

Thucydides is a Virus

Neville Morley (University of Exeter, UK)

Published in *Eidolon*, 9/4/20: <https://eidolon.pub/thucydides-is-a-virus-61de9dc72a85>

Confused by an unprecedented situation, [we need to look to the past for enlightenment and guidance](#). A superficial survey of historical epidemics both reveals the terrifying nightmare scenarios of possible social collapse that may be coming our way, and offers the reassurance that humanity has faced far worse than we currently face and nevertheless pulled through. We have the enormous advantages of modern science and epidemiology and social medicine in combatting this virus, and at the same time have learnt absolutely nothing.

The most spectacular previous outbreak of this virus was in the early 20th century, born out of the [chaos and destruction of WW1](#); earlier examples — during the civil and religious conflicts of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the violence and widespread deprivation of the French Revolution — reinforce the importance of war and political upheaval in allowing such epidemics to break out. Today, it's impossible to ignore the role of globalization and increased connectivity, so that the virus can spread faster further through society and across [ever larger areas of the world](#). But it's never a simple process; viral outbreaks are often a product of war, but they are also sometimes a cause of them, as seen most clearly at the beginning of 21st century when ruinous military interventions were driven by the infection of [prominent US Neocons](#) with the virus.

Hold on a minute, you cry. The comparison with the Spanish flu makes sense, but what's all this about an outbreak at the start of the millennium? Isn't the novel coronavirus novel?

Ah, but I'm talking about a different epidemic, caused by a pathogen that has returned time and again over the last five hundred years to bring misery and despair to humanity: Thucydides.

Yes, of course [Thucydides is a virus](#), spreading rapidly along modern channels of communication, turning those infected into dribbling zombies writing op-eds about how current events demonstrate the eternal relevance of Thucydides. Trust me, for I too have [contracted this terrible disease](#), as well as observing others suffering from it. One simply has to look at the exponential growth in “what Ancient Athens can tell us about coronavirus” articles over the last month. It's the phenomenon known as secondary infection, with the virus seizing its opportunity with the ideal conditions for replication created by the present crisis. The curve doesn't show any sign of flattening out; social distancing may help with Covid-19, but as we turn to the internet to relieve the monotony of isolation, we're all the more susceptible to [Thucyd-431](#).

Pathologies of Pestilence

Infection presents as a wide variety of symptoms in different patients, but with the obsessive repetition of the name “Thucydides” taken as diagnostic. Some specialists have posited the existence of distinct strains, hypothesizing that the variant Thucyd-431-IR manifests mainly as pronouncements on global politics (see for example the argument that Thucydides' interest in the plague demonstrates that [Realism must have something to contribute](#) to the discussion of coronavirus, or the repetition of the usual [Thucydides Trap nonsense](#)), whereas the baseline Thucyd-431-C focuses more on [analogies to other depictions](#) in Greek literature, with relatively mild comorbidities relating to “ancient roots” and “western civilization”.

But we might equally well distinguish variants on the basis of their differential morbidity and outlook. In the more acute form, sufferers develop a dangerous fever and sense of impending doom, casting off all restraint in their Thucydides-based predictions of the [imminent collapse of society, the death of democracy](#), and the [undermining of traditional values and national self-confidence](#). Even the historical information that Athens happily pursued its war for the next 27

years despite plague mortality, and that the [overthrow of democracy was actually short-lived](#), brings no relief to such cases; they simply moan listlessly that “those who do not learn from past diseases are doomed to see them repeated,” or alternatively babble that “what remains to be seen is how the rest of us will do at this exam. The people of ancient Athens failed...”

The milder form of infection leaves patients generally, if not unnaturally, calm and cold, with dry retching of empty reassurances that [ancient plagues were so much worse](#), that the coronavirus is [clearly no worse than seasonal flu](#), that [we don't know enough about it](#), and that the worse thing we can do is get all hysterical. In this condition, sufferers may be [unable to bear the touch](#) of the lightest economic and social constraint, and certainly they spread the virus further even if its effect on them is outwardly limited.

As has been [observed in other plague accounts](#), there is a clear tendency to cast around for simple rationalizing explanations, such as a universal tendency to [cast around for simple rationalizing explanations](#) (even if this entails claiming that Thucydides unhesitatingly attributed the Athenian plague to Apollo), and to focus on the [responsibility of leaders](#), their [need for Periclean *pronoia*](#) — and the likelihood that they too have been infected with Thucyd-431. “It is hard to believe that an [unsettling question does not occasionally, just occasionally, nag at the back of the prime minister's mind: what if the surest mirror held up to our future is indeed the ancient past?](#)” “Mr Johnson will be painfully aware, as a classicist, about how people react to such [events.](#)” Perhaps this itself is a form of rationalization, inventing a wider socio-political imperative for their compulsive Thucydides-referencing.

It all comes back to Thucydides; however trivial and pointless these effusions may be, they all serve to bolster his supposed authority, as the man who lived through the disease — and supposedly [nursed other sufferers](#) rather than simply observing them (cf. 2.48), which is a new addition to the personal legend — and [recorded it meticulously](#). “[Soberly empirical, dispassionately secular... It's Thucydides...that we need just now.](#)” You might as well start licking a well-used library copy of *The Landmark Thucydides* and then shake hands with random strangers.

Explanations

Some have suggested that the Thucydides virus may not actually be a real disease, given its multifarious and contradictory symptoms, and may instead be a literary construction for political or polemical purposes. If that were the case, though, it would be possible to identify a genuinely coherent and useful element within at least some of these interminable claims to learn lessons from the Athenian plague. This can hardly be on the medical side, given the simple fact that we actually understand how epidemics work (claims that Thucydides understood infection, supported by unhelpfully modernizing translations of key terms, notwithstanding), and when even historians of the flu epidemic of a century ago argue that history has [no lessons to offer](#). We could focus instead on whether his account of the social and psychological consequences of epidemics might be worth exploring in depth; but that would require proper discussion of the nature and continuity of his idea of “human thing,” the differences between ancient and modern social institutions, and the basic theoretical problems of drawing analogies between past and present, none of which is even faintly visible in any of the patients discussed above.

Could it all be a conspiracy, or at least individual opportunism and mercenary intent, aiming to profit from the current crisis? It's not impossible in some cases — I have no idea what the going rate is for an article in *The Atlantic* or *The Sunday Times* — but you don't get any recompense for writing for *The Conversation*, or giving [hour-long podcast interviews](#) for that matter. [Paid in exposure?](#) It makes far more sense to see the proliferation of Thucydides hot takes as the effects of a particularly cunning virus, tricking its hosts into the internet equivalent of sneezing violently and repeatedly in a crowded subway.