PANDEMIC FILES

Thucydides in Times of Trouble

Rereading the ancient historian after my father died

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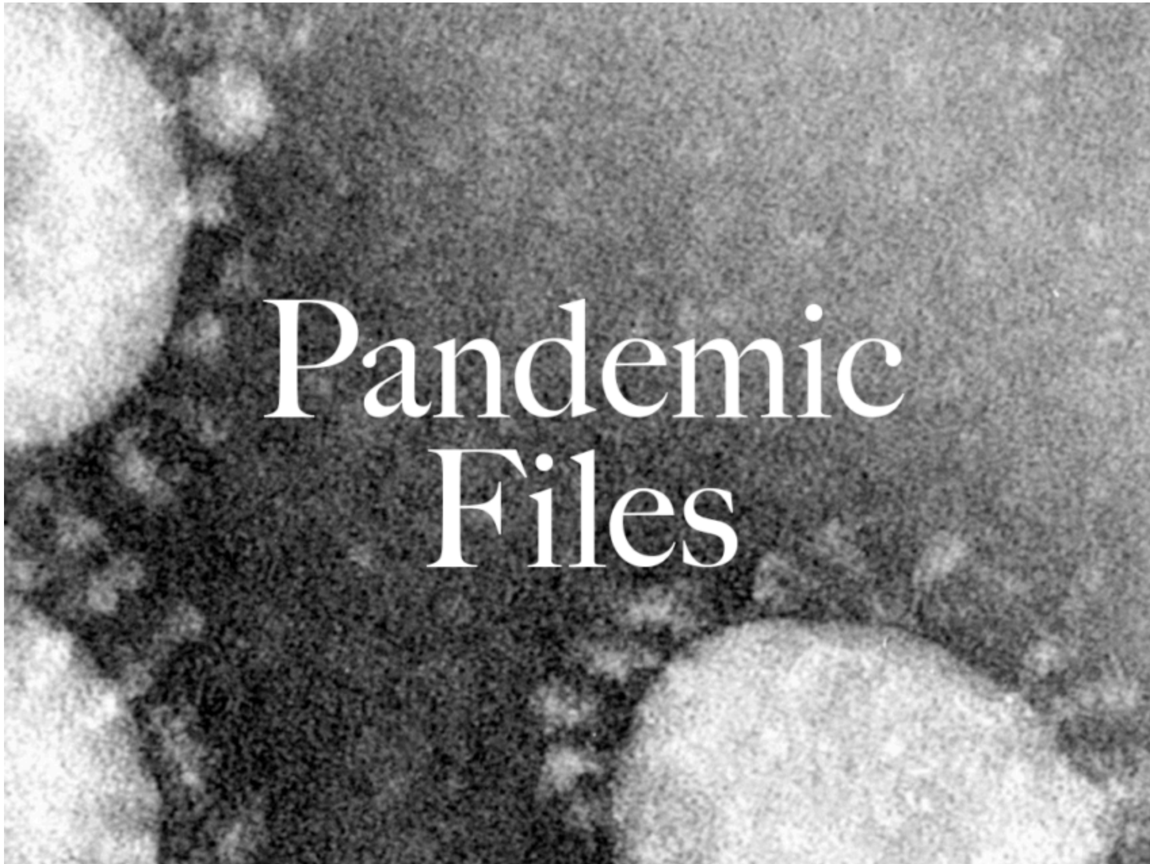

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I HAVE ALWAYS FOUND IT HARD to believe students and colleagues who say that Thucydides has helped them through a crisis. In the first book of his *History* he announces a terse, uncompromising agenda, and the ensuing work is one long disenchantment with human affairs. But in the last three months, I have found a tenderer aspect of Thucydides. In the slow, turbid dive of the pandemic, Thucydides' account of the Athenian plague has been my distance line through the compound shocks of public catastrophe and private bereavement. And in the still greater depths of the urgent, unfinished history of racism

that kills with both sly neglect and dehumanizing violence, I recall Thucydides' interpretation of another epidemic as a metaphor for the health of the body politic.

