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Reading Thucydides in a Time of Pandemic

What the Athenian historian’s insights predict about the future of our own democracy

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*Plague in an Ancient City* (circa 1650–52), Michael Sweerts (Wikimedia Commons)

Misery loves company. While Covid-19 raged outside, I remained in my study reading accounts of ancient plagues—the opening of Homer’s *Iliad*, Sophocles’s *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the enigmatic ending of Lucretius’s *On the Nature of Things*, Procopius’s account of the bubonic plague in sixth-century Byzantium.

I didn’t expect much, except a reminder that others too had been through pandemics and could write well about the experience. Then I turned to Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War* and was surprised by what I found. Reading his account of the pandemic he lived through during this war, I found, was a two-way street: Covid-19 made me stop and look more closely at his narrative, and the narrative raised questions about the full impact Covid-19 might have on our society.

THE PANDEMIC IN ATHENS

The Athenians, like many premodern people, were accustomed to persistent diseases that would flare up, take their toll, then abate, but never entirely disappear. That’s what they meant by *epidemic*. What Athens experienced beginning in 430 BCE was different: it came from overseas, struck suddenly, took a terrible toll. Thucydides was confident that it had afflicted Egypt, parts of Africa, much of the Persian empire, some Greek islands, and other cities, “especially the most populous ones.” It was, in other words, a true pandemic.

When it struck Athens, its effects were especially intense, since it hit in time of war, when people from outlying parts of Attica had crowded into the walled city to protect themselves from Peloponnesian invaders.

The disease spread rapidly, whether through respiration or physical contact is not clear, since both were likely in an often unsanitary city where social distancing was unheard of and masks were not used for medical purposes. Certainly there were no tests, therapeutics, or effective analgesics. The famous physician Hippocrates is sometimes said to have visited Athens during the pandemic; if so, he could have done little except observe the disease and its progression through those affected by it.

WHAT DISEASE WAS IT?

Thucydides never gave the disease a name, nor does any other ancient writer. For him it was just “the sickness” (*nosos*) or “the sickness-thing” (*nosema*). He knew that others sometimes called it a “plague,” but he shied away from that epic-sounding, theology-laden term.

In recent years a flourishing cottage industry has sprung up as classicists and historians of medicine have tried to identify this pandemic. Every few years a plausible article has appeared associating this disease with one familiar today: bubonic plague, typhus, typhoid, smallpox, measles, toxic shock syndrome, ergot toxin, lasa fever, viral hemorrhagic fevers similar to Ebola. The list goes on. Some scholars argue that it was a form of SARS, just as Covid-19 is, but no consensus is likely to emerge without new evidence.

In 1994 such evidence seemed to come to light, when excavators found a mass Athenian grave containing perhaps 240 bodies. A date at the time of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) seemed secure, and DNA extracted from the teeth of some of the skeletons showed signs of salmonella enterica, an organism that can cause typhoid fever.

*Eureka*! But it soon appeared that the evidence may have been mishandled in the lab; so, again, no consensus emerged.

ENTER COVID-19

Covid-19 has been a harsh teacher for those who tried to name the disease that caused the Athenian pandemic. Its lesson is that diseases are not always stable over time. New variants—beta, delta, mu, omicron—appear one after another, as the virus works its way through the Greek alphabet.

Diseases, we have learned, often come and go, changing form along the way. The “Spanish flu” (more properly the H1N1 influenza A virus), for example, raged from 1918 through early 1920 with casualties in the tens of millions, worldwide. No one could remember anything quite like it, but over time its effects became less severe. Some diseases have disappeared, notably smallpox, thanks to a major international effort. New ones have emerged: the Marburg virus in 1960, Ebola in 1976, HIV/AIDS in 1981, SARS in 2002 with its relative, Covid-19, appearing by early 2019.

The lesson is clear: diseases are not sufficiently stable over time to allow us to identify an ancient disease with one known today. The Athenian pandemic could have been a disease that has since died out or mutated. Thucydides was wise, then, to avoid pinning a name on it. That was not his goal, as he explained:

All speculation as to its origin and its causes, if causes can be found adequate to produce so great a disturbance, I leave to other writers, whether lay or professional; for myself, I shall simply set down its nature, and explain the symptoms by which perhaps it may be recognized by the student, if it should ever break out again. [tr. by R. Crawley]

He then goes on to explain why readers can feel confidence in his description: “This I can the better do, as I had the disease myself, and watched its operation in the case of others.”

