartans) actors in the making of history. Characteristic of most histories ever written, this alternation between the agency of "Great Men" and collective entities leads Sahlins to a series of incisive analyses ranging in subject matter from Bobby Thomson's "shot heard round the world" for the 1951 Giants to the history-making of Napoleon and certain divine kings to the brouhaha over Elián González. Finally, again departing from Thucydides, Sahlins considers the relationship between cultural order and historical contingency through the recounting of a certain royal assassination that changed the course of Fijian history, a story of fratricide and war worthy of Shakespeare. In this most convincing presentation yet of his influential theory of culture, Sahlins experiments with techniques for mixing rich narrative with cultural explication in the hope of doing justice at once to the actions of persons and the customs of people. And he demonstrates the necessity of taking culture into account in the creation of history—with apologies to Thucydides, who too often did not.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A challenging demonstration of the work of culture--unrelenting in criticism of abstractionism, binarism, and reductionism--and a passionate statement in defense of rigorously analytical, comparative and historically sensitive ethnography that explains the particular in a way which resonates with immediate and general significance. Here Sahlins critically synthesizes major lines of thought in his own discipline--approaches in which he has often taken a leading role--and pushes towards new horizons of understanding. Just when all seemed lost, Sahlins has hit a home run not just for anthropology but for the social sciences generally. This is his best yet." (Bruce Kapferer, University of Bergen)"Let us embark with Marshall Sahlins on a fascinating journey. In a truly comparative and contrastive method, Sahlins maps the territory between critical history and reflexive anthropology." (Claude Calame, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales)"Brilliant analysis, freshly and amusingly put--this is the work of a master at his best. Marshall Sahlins should apologize to Thucydides, who will never be the same for readers of this intelligent and irreverent study of how history has been constructed over the last two millennia. Squaring the circle of the individual and the collective, history and culture, it is must-read stuff for historians, anthropologists, and, indeed, anyone wishing to know the truth about the Peloponnesian War or the Polynesian War, how the Giants won the National League pennant in 1951 or why Al Gore did not become president of the United States." (Thomas R. Trautmann, University of Michigan)"This is only the foundation of Mr. Sahlins's complex book, which goes on to address questions of historical causation and agency using a wide variety of examples--including, at one point, Elian Gonzales and the 1951 New York Giants. The complete ramifications of Mr. Sahlins's argument will be appreciated best by anthropologists and historians. Even for the general reader, however, *Apologies to Thucydides* has much to offer, as an introduction to an unfamiliar culture and as a new perspective on our own." (Adam Kirsch New York Sun 2004-12-15)"Sahlins wants to make a place in historical explanation for ideas and passions as well as hunger, fear, and greed. In extended, detailed parallel histories of the Peloponnesian and Polynesian wars, he argues ingeniously in *Apologies to Thucydides* that both rivalries display a 'competition by contradiction, in which each side organizes itself as the inverse of the other.' . . . Sahlins counters with a lucid and convincing account of the 'cultural construction of the forms of human life.' If, like me, you were skeptical that the phrases 'social construction' or 'cultural construction' could ever really do a lick of honest intellectual work, you will

