

III.—Thucydides and the Disintegration of the Polis

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In one of the most striking passages of his *History* Thucydides offers a concentrated analysis of the political and moral crisis of his age. His description of the forces and phenomena of disintegration as presented in chapters 82 and 83 of Book 3 is, like the *Melian Dialogue* and the narrative of the revolution of 411, a stage in the development of one of his major themes, the suicidal destruction of the Hellenic world by the forces of *φιλοτιμία* and *πλεονεξία*, unrestrained by political wisdom. This summing up of the psychology of revolution follows the report of the internecine fight between the aristocratic and the democratic faction at Corcyra, which on a local scale reflects the bitterness of the panhellenic struggle in which war and civil strife were intertwined. This narrative is preceded in the same third book by the tragedies of Mytilene and of Plataea, each of which is emphasized as a representative phenomenon by the Thucydidean device of a pair of speeches. The plight of these communities, city states like Corcyra, illustrates the fate of the small *polis* caught in the middle of the life and death struggle of the political philosophies and the power interests of the two great competitors, without any internal or external defense against direct and indirect intervention. The Mytilenean and Plataean speeches, written in a similar vein to the analysis following the Corcyrean disaster, reveal the same increasing ruthlessness and the same breakdown of traditional standards after the moderate and high-minded leadership of men such as Pericles and Archidamus was succeeded by the unfettered dynamism and the *ἀκοῦσιοι ἀνάγκαι* of an increasingly pitiless war, with the ensuing cult of callousness and violence.

As in other cases, Thucydides makes use of the Corcyrean affair, an event of minor importance in itself, to illustrate the transformation, under these conditions, of the principles of thought and action in state and society. It is natural that some of his observations and conclusions in 3.82–83 have their parallels in his speeches wherever there arises the conflict between the rational and the emotional approach to politics, as in the speech duel between Cleon and Diodotus; or the distortion of traditional concepts in the service of

expediency as in Alcibiades' speech in Sparta, or in the discourse of the Thebans about the treatment of Plataea (3.61–67). Thucydides' analysis, with its combination of diagnostic and prognostic elements, has rightly been compared with the contemporary parts of the *Corpus Hippocraticum*. No doubt, Thucydides' organic concept of the state — so gloriously expressed in the *Funeral Oration* — makes him think of the physical and moral destruction of the war as an illness of the body politic. There is an obvious parallelism between 3.82–83 and the description of the plague in Athens, especially of its psychological concomitants. His comment: "There was no restraint by either fear of God or law of man" (2.53.4) would be in place also in the analysis of revolution in Book 3. However, his direct relations to medicine ought not to be overstressed; he might be compared not so much with a physician as with a *physikos* in general, as his method, like that of Greek science, combines keen observation of the particulars with the ability to understand and to express the general laws behind them.

The struggle between reason and emotion, both equally strong sides of the Greek character, is a major theme of Hellenic thought from Homer to Plato. In the political field, Thucydides sees the root of the Greek, and in particular of the Athenian, tragedy of his time in the replacement of the statesman who appeals to reason by the demagogue playing on the emotions. Daring unrestrained by reason, *τόλμα ἀλόγιστος* (3.82.4), together with the other evils of the new Pandora's box of political activism becomes the symbol of an age of disintegration. The new ideal of what we call the "red-blooded" man, frantic violence, *τὸ ἐμπλήκτως ὀξύ*, now asserts its claim to leadership; it is the type of which Thucydides gives such a lively though not unbiased picture in his Cleon, who in a way typical of demagogues of any period, seasoning his agitation with moralizing, praises *ἀμαθία μετὰ σωφροσύνης* (3.37.3) and the *φαιλότεροι* against the *ξυνετώτεροι* — the intellectuals who in their conceit pretend to be wiser than the traditional "Athenian way of life"; and it is worth noting that quite a few of Cleon's slogans coincide with the concepts formulated by Thucydides in 3.82–83. Unconditional loyalty to the political group, aggressiveness, a spirit of ruthless action, of distrust, hatred, and vengeance, accompanied by shrewd cunning: these are the new virtues leading to success, as they appear in these two chapters.