Military man that he was, Thucydides liked to describe the disease using the terminology of war. It took the Athenians by surprise like an ambush. Readers of Thucydides’s battle narratives know what that means—a tactical advantage for the attackers; fear, panic, flight for those taken by surprise.

That, it appears, was where Thucydides thought his narrative could make a difference—not in naming the sickness, nor propounding a treatment for it, but by careful description, thereby warding off the demoralizing effects of surprise if the sickness or something like it should strike again, as he believed it surely would.

EFFECTS ON THE BODY

People in perfectly good health, Thucydides noted, were “all of a sudden attacked by violent heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes, the inward parts, such as the throat or tongue, becoming bloody and emitting an unnatural and fetid breath.” The disease was not static; it progressed through the body, working its way down from the head and throat, beginning with

sneezing and hoarseness, after which the pain soon reached the chest, and produced a hard cough. When it fixed in the stomach, it upset it; and discharges of bile of every kind named by physicians ensued, accompanied by very great distress. In most cases also an ineffectual retching followed, producing violent spasms.

As he continues his description of the physical symptoms, Thucydides notices a strange dichotomy. While “externally the body was not very hot to the touch … internally it burned so that the patient could not bear to have on him clothing or linen even of the very lightest description; or indeed to be otherwise than stark naked.” Those afflicted, he says, wanted nothing so much as to throw themselves into cold water; indeed, some risked death by plunging into cisterns.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

This image of frantic self-destruction is the start of a transition in Thucydides’s account from physical symptoms to the psychological toll the pandemic exacted on its victims. To be sure, the sufferings of the body are still kept in view, but with sharp attention to their consequences. With no effective therapy, survival became a matter of endurance, hanging on until the disease reached a crisis, often in the seventh or eighth day. Even then, recovery was far from certain. The sickness tended, he notes, to settle in the extremities, fingers, toes, and genitals.

At this point Thucydides shifts his word choice from physiological descriptions and military metaphors to a term (*antilepsis*) otherwise used in commercial settings, for deal making, bargaining or trading one thing for another. Most translators wiggle their way around Thucydides’s surprising use of a routine commercial term at a moment of such extreme suffering. Understandably so: what possible tradeoff or bargain could be struck when the sickness was the counterparty? Unless … in their pain and delirium verging on madness did some victims of this pandemic imagine that they could alleviate their sufferings by getting rid of an agonizing finger or a hand? Would some trade even their eyes or genitals, for remission of such suffering? The Roman poet Lucretius (c. 99–55 BCE) thought that this was exactly what Thucydides meant. Lucretius did not flinch from the idea that in their desperation victims of such a pandemic might castrate or blind themselves. He ends his Latin poem *On the Nature of Things* with a paraphrase in hexameter of Thucydides’s description of the pandemic, including these lines:

… the disease would make its way into his sinews and limbs and even into the genital parts of his body. And some in heavy fear of the threshold of death would live on, bereft of the privy parts by the knife, and not a few lingered in life without hands or feet, and some lost their eyes. So firmly had the sharp fear of death gotten hold on them.” [tr. by Cyril Bailey]

Lucretius argues that the sharp fear of death, against which his poem is directed, can in extreme circumstances drive people to horrible acts of self-mutilation. Some early Christian writers thought along parallel lines, advising their adherents, “if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out” (Matthew 5:29), or to follow the example of worshippers of Cybele who “made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12).

DELUSORY IN DURHAM

Another psychological symptom of the “sickness thing” was the “forgetfulness of everything,” so powerful that its victims no longer “recognized themselves or those closest to them.”

Clinicians observing Covid-19 have found that similar forgetfulness can appear as “brain fog” or as far more serious problems, including paranoid delusions, sometimes coming on “like turning on a light switch,” as one Covid-19 sufferer phrased it. The psychological effects could hit even when patients thought they had recovered from the virus.

