Feeling Together: Collective Emotion and its Discontents

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Alma Tadema, "A Pyrrhic Dance"

> "We should beware of the tendency to reinforce the opposition between reason and emotion by rendering emotion as primitive as possible and then glorifying reason in an uncritical way. To pack all of the reasonable solutions and their mode of deliberation into one set of categories (reason) and only the most unreasonable, vindictive, and ill-considered emotional responses into another (emotion) is to render reason insensitive and emotions devoid of sense."[1]

The tendency to view reason and emotion as opposite faculties and ways of responding has become almost natural – so natural that we also tend to overlook the risks of maintaining a division that, after all, may not be that sharp. On the eve of the presidential election, a political speechwriter wrote on the challenges of making a speech compelling:

> "When I write speeches, I'm influenced by novels. I use story to move listeners. I also plant something in the opening and bring it back at the end, the way Anton Chekhov advised ("If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall…"), and I search for illuminating details, as Joseph Conrad urged ("My task is to make you hear, to make you feel, and, above all, to make you see").
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> …
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> Speechwriters must help maintain what Aristotle called *ethos*, or character. Voters cast ballots not just for candidates they agree with, but for those they like. Are they compassionate? Humble? Optimistic?"[2]

The question persists: how far apart is reason (what voters agree with) from emotion (what voters like)? Are these clearly distinguishable categories? The question is by no means a new one. The study of the nature of human emotion has gone through many twists and turns from antiquity onward. More recently, debates between advocates of neo-Darwinism and different conceptions of cognitivism, advances in neuroscience, anthropological and psychological studies and other developments in numerous fields have questioned long-held conceptions of the location and function of emotion and cognition in the human brain and culture. As a classical scholar, my interest lies in a very specific type of emotional "turns": those that the tragic chorus performs as a collective body in democratic Athens. In order to situate my approach to the choruses of Greek tragedy in its cultural context, I look at other discourses on collective emotion in the classical period. Thucydides offers a particularly rich source for the representation of collective emotion in the context of democratic deliberation and policy-making. For this post I turn to an example from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

The relationship between reason and emotion occupies a central position in Thucydides' presentation of individual and collective psychology. *Orgê*, the term used for both vehement anger and emotion in general appears to oppose rational and systematic thinking usually encapsulated in the term *gnômê*.

I argue that while Thucydides' terminology points to a sharp divide between the two, his narrative problematizes or even undermines such a divide. I draw my example below from the narrative of the Sicilian expedition (415-413BCE), which, according to the historian, proved to be "the greatest of all" the events in the war (7.77.5-6).

During deliberation at the Athenian assembly, Nicias strongly opposes the expedition which presents too great a risk for the Athenians. He views the Athenians as being "diseased", infected as they are with an unhealthy desire to sail to Sicily. He calls on the older men of the population to resist the younger men's disease, what he sees as a "morbid desire for what is out of reach" (δυσέρωτας εἶναι τῶν ἀπόντων, 6.13.1). But Nicias is unsuccessful. Alcibiades' support of the expedition intensifies the *dêmos'* desire. And, paradoxically, so does Nicias' consequent exaggeration of the preparation and expenditure the expedition will require. He thinks that the magnitude of the affair will stop the Athenians. Instead of being discouraged, however, they "were far more bent upon it; … and upon all alike fell an eager desire to sail" (πολὺ δὲ μᾶλλον ὥρμηντο; … καὶ ἔρως ἐνέπεσε τοῖς πᾶσιν ὁμοίως ἐκπλεῦσαι, 6.24.2-3).[3]

Thucydides' terminology emphasizes the contagiousness of this aberrant *erôs* that is shortsighted and excessive. It spreads just like the plague that decimated, terrified, and corrupted the Athenian population at the beginning of the war (2.47-54). The excessive eagerness of the majority also stifles thoughtful opposition, the historian tells us, and the "disease" takes over. The presentation of desire as contagious disease creates the impression that the Athenian *dêmos* is overcome by an irrational force. When we look closer, however, it becomes clear that specific calculations motivate the different segments of the population. The elders believe that they will conquer new places or, at the very least, that they will not be defeated. The young Athenians long for "sight" and *theôria* (πόθῳ ὄψεως καὶ θεωρίας), being hopeful (εὐέλπιδες ὄντες) that they will obtain a safe return. And the great multitude eagerly desires both to make profit under the current circumstances and to secure profitable resources for the future. Passionate desire and hope indeed lead the way. But they clearly reveal a rationale based on calculation of different types of profit (6.24.3-4).

For my purposes, two elements stand out. First, reasoning – albeit misguided reasoning – either triggers or sustains the collective desire to undertake the expedition. Second, even though the Athenians share the "aberrant *erôs* for what is out of reach", the different motives behind their collective desire reveal the absence of a coherent and truly shared vision for the expedition.

