The Deterioration of Character

In his account of the civil war in Corcyra, Thucydides is concerned with more than simply relating the history of a particular revolution. He digs deeper, analyzing human nature and exploring the impact of war on individuals and society. He observes the traits that emerged in the citizens of Corcyra and uses them as a starting point to extrapolate certain truths about power, cruelty and the degeneration of humanity during war. Using Corcyra as an example from which to theorize about the nature of mankind, Thucydides conjectures that the breakdown of law and order during war leads people to show their nature as it truly is. While people normally behave a certain way to fit into their society, the deconstruction of social mores leads to a revelation of the innate depravity of humankind.

Corcyra was a small island off the west coast of Greece that held an alliance with Athens. The Corinthians had released Corcyraean naval prisoners, captured off Epidamnus, in an attempt to win Corcyra over to the Corinthian side. The people of Corcyra voted in favor of remaining allied to Athens. However, they put Peithias, the leader of the democratic party, on trial and charged him with enslaving Corcyra to Athens. He was acquitted but afterwards vengefully accused five of his opponents of desecrating ground sacred to Zeus. He mercilessly prosecuted them to the full extent of the law, condemning them to utter poverty. These five accused men joined up with a revolutionary oligarchic faction and killed Peithias and some sixty others. This
sparked a series of violent actions that led to full-blown civil war within Corcyra between the democrats and oligarchs. The cultured, civilized nation quickly deteriorated into savage anarchy.

Before delving into philosophy, Thucydides’ begins with the surface issues. His account starts by relaying the factual occurrences, although even here he cannot help but occasionally add his own commentary. He describes the Corcyraeans in all their impulsiveness and imprudence. Fearing that the democrats might sweep down and seize their arsenal, the oligarchic party set fire to entire blocks of houses so that there would be no means of approach. Thucydides notes that if a wind had risen up, the entire city could have been destroyed. In relating this episode, Thucydides attempts to portray the fervent passion that had swept through the citizens. He writes that even the women were fighting with great daring. This episode depicts that war had somehow transformed the citizens, bringing on abnormal fervor and zeal.

This violent passion led Corcyra into “a state of utmost confusion” (Book III, 77). Their government structure and system of law had fallen apart and the nation was in chaos. This state of panic soon turned ugly. The Corcyraeans began to massacre every one of their enemies that they could find. In this killing spree, many started killing those on their own side, simply because of personal vendettas or debts. The society had spun out of control. Thucydides writes that “there was death in every shape and form. And as usually happens in such situations, people went to every extreme and beyond it” (Book III, 81).

Thucydides seeks to understand how a cultured state could turn into the scene of such massacre and savagery. He wants to discover the true reason behind the citizens’ seeming conversion into bloodthirsty beasts. What was it that caused this “general deterioration of character throughout the Greek world” (Book III, 83)? What he proposes is that Corcyra was not
experiencing a transformation of character per se; rather, the civil war stripped away the façade of society to reveal the true nature of its civilians.

He uses the specific example of lawlessness in Corcyra to make more general statements about a society’s response to war. With the overturn of their government, the Corcyraeans’ entire lives were restructured and they embraced a new mentality. “In times of peace and prosperity cities and individuals alike follow higher standards” (Book III, 82). During peaceful times, it is beneficial for one to follow the law. Violence and treachery is looked down upon and punished. One cannot be successful in society without fitting into its rule of law. “But war is a stern teacher; in depriving them of the power of easily satisfying their daily wants, it brings most people’s minds down to the level of their actual circumstances” (Book III, 82). War creates a new mentality in the people. With the utter breakdown of the structure of the society, it was no longer advantageous to follow the law. In the midst of chaos and panic, men found that new skills of brutality and deceit were valued. “What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member…Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man” (Book III, 82).

Ultimately, as throughout the entirety of his writings, Thucydides is concerned with power. Just as he concludes that power was the cause of the Peloponnesian war, so he believes that power was the root of the Corcyraean problem. “Love of power, operating through greed and through personal ambition, was the cause of all these evils” (Book III, 82). Men acted the way they did because they saw an opportunity to gain power. The opposing sides each held positions that could be seen as admirable: the democrats sought political equality for the masses, while the oligarchs wanted safe and sound government of the aristocracy. However, these pure motives were tainted by human lust for power. “In professing to serve the public interest they
were seeking to win the prizes for themselves” (Book III, 82). Individuals, having once tasted power, seek more. Thus the old adage, “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Seizing upon the anarchy in Corcyra, power-hungry men used the chaos to their own ends. “Deterred neither by the claims of justice nor by the interests of the state, their one standard was the pleasure of their own party at that particular moment” (Book III, 82). The utter breakdown of law and order allowed those who had been mistreated or oppressed in the past to get their revenge. “Thus neither side had any use for conscientious motives; more interest was shown in those who could produce attractive arguments to justify some disgraceful action” (Book III, 82). With no societal reason to stop them, men will do anything to gain power.

Thucydides sees this as indicative of the innate depravity of the human race. Corcyra was home to “savage and pitiless actions into which men were carried not so much for the sake of gain as because they were swept away into an internecine struggle by their ungovernable passions” (Book III, 84). With the normal restraints of law and honor nonexistent, humanity was seen in its true light. Thucydides sums up his view of humanity when he says, “With the ordinary conventions of civilized life thrown into confusion, human nature, always ready to offend even where the laws exist, showed itself proudly in its true colors, as something incapable of controlling passion, insubordinate to the idea of justice, the enemy to anything superior to itself” (Book III, 84). Thucydides uses the civil war in Corcyra to put forth his philosophy of the depravity of mankind. Rather than suggesting that the events of the civil war created savagery in the people, he asserts that the collapse of social constructs unleashed what was already in men’s hearts. The revolution stripped away the façade of civility and honor and bared the true nature of man. With anarchy and chaos, without fear of reprisal or justice, men let loose the cruelty and malice of their true beings. Thucydides uses Corcyra to speak of his philosophy on the nature of
The human. The impact of war on society, he believes, is that it reveals humankind at its worst and at its truest.

There is much below the surface of Thucydides’ account. What could, at first glance, be seen as a history of a certain civil war, is actually much more illuminating. Using the Corcyraeans as an example, Thucydides extrapolates from their condition to generalize about the condition of mankind and profess certain truths about human nature. Coreyra reveals that man’s depravity is only held in check because of the benefits of adhering to one’s society; when war destroys a nation’s structure of government, humanity’s true nature will show itself in the savagery that follows. By relating the Corcyraean civil war and making judgments based on the events there, Thucydides successfully summarizes what he believes are the truths about the impact of war on society: namely, that war strips away the pretense of civility and reveals humanity as it truly is.

BIBLIOGRAPHY