Thucydides died while still writing and editing his *History* of the Atheno-Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE). For the Athenian Thucydides, the defining crisis of this war was a devastating epidemic that struck the city-state of Athens in the summer of 430 BCE and ravaged the population, on and off, for four years. Thucydides himself caught (and survived) the plague and remarks that "an untold number" of Athenians died—perhaps as much as a third of the total citizen population. (This is itself a sobering reflection on the history of who counts as being countable in political communities, since Thucydides only gives us estimated mortality figures for Athenian citizens, and neglects to mention the effect of the plague on the large enslaved population and on the immigrant population in Athens.) Attempts to retrodiagnose the Athenian plague continue to this day (typhoid fever has been suggested), but Thucydides himself eschews any such identification, commenting that "the type of the disease exceeded explanation." (All quotes are taken from Steven Lattimore's 1998 translation.) Instead, he takes greater interest in the spectrum of human ingenuity and fallibility, particularly as revealed in responses to novel crises, from the way the mind struggles to take in sudden reversals of expectation, to the limitations of leaders to respond and adapt to events.

Read today, his account of the plague's onset sounds familiar: the slow beginning as reports spread and then a sudden revolution of time as the inexorableness of the disease sank in. At the start, Thucydides uses an ingressive past tense: "the plague first began to occur." This puts us in real time with the Athenians, as cases begin to crop up and they begin to register the outbreak of the disease. To read this phrase a few months into our own pandemic is to experience an odd feeling of nostalgia, as we remember ourselves, back in early March 2020, on the threshold of an as yet ungraspable future, developing a sudden lay interest in epidemiology.

As Thucydides tells it, the Athenians first reacted to the plague by looking to contemporary medicine for answers that it could not give. He nods to the case histories of contemporary physicians, which charted the progress of diseases by days, noting indicative signs and recording the outcome, whether recovery or death. We have an insight into these case histories from Books 1 and 3 of the *Epidemics*, attributed to the famous physician Hippocrates. These books record both communal patterns of disease by region and season, and individual case histories where the symptoms and course of the disease were atypical. From the sparse notes in the case history of a man named Erasinus, who lived on the island of Thasos, we read: "Fifth day. Early

in the morning was composed, and completely lucid; but well before noon he became utterly delirious and lost control. His extremities were cold and bluish and his urine stopped. He died as the sun was setting." The accounts of epidemics in the Hippocratic corpus are empirical in approach, interpreting and recording what happened as a resource for physicians practicing medicine in similar conditions and populations; although the accounts are dramatic, even fatalistic, the ordered chronology of the case history creates an impression of control.

In contrast, Thucydides gestures towards medical time only to illustrate the futility of calibrating a disease for which there was no diagnosis and no effective treatment, that had a very high mortality rate, and which ravaged even its survivors. Of the "progress" of the plague, Thucydides writes,

> most either died from the internal burning on the ninth or seventh day, while they still had some strength, or if they survived and the disease descended into the belly, and severe ulceration occurred and completely liquid diarrhea set in at the same time, most perished later from the weakness this caused… . and if anyone survived beyond the most serious effects, the attack on his extremities at least made a mark. For it struck the genitals and fingers and toes, and many survived with these lost, some their eyes as well. Total loss of memory also came over some as soon as they recovered, and they could not identify either themselves or those closest to them.

In the gap where medicine falls short, Thucydides recreates the psychological impact of the plague in precisely modulated prose. He considers the plague from three different prepositional angles: it falls onto the Athenians, against the Athenians, and they fall into it (*eispiptō*, *epipiptō*, and *peripiptō* in Thucydides' Greek). The assorted prepositional verbs are not just a case of an exacting writer mixing up his prose, but suggest that, in their distress, the Athenians entertained several parallel explanations for their suffering all at once. The first two verbs (*eispiptō* – "fall on, set upon," and *epipiptō* – "attack") are also used of military invasion and reflect the connection that the Athenians made between the Peloponnesian invasion of their land and the sudden onset of the plague. (This coincidence led to the conspiracy theory that the Peloponnesians had poisoned the water reservoirs in the Athenian port of Piraeus.) The third compound verb, *peripiptō* (fall into), bears connotations of hapless, blundering agency, and leaves open questions of causation and responsibility.