Such delusions sometimes take on bizarre forms. One instance of this occurring early in the Covid-19 pandemic alerted researchers to the potential psychological effects of the disease. At the pickup window of a fast-food restaurant near Durham, North Carolina, a mother, who had no previous history of mental disorder but had been infected with Covid-19, attempted to pass her children through the opening “in an effort to prevent their kidnapping.” Psychological disturbances of this sort have been found in a few other cases of Covid-19—just a few, but enough for both the NIH and a global consortium to monitor and seek to understand them.

DOGS AND CARRION BIRDS

The effects of the pandemic in Athens, Thucydides observed, were not limited to individual patients and those close to them, but also extended into the very fabric of society. As in many other transitions, Thucydides marks his shift to this topic with a striking observation: carrion birds and dogs were scarcely to be seen. Thucydides pauses to ponder their absence. Had they died off after devouring the flesh of corpses, or had they somehow recognized that this was no ordinary illness and fled from it?

While Thucydides ponders, his readers are likely to pause while trying to grasp what lies behind his observation, if there is something he knows but does not say. One would expect to find such animals when the dead have been abandoned without proper burial. Only later does Thucydides make this explicit, and then it is not only the dead but also those still dying who were “writhing in the streets, desperate for a sip of water.”

The realization of what happened to the dead and dying shocks but should not surprise us, for in such a pandemic, customary decencies may be impossible to maintain. In the United States at one peak of Covid-19, some morgues were crowded beyond capacity. Funerals had to be postponed, conducted via Zoom, or completed in a rush. There were numerous images of bodies being stored in freezer-trucks. In India the situation was even worse, and more revealing: crematoria could not deal with corpses stacked nearby. The problem was not mere logistics but the painful erosion of customs that console individuals and bind family and friends together in shared grief.

Customs matter. Funeral customs were important in Athens, as readers of “Pericles’s Funeral Oration” know. They were both markers and supports of social order. But when one such norm crumbles, others tend to give way as well. Society itself may be at risk of coming apart.

That’s what Thucydides feared was happening in Athens during the pandemic:

All the burial rites before in use were entirely upset, and they buried the bodies as best they could. Many … with so many of their friends having died already, had recourse to the most shameless sepultures: sometimes … they threw their own dead body upon a stranger’s pyre and ignited it; sometimes they tossed the corpse which they were carrying on the top of another that was burning, and so went on their way.

His fellow citizens, Thucydides realized, had become “utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane.” This was not, he goes on to say, “the only form of lawlessness which originated from the sickness then; for now men more readily dared to do what formerly they kept hidden.” Earlier, Thucydides had said that the pandemic baffled all comprehension and was harsher than human nature can measure. Now we can see what he meant: the suffering pushed human beings to their limits, and beyond.

DEMORALIZATION

Athens did not disintegrate when the pandemic reached its height, but Thucydides looked unflinchingly at the worst of what was happening. He was no number-cruncher convinced that meaning is always to be found at the mean. He knows some figures that can help gauge the extent of the losses Athens suffered, but he holds them until his primary exploration of the pandemic is complete. He thereby allows himself to probe the emotional and psychological extremes of the situation, believing, I suspect, that human nature can best be understood when it is under the greatest stress and most intense pressure.

In modern America, statistics tell their own stories, different in tone but not in substance from what Thucydides observed. They show that the victims of a pandemic are not only the infected, but also those who suffer from the crime and demoralization that accompany it.

At first, when Covid-19 led to lockdowns in the United States, burglaries and many other crimes declined. Then gun sales soared and with them gun violence. In 2020 murders increased by more than 27 percent, a rise unparalleled in the past half century. The following year saw another increase. Opioid deaths went up 29 percent in a year. Alcohol abuse also soared, as did domestic violence and child abuse. Altercations on airplanes increased, as did reckless driving. The FBI reported a surge in hate crimes. School shootings, *The* *Washington Post*reported, reached an all-time high. In emergency rooms the count of suicide attempts soared, most notably with a 51 percent increase among adolescent girls from early 2019 to early 2021; the numbers for boys were not far behind.

Some of these increases are intensifications of previously existing trends. Covid-19 can’t be blamed for everything. Yet, as more data are gathered the picture only darkens. Covid-19 seems to attack society as a whole the same way it does individuals: whenever possible it finds preexisting conditions, exacerbates them, and thereby takes its toll.