Thucydides, being the son of a people and of a century that were

intensely conscious of the power and the meaning of words, was aware of the transvaluation, under the impact of the political and moral crisis, of the *είωθυῖα ἀξιώσεις τῶν ὀνομάτων* (3.82.4). The war as a "stern teacher" (3.82.2) undermining economic, psychological, and moral security, and, as the historian emphasizes, gradually removing the sound balance between *σωφροσύνη*, the spirit of restraint and conservation, and *ἀνδρεία*, the urge to action, brings about a one-sided emphasis on reckless activism as the essence of *ἀνδρεία*. With a nation so proud of its energies as were the Greeks of this age, the discussion about this concept of manliness was bound to be lively in the years when this virtue was in danger of degenerating into the irresponsible and egotistical dynamism of *πλεονεξία*. This development is reflected in contemporary drama and philosophy, both of which are rather critical of this radicalization, since, with very few exceptions, poets and philosophers, being men of thought, felt attracted by the ideal of moderation and repelled by the *hybris* of the extremists. A significant example is Euripides' transformation of Aeschylus' Eteocles, paragon of *ἀνδρεία*, into the Eteocles of the *Phoenissae*, representative and mouthpiece of the "modern" philosophy of power (with the ideals of restraint advanced in vain by his mother Jocasta), in one of the most famous scenes in Greek tragedy. The difficulty of the old way of quietude and moderation to hold its own in face of the praise of political ambition is reflected in the discussion of Zethus and Amphion in the *Antiope* on the merits of the active and the contemplative life, later integrated by Plato in one of the key passages of his *Gorgias*. But it is Thucydides who, his judgment undisturbed by any moralizing emotions or reforming zeal, gives the most concise picture of how and why the ideal of manly courage, like others of its kind, under the stress of growing emotionalism turned into the catchword of the radical advocates of blind rage.

In contrast to this overrating of dynamic ruthlessness — which has its well-known modern parallels — is the disparagement of reason and self-control. Thucydides, who saw in the dynamism of his people the foundation of its greatness as well as the cause of its fall, has traced an unforgettable picture of it in the first speech of the Corinthians and in the *Funeral Oration*, the latter presenting the ideal situation of a great people under the control of a great statesman who, by strengthening the counterweights of reason and reflection, prevents this dynamism from getting out of hand. This

is the background against which chapters 3.82–83 have to be seen. Now we have the conditions of a political society out of joint, under the sway of its own passions dominated by a new crop of violent and scheming politicians. Thucydides presents them in his usual way both with reference to the particular situation of the Peloponnesian War and to the dangerous potentialities inherent in human nature as such: *ἀεὶ ἐσόμενα ἕως ἂν ἡ αὐτὴ φύσις ἀνθρώπων ᾖ*. This *ἀνθρωπεία φύσις* is the raw material for all those concerned with state and society in thought or action (and it is among them that Thucydides expects his readers); the fact that the crisis reveals and intensifies some otherwise hidden aspects of this nature gives to these two chapters of analysis a central position in the entire work. Thucydides, being historian and political thinker at the same time and thus considering, with equally keen interest and judgment, the general rule and the particular event, stresses, in this picture of human behavior in the political crisis, the wide range of variety and intensity presented by each individual case.

The new philosophy of reckless temerity sees in planning, forethought, and caution nothing but specious pretexts of inaction and cowardice: *δειλία εὐπρεπής* or *τοῦ ἀνάνδρου πρόσχημα*. Some aspects of this distrust of a policy of responsibility and reason have been embodied in the speeches of Cleon and Alcibiades, both of whom have been drawn by Thucydides as representatives of a powerful but, as he sees it, dangerous trend in the Athenian character. It is not by chance that when discussing these two politicians he seems to leave his usual reserve, just as he does when he presents his ideal of the statesman in Pericles and of the responsible conservative, model of *ἀριστοκρατία σώφρων*, in Antiphon. The most extreme type of the “red-blooded” man, with which the picture in 3.82–83 is concerned — at variance with a demagogue such as Cleon — would not talk at all, not even about his own principles, but just act and fight. In contrast with the conservative attitude of keeping out of trouble (without cowardice, though), the tough extremist is not afraid of first suffering himself if only he may have the subsequent joy of taking revenge on his opponent (3.82.7). We contemporaries of the age of the *terribles simplificateurs*, to use Jacob Burckhardt’s prophetic expression, are amazed at Thucydides’ description of this brave new world of distrust, treachery, and vengeance, with the cult of violence posing as manly courage, and the cult of deceit and cunning misusing the ideal of human intelligence that had been fre-