be pleasantly surprised. I may have made *Apologies to Thucydides* sound too formidable; it is witty as well. And there is wisdom where appropriate." — George Scialabba, *Boston Globe* (George Scialabba *Boston Globe* 2005-04-03)"No apologies needed, then, just 'thanks' to Thucydides for stimulating this creative and insightful investigation of history and culture some 2400 years after his death." (Simon Hornblower and Charles Stewart *Anthropological Quarterly*)"A demonstration of what a historiography informed by anthropology might look like. Moving easily between concrete cases and general principles, Sahlins makes a compelling argument that there is no history without culture, and vice versa. . . . As a classicist who has benefited from Sahlins's previous work, I appreciate this view of Greek history through an anthropologist's eyes. More generally, this book is a paradigm of how history and anthropology might be brought together, to the mutual enrichment of both disciplines." (William G. Thalmann *American Historical Review*)"When the history of anthropology is written . . . Marshall Sahlins will already have had his place etched in stone in the line-up of the brightest and most influential thinkers in the discipline. . . . *Apologies to Thucydides*, in many ways a culmination of his earlier works, is unswerving in its dedication to rigorous cultural comparisons, the sine qua non of anthropology. . . . So perhaps we should construct his monument now. Or better, since there will be more from Sahlins down the line, just buy the book. . . . Every future can use a large-minded past and a large-minded practitioner or two. This is a book to build on." (Ivan Brady *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*)"It would be hard to argue that the year's most ambitious, and in my opinion, — the best and most entertaining work, is Marshall Sahlins' brilliant *Apologies to Thucydides*. . . . Sahlins' attempt is to rethink the nature of historical explanation, his lifelong project, one that continues his profound and daring explorations into the ways in which history and anthropology might be thought of as overlapping, rival and complementary disciplines attempting to account for the same types of actions, events and structures." (Andrew Hadfield *Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*)"This is an important book, and a remarkable one too. It is definitely an important moment of modern reception of Thucydides outside the constituency of classicists; it is a bold and analogical study of ancient and modern history with an anthropological approach. . . . Students of classical antiquity are likely to find the whole book interesting in various respects." (Federico Santangelo *Anzeiger fuer die Altertumswissenschaft*)"The remarkable work under review by Marshall Sahlins, for which he need apologise to no one, has cleared the path of fashionable dead wood and opened the way to a history that includes culture, and it should lead to much further enterprise in the study of Pacific culture and history." (Kerry James *Australian Journal of Anthropology*)"It would be a great pity if the readership of these brilliant essays were restricted to anthropologists or to historians of Polynesia. .

. . Sahlins has raised questions that all practicing historians need to think about and has offered them some fresh answers." (Peter Burke *Journal of Modern History*) "A powerful statement on the enduring kinship of history and culture." (*South Pacific Journal of Philosophy and Culture* 2014-09-09)

Marshall Sahlins is the Charles F. Grey Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. The author of numerous books, Sahlins is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

With a title like "Apologies to Thucydides," what I was expecting was a more anthropological view on Thucydides' material. What I got was Sahlin's shaky justification for his tenuous and, dare I say, boring thesis. Within the first few pages I knew this book wasn't going to be what I was hoping for, but I stuck with it, only to be thoroughly confused at the random trains of thought expressed. It seems to me that Sahlins had a list of things to tie the Peloponnesian War to before he wrote the book, and just did whatever he could to connect them. The purpose behind this is dubious and isn't explained in a satisfying manner at all. I just fail to see the value in this book. My recommendation: don't waste your time. The book I was looking for, as far as I'm concerned, hasn't come out yet.

Marshall Sahlins uses two seemingly unrelated episodes in history to question the narrative form of historiography with which we all grew up. He compares the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Greece with the nineteenth century conflict between Rewa and Bau, two Fijian kingdoms. Both featured an expansive, sea-going empire versus a more insular, land-oriented opponent. Sahlins makes a very good case for the conflicts being driven by geography and culture, more than great men. He uses the two wars to illustrate the differences between narrative history and the more modern cultural view. He even recounts the 1951 National League pennant race between the Dodgers and the Giants to illustrate his point. Although I prefer narrative history, with its seeming movers and shakers, and its chronological descriptions of events. I have to admit that Sahlins makes very good points for "Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa" as he subtitled this book. My only real complaint, and this extends to most works of this genre, is its intensive use of sociological jargon. Some sentences are simply unintelligible to a sociologically untrained, but otherwise literate reader. That said, this is a good read, and certainly expanded my horizons.

Don't trust the negative attacks discussed about this book from anyone else. Most anthro

wannabees dispose Marshall Sahlins in the trash simply because he switched his views in anthropology over time. To me this is virtuous, because we scientists actually advocate the ability to change over time with new and interesting information and data. This is the key that separates us from belief systems - the ability to change and accept change. This book is about "agency" and "contingency." This will lose people right away unless you know something about Pierre Bourdieu and practice theory. Sahlins engages us in an "historiography," by showing us the logical connections between ancient Greek kinship systems and contemporary, yet historic, kinship relations with Bau and Rewa people and their conflict. He shows how these two 'cross-cultural comparisons' are a useful guide in understanding how an historicographic approach can benefit anthropologists, and when you illustrate how both agency and contingency can determine aleatory, stochastic chance outcomes in historic events, that the patternability to human behavior ultimately gets drawn into question. This is provocative research. He even delves into the story of Elian Gonzalez and the home run of home runs that won a World Series - all based entirely on chance outcomes that cannot be justified by statistics alone. The patterning of behavior is dependent upon holistic conditions and chance outcomes. This book... is anthropology at its best.

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