Fear grows so much that, as David Brooks has written, society itself may be falling apart. Social psychologists, we can be sure, will provide many explanations; readers of Thucydides may grasp one simple fact—under such stress, human nature shows its vicious side.

CLOSURE?

Thucydides seems to draw his account to a close without a murmur of consolation or hint of hope. While images of bodies piled one on another and of smoking funeral pyres are fresh in mind, he adds new images: old men arguing whether an ancient oracle had predicted *death*or *dearth* (plague or famine; the words sound very much alike in Greek), and younger men deciding to kick back and enjoy life a little. Then, instead of summing up with figures indicating the extent of the losses, or ruminations on their long-term effects, he abruptly inserts a formula of a type he often uses to round off and complete an episode, “This was what happened during the sickness.”

End of story.

But, of course, that was not the end at all. Pandemics, as we keep discovering, have ways of recurring. Thucydides later tells his readers that after a while, the first phase of the pandemic abated, but then, in the winter of 427–426 BCE, it flared up again, “for although it had never entirely left them, still there had been a notable abatement in its ravages. The second visit lasted no less than a year, the first having lasted two.”

Their pandemic was probably doing something similar to what ours has done, morphing from beta to delta, then to mu and omicron, then, we hope, ending up as a low-grade affliction like the year-in, year-out endemic flu.

Thucydides’s observations about the recurrence of disease lead him, at last, to provide numbers to let his readers gauge just how bad the pandemic really was. The city of Athens kept no mortality statistics, but its well-oiled military machine did. A naval expedition, Thucydides reports, returned to Attica after about 40 days, having lost 1,050 of its 4,000 men because of “the illness.”

This is the first quantitative indicator of the scale of the pandemic—an appalling mortality rate. Those who sailed off on triremes (open-decked ships) were, moreover, citizen males of military age, deemed healthy enough for service. To be sure, they were packed tightly into these triremes, but those in the city were also crowded together, and some were likely to be more vulnerable than the men on the expedition. This would especially apply if they were very young or very old, slaves or impoverished free people, pregnant women or those with old health problems. Surely, then, the mortality rate for the city as a whole was higher than the approximately 25 percent among those on this expedition. The expedition, moreover, lasted only 40 days, a mere fraction of the multiple years the pandemic endured. (When it recurred in 427 BCE, Thucydides reports deaths in the thousands on another naval expedition.)

Historians, then, are on solid ground when they estimate that the pandemic killed more than half the city’s population, an appalling number but not unparalleled in other premodern societies. Surely the mortality rate was vastly higher than what we in the United States have encountered in the current pandemic, with the dead, at this writing, estimated at 890,000 or about a quarter of one percent of the population. That is, however, enough to exert a frightening pressure on civic life and decision-making, the full extent of which is still to be ascertained.

THE “ENRAGEMENT OF JUDGMENT”

As Covid-19 continues, we have started using a new vocabulary in our struggle to understand its effects: “brain fog,” “breakthrough cases,” “long haulers,” “Covid rage.” Thucydides, too, pushed language to better understand the full effects of the pandemic on the life of his city. It led him to an important insight into a critical moment in the politics of his own day. His terminology also raises serious questions for our own time, for he knew that political decision-making may be more deeply impaired by a pandemic than citizens recognize.

Thucydides did not hesitate to explore such effects. He did this by recounting a matter ostensibly only loosely related to the pandemic.

By the end of its second year, the war was going so badly for Athens that its legislative assembly voted to send a delegation to Sparta to sue for peace. This was a total repudiation of Pericles’s strategy and of his leadership.

Pericles believed—and Thucydides clearly shares his view—that the Athenians’ decision was not based on a cool-headed assessment of the strategic situation, but on an impulsive reaction to the pandemic, which had left the citizenry vulnerable to its unspoken and unrecognized emotional effects. That, above all else, was what needed to be brought into the open and forthrightly addressed.

Pericles knew that he would have to deal with these emotions if his city were to avoid what he regarded as a disastrous blunder. So, using his authority as a general, he convened another session of the assembly to focus attention on what he regarded as the underlying causes of the blunder. It would do little good, he realized, to describe the economic consequences of a capitulation or conjure up an image of Spartan troops imposing a narrow oligarchy on a once proudly democratic city. Instead of these obvious rhetorical strategies, he would have to deal with the emotions underlying the decision.