quently extolled by the contemporary enthusiasts of man as the measure of all things. Again the drama is a good mirror of this change of values; we may compare the picture Sophocles drew of Odysseus, model of intelligence and cleverness, in the *Aias* in the heyday of Periclean Athens with the Odysseus of the *Philoctetes*, written under the shadow of the impending catastrophe. A particular sign of this moral anarchy is the fact that this breakdown of standards is not just accepted, as it is by the unemotional clarity of Thucydides' mind, as the actual reality of political life, but that the discarding of all traditional restraints becomes a matter of pride. This emotional nihilism is concomitant to, yet different from, the cold and unemotional planning of power politics as presented in the *History* in its different stages from the Periclean speeches to the *Melian Dialogue*. It was this abuse of "man in his pride" which was to bring about the popular reaction against the so-called sophists (one of them being Socrates) as the alleged advocates of a destructive, radical, and egocentric philosophy; on a higher level, it is the background of Plato's emphasis on strict control and restraint in politics and of his drawing of characters like Callicles and Thrasymachus as embodiments of the evils of *φιλοτιμία* and *πλεονεξία*.

When we read (3.82.6) that, as part of the new order of things, the ties of blood proved less strong than those of the political group, we have again to remember the conflict of loyalties as it appears in contemporary literature. This concept of the *ἐταιρία* claiming the unreserved allegiance of its members has little to do with what we call party; its modern counterpart is rather the hard and fanatic core of a totalitarian group fighting to obtain or to keep power. The same disintegration occurs in every area of the *νόμος*, the wide field of previously accepted standards of thought and action: solemn pledge and oath, the foundations of society as symbols of good faith and honesty, are now both given and accepted with the understanding that they may be broken whenever convenient (3.82.7). This is the world of which old Sophocles complained through the mouth of his *Oedipus at Colonus* (611 f.): "Good faith is dying, and faithlessness is rife"; the same Sophocles who recently in his *Philoctetes* had set the old-fashioned straightforward *ἀνδρεία* of Neoptolemus against the "modern" cleverness of Odysseus. A consequence of this condition, as the analysis points out (3.83.2), is the impossibility of reaching any agreement or compromise, since in such a world reliance on any obligation no matter how solemnly

undertaken would be suicidal folly. That the issue whether and when to keep an oath met with much interest is shown by its reflections in tragedy; Euripides makes use of it as a key motif in the *Hippolytus*; and it is significant that the "conservative" and unmodern hero stays with his oath although in a famous line (612) he professes the modern theory that an oath taken under deceit has no binding power. The new wisdom is unconcerned with any standards except power, success, and the gratifying pride of being clever (*δέξιος*) even if a scoundrel, instead of being considered honest and slow-witted (*ἀμαθής*, 3.82.7) — catchwords typical of the time and recurring in the language of drama and philosophy. We may think of the tacit irony with which Thucydides makes that paragon of Attic *δεξιότης*, Alcibiades, present his speech to his less than clever Spartan audience (6.89–92). The prize of cleverness goes to the one who anticipates or outwits the schemes of his opponents; in the competition of shrewdness and cunning he receives *ξυνέσεως ἀγώνισμα* (3.82.7). The presentation of this picture of moral disease becomes even more convincing through its scientific terseness and the lack of any obvious moralizing. Thucydides leaves it to his reader to draw his conclusions for thought or action; this was done by the two leading minds of the next generation, who, each in a different direction, tried to rebuild Greek society from its moral ruin: Plato and Isocrates.

As to be expected, these conditions are the heyday of the demagogue on either side. Thucydides, here as in most of the other parts of his work free from any bias, sees both parties caught in the same illness. Pro-Spartan oligarchs and pro-Athenian democrats equally cover the ruthless struggle of selfish interests and ambitions with lofty slogans such as the *ισονομία πολιτική* of the democratic politicians and the *ἀριστοκρατία σώφρων* of their competitors, the one side emphasizing equality of rights and justice, the other responsible leadership by the best (3.82.8). Both, so we read in one of the rhetorical assonances which the author uses in order to convey the bitter irony of the situation, have the same disregard for traditional *εὐσέβεια* while successfully handling the *εὐπρέπεια λόγου* of their slogans. In this struggle in which quarter is neither expected nor given, violence though the shortest is not the only way to power; since cunning is equally or even more respected (contemporary drama offering interesting examples for what later became Machiavelli's advice to his Renaissance prince to be both a fox and a lion),

shrewd manipulation of the law courts and their votes proves an equally effective, and apparently legal, device for getting rid of political competitors; we may remember that Thucydides owed his own exile presumably to the cleverly manipulated sentence of a biased democratic jury.