Like us, the Athenians simultaneously resigned themselves to the plague's onslaught and looked

to hold political leaders to account for decisions that contributed to their suffering. Chief among these was the war strategy proposed by the Athenian general Pericles, which involved evacuating Athens's rural townships and moving their residents into the urban center of Athens, so that the entire population could shelter within the city's walls. This strategy led to overcrowding and increased transmission of the disease, forcing people to witness others' traumatic suffering at close quarters: "the devastation did not occur in an organized situation, but the dead and dying lay on top of one another, and half-dead men tumbled in the streets and around all the springs in their craving for water." In his description of the Athenians' anger towards Pericles, Thucydides again uses the verb peripiptō: "the Athenians held Pericles responsible as the one who had persuaded them to go to war and because they had fallen into misfortunes because of him."

Thucydides does not contradict this accusation, but he himself focuses more on collective responsibility, describing how the plague exposed weaknesses in social, cultural, political, and religious life, challenging the Athenians' sense of invulnerability and exceptionalism. In the History, the narrative of the plague follows and seems to answer the funeral oration for Athens' war dead delivered by Pericles, as well as an earlier speech by Pericles on war strategy in the lead-up to the war. Pericles' funeral oration glorifies Athens, boasting about the superiority of her democratic system of government, the quality of life enjoyed by Athenians (i.e. free-born, adult male citizens), and the city's preeminent power. Although Thucydides does not describe the cause of Pericles' subsequent death in 429 BCE, his readers would have been aware that the general himself died of the plague.

The classicist Rachel Bruzzone has demonstrated that Thucydides' plague narrative itself belongs to an ancient Greek literary tradition, reaching back to Homer, of accounts of "a total and simultaneous breakdown on many fronts, social, natural, epidemiological, and political." In Thucydides' telling, the compound experience of war and epidemic leads to manifold desolation as the customary way of life and death collapses, and individual losses and grief keep piling up. The city falls into despair and anomie as people abandon hope for the future. The skeleton of society is exposed and time loses its disciplining hold on human life. The scholar in me resists simple comparisons between today's pandemic and Thucydides' account of the Athenian epidemic, but we have all experienced enough in recent months to read Thucydides with fresh eyes.

Two weeks into the outbreak of the pandemic in the Northeast, I (like everyone else) was

beginning to learn to accept the new regimen and the up-ending of my calendar. Looking back, I laugh at that conceit and the self-deception of calendar-making, as though the calendar was ever mine and our plans are ever not radically contingent on the lives of others. I was not so philosophical when the phone woke me past midnight on the twenty-seventh of March. I wished it un-rung. Two weeks earlier, a Delphic text message had startled my brother and me: "Dad is dead" – just like that. In the absence of a pronoun, my brother and I inferred the father to be our dad, and fell about in a panic. But it turned out to be the sender's father and, recomposed, we sent commiserations.

Now, listening to the phone ring, some second sense told me that the oblique text had been prodromal. And then I heard it: my father was dead. As my mind unspooled before gathering itself again, I tried to piece together the how. The description I heard could have been symptoms of COVID-19 – but that remains unknowable given the lack of testing and my father's pre-existing conditions. I offered blurred condolences to my father's second wife and son, whom I have never met, but whose voices I know well. "Please come," they said.

But I couldn't. Flight restrictions, I explained, meant that we would not be able to travel to Kenya for the funeral. I slept and then woke to news reports that police were firing tear gas to disperse the crowds at the Likoni ferry – the route that the ambulance would have to travel to take the body to the mortuary. And I found myself fretting about safe passage, not between this world and the next, but the earthly journey of twenty miles to find a temporary resting place for my father.

We worked together as a makeshift family to cobble together a funeral. My brother and I did what we could. On the other side of the world, eleven hours ahead of me, my brother edited our father's life for an obituary. Meanwhile, I cut and pasted segments of the Anglican liturgy for the burial of the dead, weighing the psalms I thought would have meant the most to my father. And then the vigil, staying awake and holding my own ceremony in the hollow of morning to keep time with a funeral eight thousand miles away and seven hours ahead. I remembered my mother, thirty years ago, having heard too late of her own father's death in another country, sitting at the bottom of the garden weeping out of time.

