

10.2. Thucydides / Civil War in Corcyra

Thucydides has just described a violent civil war (stasis) on the island of Corcyra fought in the year 427 between two opposite political factions, one favoring an extreme form of democracy and supported by the Athenians, the other advocating a more conservative, oligarchic form of government and supported by Sparta. For Thucydides the demoralizing events of Corcyra are an ominous indication of what was to occur throughout the Greek world in the latter years of the war.

Thuc. 3.82–83. Thucydides. *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War*. Trans. John Porter. University of Saskatchewan, 1995.

(82) So savage was the factional strife that broke out—and it seemed all the worse in that it was the first to occur. Later on, indeed, all of Hellas (so to speak) was thrown into turmoil, there being discord everywhere, with the representatives of the demos (i.e. the extreme democratic factions) wanting to bring in the Athenians to support their cause, while the oligarchic factions looked to the Spartans. In peacetime they would have had no excuse nor would they have been prepared to summon them for help, but in the midst of a war, the summoning of outside aid readily offered those on both sides who desired a change in the status quo alliances that promised harm for their opponents and, at the same time, benefit for themselves.

Many harsh events befell the various cities due to the ensuing factional strife—things which always occur in such times and always will occur, so long as human nature (physis) remains the same, although with varying degrees of violence, perhaps, and differing in form, according as variations in circumstances should arise. For in peacetime, and amid prosperous circumstances, both cities and individuals possess more noble dispositions, because they have not fallen into the overpowering constraints imposed by harsher times. But war, which destroys the easy routines of people's daily lives, is a violent schoolmaster, and assimilates the dispositions of most people to the prevailing circumstances.

So then, affairs in the cities were being torn apart by faction, and those struggles that occurred in the latter stages of the war—through news, I suppose, of what had occurred earlier in other cities—pushed to greater lengths the extravagance with which new plots were devised, both in the inventiveness of the various attempts at revolt and in the unheard-of nature of the subsequent acts of retaliation.

And people altered, at their pleasure, the customary significance of words to suit their deeds: irrational daring came to be considered the “manly courage of one loyal to his party”; prudent delay was thought a fair-seeming cowardice; a moderate attitude was deemed a mere shield for lack of virility, and a reasoned understanding with regard to all sides of an issue meant that one was indolent and of no use for anything. Rash enthusiasm for one's cause was deemed the part of a true man; to attempt to employ reason in plotting a safe course of action, a specious excuse for desertion.

One who displayed violent anger was “eternally faithful,” whereas any who spoke against such a person was viewed with

suspicion. One who laid a scheme and was successful was “wise,” while anyone who suspected and ferreted out such a plot beforehand was considered still cleverer. Any who planned beforehand in order that no such measures should be necessary was a “subverter of the party” and was accused of being intimidated by the opposition. In general, the one who beat another at performing some act of villainy beforehand was praised, as was one who urged another on to such a deed which the latter, originally, had no intention of performing.

Indeed, even kinship came to represent a less intimate bond than that of party faction, since the latter implied a greater willingness to engage in violent acts of daring without demur. For such unions were formed, not with a view to profiting from the established laws, but with a view toward political advantage contrary to such laws. And their mutual oaths they cemented, not by means of religious sanction, but by sharing in some common crime.

Fair proposals offered by the opposing faction were accepted by the party enjoying the superior position in a guarded fashion, not in a truly generous spirit. More concern was placed on exacting vengeance from someone else than on not suffering a wrong yourself in the first place. And if ever oaths of reconciliation did come about, having been exchanged in the face of some temporary difficulty, they remained in force only so long as the parties possessed no resources from any other source. The one who was quicker to seize the opportunity for some daring outrage, if ever he saw his opponent off his guard, took more pleasure in taking vengeance in this way than if he had done so openly, considering this method to be safer and thinking that, by getting the upper hand through deceit, he had won in addition the prize for cleverness. And indeed, most people accept more readily being called clever, when they are knaves, than being called fools when they are honest: the latter they take shame in, whereas they preen themselves on the former.

The cause of all of these things was the pursuit of political power, motivated by greed and ambition. And out of these factors arose the fanatical enthusiasm of individuals now fully disposed to pursue political vendettas. For the leading men on both sides in each city, employing fine-sounding phrases and advocating either equality before the law for the masses (in the case of the democrats) or the moderate rule of the best men (in the case of the oligarchs) made a show of serving the common good but in fact engaged in competition for personal advancement. Competing in every possible fashion to get the better of their opponents, they went to the farthest extremes of daring and executed even greater acts of vengeance, not limiting themselves by the demands of justice or the interests of the city, but only by their whims at any particular moment. In their efforts to gain power either through the use of trumped up lawsuits or by force, they were always ready to pursue the political vendetta of the moment. The result was that neither side was wont to pay any regard to personal integrity: those who succeeded in accomplishing some act of malice under cover of some fine phrase were the ones to gain general approval. By contrast, those citizens who chose the middle course of

moderation perished at the hands of both factions, either for their failure to join in the struggle or due to envy at the fact that they were surviving amid the general chaos.

(83) Thus moral degeneration of every type took hold throughout Hellas due to factional strife, and simplicity of character—with which a concern for honor is intimately connected—became an object of mockery and disappeared. People were ranged against one another in opposite ideological camps, with the result that distrust and suspicion became rampant.

For there was no means that could hope to bring an end to the strife—no speech that could be trusted as reliable, no oath that evoked any dread should it be broken. Everyone, when they had the upper hand, reckoned that there was no hope of any security

by means of promises or oaths, and so concentrated on taking precautions not to suffer any injury rather than daring to trust anyone.

And, for the most part, those of more limited intelligence were the ones to survive: in their fear regarding their own deficiencies and their opponents' cleverness, lest they might be defeated in debate (e.g. in a political trial) or be forestalled in laying some plot by their opponents' cunning, they turned to action right away with a boldness born of desperation.

Their opponents, overconfident in their assurance that they could anticipate the plots of their less intelligent antagonists, and feeling that they could attain their ends by cunning rather than by force, tended to be caught off guard and so perished.