

Thucydides on Plague and Politics

In the early weeks of the coronavirus pandemic, there was a spate of articles in different media about Thucydides' description of the plague of 430 BCE in Athens. The majority of these offered no more than summaries of his account, with vague gestures towards claims made by some of his admirers about its scientific rigor and prescience (cf. Thomas 2006 on Hippocratic connections, and King & Brown 2015 on earlier receptions of the narrative). However, two publications made stronger claims for its historical and political insight, and hence the possibility of learning important lessons for the present. According to Thucydides, on these readings, Athens lost the war and its democracy was overthrown as a result of the plague, because its people and leaders were found wanting (Kelaidis 2020) and its society was fatally weakened (Zaretsky 2020) – but we can benefit from his experience, at least to recognize that we may be facing a crossroads of national destiny.

Despite suffering a terrifying (though unknown) number of deaths, Athens was not in fact overcome by disease; the military defeat and political upheaval that these authors attribute to the plague occurred over twenty-five years later. But in any case such readings misunderstand Thucydides' project; he aimed not to predict the future in crude terms, but to understand the underlying causes of events on the basis of what he called 'the human thing', the tendency for people to think and act in similar ways in the same general circumstances (Hawthorn 2014). The key to learning from his account is not to identify an inevitable sequence of events that will repeat in future, but to consider what those past events reveal about patterns of human behavior. Thucydides does not, contrary to many naïve readings in political science, offer normative theories of institutions or decision-making, but rather, as Thomas Hobbes put it, makes the

reader a spectator of events in a manner that prompts reflection on underlying causes and analogies. The plague narrative, alongside (and indeed considered as a pair with) the *stasis* at Corcyra (cf. Orwin 1996) is his most important exploration of the relationship between politics in a narrow sense and the values and structures of society that ground political behavior.

Although Thucydides described the symptoms and course of the Athenian plague in gory detail – and later readers have been unable to resist the temptation of retrospective diagnosis – the most significant element of his account is its psychological dimension: the responses of the afflicted and their relatives to the disease, and the responses of the wider population to pandemic conditions. Thucydides’ narrative reveals the different roles played by fear, desire, shame, self-policing, and a sense of time horizons in establishing the ‘normal’ conditions of political life, and the impact of external shocks on these norms (cf. Wohl 2017). As in Corcyra, the main effect is to reveal and accentuate existing social fault-lines, rather than to create them *ex nihilo*; and in the case of Athens, with Pericles’ last speech, Thucydides takes the opportunity to dramatize the limited capacity of conventional politics to respond adequately to the unfamiliar situation. His plague narrative does indeed offer food for thought for contemporary society, but only if we adopt a similar approach to contingency, complexity and counterfactual possibilities rather than seeking a simple set of predictions of future developments.

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