This triumph of viciousness, *κακοτροπία*, in a world ruled by the hysteria of mass emotion and mass violence not only turns the mainstay of any society, straightforward and simple honesty, the *εὐηθές*, into a matter of contempt (3.83.1), but even the winners in this struggle can never relax from fear and distrust in this society turned into a *bellum omnium contra omnes*. This is the world in which the fight of the Ἄδικος Λόγος against the Δίκαιος Λόγος has turned from a piece of comedy into tragic reality, in which justice is but *γενναία εὐήθεια*, as the spokesman of this moral anarchy in Plato's *Republic* (348c) declares in words that recall Thucydides. And Plato's later analysis in Book 8 of the decadence of the *polis* under the rule of the radical mob, of demagogues, and dictators seems also to be indebted to the Thucydidean model.

Among the worst consequences of this disintegration is, in the mind of Thucydides, the elimination of the μέσα τῶν πολιτῶν who represent the sound political and moral foundations of the state against both anarchy and despotism, as already emphasized in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (525 f.) and by Euripides (*Suppl.* 245). It is the ideal picture of the μέσοι which Thucydides draws in his *Funeral Oration* with his praise of what a Greek city might have been in contrast with the gloomy realities as depicted in 3.82–83. The refusal of these men of reason and good will to join the struggle attracts the hatred of the wild extremists from both sides, who see in the very existence and survival of the μέσοι a denial and refutation of their own philosophy of ruthless action. Another aspect of the same situation — also confirmed by our own experience — is the plight, not entirely undeserved, of the intelligentsia (3.83.4). Discussing their fall, Thucydides must have thought of some members of his own social class, possibly even of himself. They rely on their brains to master a situation requiring a solution by force, and they look down at the advocates of violence, or even of quick action in general, as morally and mentally inferior. On the other hand, the φαυλότεροι, the unsophisticated and uncomplicated minds (the same φαυλότεροι who significantly are praised by the demagogue Cleon [3.37.4] against the ξυνετώτεροι) find in the

recourse to direct action a safe and simple way out of the crisis, leaving the men of culture and intellectual conceit to discover too late, like their modern counterparts, that engulfed in the slow and thorough process of thinking and discussing they have lost to their opponents the opportunity of acting.

In order to impress upon his reader the points of his analysis (also in order to make them more consciously clear to himself), Thucydides uses, as he does in his speeches, the then "modern" devices of "sophistic" rhetoric. Being one of the first to create the language of political thought, he has to work with a linguistic raw material not yet fully ready to express the rational and emotional concepts and overtones of political and psychological phenomena. It is due to his pioneering work that the historians and political philosophers of the next century have a vocabulary of political thought available. The two chapters 3.82-83 allow us an exceptionally good look into the workshop of one of the great masters of historical and political analysis, trying to force the words and expressions available to him to give a clear picture of the facts he observed and of the concepts, forces, and laws he saw behind them. Like his contemporaries he has become conscious, as a student of the sophists, of the inexhaustible potentialities of the Greek, especially the Attic, idiom. With a sometimes exaggerated faith in the effectiveness of the new devices of expression, he makes use of parallelism, contrast, and variation, of infinitives and adjectives turned into nouns in order to increase his meager supply of abstract concepts, of the interplay of sound and meaning in the association of ideas. We constantly feel the difficulties he encounters when trying to describe and to explain the intricacies of human nature as revealed in the crisis of civil war; but these very difficulties offer us a unique insight into his process of thinking and writing.