Here Thucydides stretches his language, adopting, or perhaps coining, a remarkable phrase to describe this remarkable rhetorical strategy. Its intent was, he says, to “lead the enragement of their judgment onto gentler and less fearful ground.”

The phrase is built on a Greek term, *orge,* often translated as *anger* or *rage*, but which includes as well a loss of ability to restrain any of a number of intense emotions and drives. It implies that the Athenians were not just angry; their emotions had taken over, affecting their ability to make sound judgments. Even worse, Thucydides indicates, they were not aware of what was happening to them.

They had good reason to be angry—at the war, at Pericles’s strategy, at the terrible pandemic. But that pandemic had left the citizenry vulnerable to something worse, hotheaded decision-making. That’s what a pandemic does, as Pericles explains in his speech to the Athenian Assembly: “A great disruption falling on you suddenly has impoverished your understanding.” For, he explains, “something so swift, unexpected and unaccountable enslaves one’s judgment.” That, Pericles asserts, “is what has happened to you.”

To speak in such a confrontational way risked intensifying the assembly’s anger, but Pericles pushed on with a powerful speech. Yet, it was only partially successful. The Athenians, apparently recognizing the force of his analysis, decided to stick with his strategy, but in their continuing anger imposed a fine on him, large enough to remove him temporarily from office.

JANUARY 6 AND BEYOND

Pericles was willing to undergo personal risk for what he believed was the good of his endangered city. A demagogue would be more self-serving, recognizing in the distress caused by a pandemic an opportunity for advantage and self-gratification. Demagogues, ancient and modern, know how to exploit such situations, then pretend they had nothing to do with the outcome. A few inflammatory speeches—nothing need be explicit—can turn a crowd into an angry mob, provided conditions are right.

Thus, while a pandemic in ancient Athens may seem inconsequential when we are trying to cope with a pandemic of our own, Thucydides’s analysis of the political consequences of the Athenian pandemic raises pressing questions for American politics today, most important, perhaps, whether the Covid-19 pandemic can affect the body politic as gravely as it does the health of its individual citizens.

The crowd attacking the U.S. Capitol building on January 6 is an obvious example of such “enragement of judgment.” Yet, it presented itself as a political act, an exercise of a constitutional right to freedom of expression. Clearly, however, it was mob violence driven by blind rage. Thucydides would see behind such enragement the pandemic’s erosion of civilized norms—not that the pandemic *caused* the riot, in some narrow sense, but by heightening and exacerbating emotions, thereby it helped provide the conditions, the tinder, for such an unprecedented flare-up.

Even the well-intentioned and high-minded may be affected by enragement, for pandemics are equal-opportunity destroyers; they strike wherever the unsuspecting present themselves. They blur memories, distort facts, raise hackles, leave things in shambles. There are no vaccines protecting political judgments from what a pandemic can do.

This raises the disconcerting possibility that here right now, as in ancient Athens, political judgments are distorted. It’s easy to recognize distorted judgment among one’s opponents, but Thucydides points to something more insidious, that any one of us may also be making them—without being aware that it is Covid creating the distortions. We cannot be sure of this, because we do not yet know for certain the full extent of the damage a pandemic can inflict on the body politic.

But the possibility is all the more frightening because of the unprecedented national mood to which commentators have been calling attention. The late Joan Didion thought it was a recurrence of the “jitters” of the 1960s. David Brooks writes about feelings of “numbness,” and his *New York Times*colleague David Leonhardt tells us we are *languishing*. All fine words, but none quite evokes the toll the pandemic has taken on the nation’s well-being and the threat of even more serious damage in the future.

Reading Thucydides brings to the fore questions we might prefer to avoid: Are individual feelings of fatigue, isolation, distractedness, vulnerability, exhaustion, and outright despondency aggregating into distrust, divisiveness, and demoralization at the national level? Are they compounding with ongoing fault-finding and a constant search for someone or something to blame? Will under-the-surface enragement afflict the judgment not only of the arrogant and intransigent, but even of those trying their best to do what is right?

If so, will our democracy be able to sustain itself? Thucydides has brought us to the point where we must ask such questions, but he will not answer them for us. That’s our job, and it’s an urgent one.

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