I have learned lessons in remote mourning – how we remember the dead when they die far away from us. Thucydides gives short shrift to religiosity and over-easy credence in divine causation and its signs. He tells us that, in the context of the plague, people recalled an oracular verse from

oral tradition, predicting "A Dorian war will come, and with it plague," but that there was some dispute about whether the verse said *loimos* (plague) or *limos* (famine). "Under the circumstances," he remarks, "the opinion naturally prevailed that plague was mentioned; men shaped their memories in accordance with what they experienced. And yet, I suppose, if another Dorian war breaks out after this one, and it happens there is famine, they will probably recite accordingly." This passage came back to me as a cautionary tale about the ethics of memory as we struggle to do justice to the wide horizons of a life, and a thought experiment about how we will choose to recall these times of widespread suffering.

My father's former students wrote and stirred dormant memories; these came to us on the winged words of social media. In the absence of present mourning, my brother and I relied more than ever on such memories, loaned from others, as confirmation that our father had lived in the world. One particular message woke me out of my private grief: reading it I became a girl of twelve or thirteen again, in our home on the campus where my father—a schoolteacher—was head of pastoral life during another plague, that of HIV/AIDS. Sitting in my bedroom at the front of the house, I watch a scene on a loop: students coming up the drive, with the gait of those who are expectant but unsure of what to expect. I imagine the slow relay: a death from the virus, then a telegram for the attention of my father, then a message passed to a student in their dormitory, and their slow walk across campus, weaving in and out of shadow and light. The hushed tones as my father walked with them on the driveway and the brave line of the shoulders slowly crumbling and my father, who could be austere, crumbling with them. And sometimes, if a student could not stand, they would both sit on the wall outside my window, their slumped backs to me. Meanwhile my mother hovered, in the doorway, ready to offer comfort. On the cusp of the nineties these telegrams became more frequent as the virus that could not be named swept through families, taking parents before their time. Now in this message from one of these former students, the arm that I saw reach out to comfort others comes back to me—and with it a reminder of the long arc of the global epidemic of HIV/AIDS that is still with us and a palpable sense of pandemic loss.

This was before the killing of George Floyd, a result of what Benjamin Crump, the Floyd family's attorney, described in The Guardian, as "that other pandemic that we're far too familiar with in America, that pandemic of racism and discrimination." Thucydides' account of the plague cemented the tradition, in classical political thought, of the image of disease in the city and the citizen body as a metaphor for social and political decay. The protests and other forms of direct political action in response to the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud

Arbery, and "an untold number" of black Americans, are pressing this logic home and demanding a deeper diagnosis of what ails us.

What began as a national discourse about a strange new virus and a global pandemic has become a question about the stricken body of American democracy. In 1957, Richard Wright wrote in *White Man, Listen!*, "The History of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms […] The Negro is America's metaphor." Are we ready to recognize, finally, that the black body, black life, and black personhood are synecdoche for the Republic? In the midst of this pandemic we crave that most ambitious of cures—the cure of the ailing body politic.

Thucydides keeps his prose together, but I imagine that the composition of the plague narrative was haunted by scenes of suffering and death, as he remembered the citizen body of Athens falling apart and the swaggering heights from which it fell. As he reflected on the catastrophe of the plague, he may have remembered Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, performed in Athens before the plague in 442 or 441 BCE, whose chorus sings a double-edged praise of human ingenuity—the so-called "Ode to Man": "Many things are formidable and none more formidable than humankind," in Hugh Lloyd Jones's translation. Sophocles' chorus proceeds to recite a catalogue of the skills of "all-resourceful" man, who "meets nothing in the future without resource," and has "contrived escape from incurable diseases." The tragic irony of this description seems to echo behind Thucydides' observation that "doctors had no effect … nor did any other human agency."

For his part, Thucydides offers the following explanation for his narrative of the plague: "I will say what it was like in its course and describe here, as one who had the plague myself and saw others suffering from it myself, the symptoms by which anyone who studies it cannot possibly fail to recognize it with this foreknowledge, if it ever strikes again." In other words, Thucydides tells his readers about how the plague happened not as any kind of inoculation against the recurrence of the disease, but so that the next time, people will be wiser. We all know how that goes.

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