A rather intelligent reader of the Hellenistic age has added some notes to Thucydides' analysis, summing up, in a language trained through a thorough acquaintance with his style of thought and expression, the dire phenomenon of *ἀνθρωπεία φύσις . . . τῶν νόμων κρατήσασα*. There is, however, a strong emphasis, more in line with Polybian than with Thucydidean thinking, on these conditions as examples of moral depravity. A certain Thucydidean tinge has brought about the inclusion of these notes in our text as chapter 84, although its authenticity has been questioned already in the scholia. But the very shortcomings of this passage, written by an otherwise not

unworthy student of the *History*, put the inimitable greatness of the master in the right relief. No matter how deeply concerned with human affairs, Thucydides keeps as clear of any moralizing as he does of sentimental emotionalism. Instead, anticipating such modern thinkers as Lord Acton and Jacob Burckhardt, he draws an objective and apparently detached picture of the daemonic forces inherent in the struggle for, and in the possession of, uninhibited political power.¹

¹ With a passage as clear in its general purport and as complicated in its details as are chapters 3.82–83, it is very rewarding to compare, in addition to the good commentaries by Classen-Steup, Shepperd and Evans, and A. W. Spratt, the various translations which in this case are interpretations as well. They include some of the outstanding achievements in the art of translation and thus may serve as excellent material to present both the possibilities and the limitations of translating a great masterpiece of thought and writing. At the beginning stands the great name of Thomas Hobbes, whose expectedly forceful rendering offers an impressive example of Jacobean English prose. The Victorian age produced Crawley's (1871) and Jowett's (1884) translations. Our own generation, reflecting the increased interest in, and understanding of, Thucydides under the impact of the political and moral crises of this century, has brought forth a considerable number of translations, by C. F. Smith (*LCL* 1919–23); Finley (1942) and Grundy (1948) in their books on Thucydides; R. W. Livingstone (*World's Classics*, 1943); P. H. Epps (*Greek Lit. in Transl.* 1948); and G. Else (*Greek Classics in Transl.* 1951). A very solid work of scholarly interpretation is offered by Regenbogen's new German translation in his *Thukydides Politische Reden* (Leipzig 1949).

Every aspect of Thucydidean research (including bibliography) is discussed in: Schmid-Stählin, *Gesch. d. griech. Lit.* 1.5 (1948) 3–223; in the forthcoming article on Thucydides in *RE* by K. Ziegler; further: C. N. Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (1929); W. Jaeger, *Paideia* 1 (1939) esp. 379–408; J. H. Finley, Jr., *Thucydides* (1942); J. de Romilly, *Thucydide et l'impérialisme athénien* (1947); G. B. Grundy, *Thucydides and the History of his Age* 2 (1948) esp. 28–80. A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (1945), although treating only Book 1 so far, presents also valuable material for the analysis of 3.82–83.

Thucydides' style: Schmid-Stählin, *op. cit.* 181–204; Finley, *op. cit.* 250–88; "The Origin of Thucydides' Style," *HSCP* 50 (1939) 35–84; J. Ros, *Metabole als Stilprinzip bei Thukydides* (Paderborn 1938). — Thucydides and the *Corpus Hippocraticum*: W. Nestle, *Hermes* 73 (1938) 28–31; Jaeger, *op. cit.* 1.389 f.; 3.6. The topic has recently been discussed in detail by K. Weidauer, *Thukydides u. d. Hippokrat. Schriften*, "Heidelberger Forschungen" (Heidelberg 1954); cf. my forthcoming review in *CW*. — Thucydides and the Sophists: W. Nestle, "Thukydides u. d. Sophistik," *NJbb* 33 (1914) 649 ff.; Schmid-Stählin, *op. cit.* 8 f. — Thucydides and Plato: Schmid-Stählin, *op. cit.* 209 f.; Romilly, *op. cit.* 301–4, denies relations. — Thucydides and Isocrates: Jaeger, *op. cit.* 3.52, 75. — Ideas and catchwords of Thucydides' age: W. Woessner, *Die synonym. Unterscheidung bei Thukydides u. d. pol. Redner d. Griechen* (Diss. Berlin 1937); F. Heinimann, *Nomos und Physis*, "Schw. Beitr. z. Altertumsw." 1 (Basel 1945); G. Grossmann, *Polit. Schlagwörter a. d. Zeit d. pelop. Kriege* (Diss. Basel 1945, publ. 1950). — Chap. 3.84 is accepted as Thucydidean, at least in its essential parts, by some scholars, among them E. Schwartz, *Das Geschichtswerk d. Thukydides* (1919) 231, and Schmid-Stählin, *op. cit.* 83. The attempt by E. Topitsch, *WS* 60 (1942) 9–22, to prove the authenticity of this chapter is not fully convincing.