I would like to expand some more on the young population's longing for sight and *theôria* and its connection with collective emotion. Thucydides' choice to articulate this motive is particularly telling because he continues to emphasize the role of sight and perspective (literal and metaphorical) throughout the narrative of the expedition. The younger soldiers view the expedition as a theoric journey. Such journeys are institutionalized in the Hellenic world and often supported by the state. They entail traveling abroad, encountering new experiences primarily through a type of spectatorship (e.g., at festivals and oracle consultations), and returning home to share with the community the fruits of such encounters.[4] The lack of familiarity with Sicily entices the young soldiers. But their anticipation of a *theôria*-like experience indicates how misled their perspective is. This is a military expedition, and a very risky one at that. Not only will the "sight" of Sicily turn out to be disenchanting. It will also inevitably require direct participation and will force them to develop a unifying perspective.

The soldiers' performance at different battles points to this direction. I give here a brief example from the night-battle at Epipolae. Even though there is a full moon, the Athenians and their allies can "see the sight" of the bodies in front of them but cannot trust the recognition of fellow-soldiers as being their allies (τὴν μὲν ὄψιν τοῦ σώματος προορᾶν, τὴν δὲ γνῶσιν τοῦ οἰκείου ἀπιστεῖσθαι, 7.64.2). Lacking the literal vision that would allow for successful collaboration and mutual support, they become terrified and disoriented and turn to killing each other. The closer we get to the final defeat, the more Thucydides foregrounds the fact that the Athenians bring to the battlefield itself their habitual ways of seeing and feeling. If this is to be seen as a theoric journey, the vision the Athenians will bring back home is very different from what they anticipated. Only upon defeat do they manage to gain a clear perspective and become unified in their emotion. "With one impulse all broke forth into wailing and groaning, being scarcely able to bear what was happening" (ὁ δὲ πεζὸς οὐκέτι διαφόρως, ἀλλ'ἀπὸ μιᾶς ὁρμῆς οἰμωγῇ τε καὶ στόνῳ πάντες, δυσανασχετοῦντες τὰ γιγνόμενα, 7.71.6). The collective impulse to grieve replaces the initial collective *erôs*. But the new passion for communal lament is based on accurate knowledge: united in defeat they can clearly see where their miscalculations lay.

By throwing into sharp relief the challenges of truly "seeing", feeling, and therefore acting as a collective body, Thucydides' text points to the evaluative processes that accompany emotional experience. Scholars have argued that the historian criticizes haphazard and irresponsible methods of acquiring knowledge through democratic deliberation.[5] The above reading suggests that it is precisely inadequate knowledge and self-oriented calculation that cultivates and sustains unreasonable emotion, not the other way round.

Would this understanding render emotion indistinguishable from reason? I suggest not. I view the emotions portrayed in both Thucydides and tragedy as complex processes that include evaluation based on belief, pleasure or pain, and a sense of attachment that equips the experience with motivational force for action.[6] In the case of the Sicilian expedition, the burning desire to sail comes with the pleasure of envisioning different types of profit and indulging in what I call "participatory pleasure". Sharing the same desires creates a sense of empowering attachment within the group experiencing those desires and between the group and the collective cause (no matter how misled it is). This sense of attachment motivates all to take action. It is telling that, despite his criticism of the emotionally volatile *dêmos*, Thucydides never recommends the elimination of emotion. He attempts to capitalize on its motivational power by advocating for leaders like Pericles who have the ability to fine-tune the emotions of the *dêmos* according to their perceptive judgment and commitment to collective prosperity. This is Thucydides' vision for cultivating sensitive reason and sensible emotion and thus qualifying citizens for competent collective action. In mythic frames that resemble the Sicilian narrative, tragic choruses offer their own suggestions for cultivating reasonable emotion. I will turn to some of these suggestions and their implications for 5th c. conceptions of the self and of political participation in my next posts.

[1] R. C. Solomon, "Justice v. Vengeance: On Law and the Satisfaction of Emotion" 143-148 in S.A. Bandes (ed.) (1999) *The Passions of Law*. New York. The quote is from p. 129 with some modifications.

[2] http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/03/the-political-speechwriters-life/

[3] A number of scholars have examined the role of *erôs* of Thucydides. See, e.g., V. Wohl (2002) *Love Among the Ruins: The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens*. Princeton; and P.W. Ludwig (2002) *Eros and Polis: Desire and Community in Greek Political Theory.* Cambridge

[4] See Ch. 1 in A. Nightingale (2004) *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context.* Cambridge

[5] On democratic knowledge, see especially: J. Ober, (1993) "Thucydides' Criticism of Democratic Knowledge" 81-98 in R.M. Rosen and J. Farrell (eds.) (1993) *Nomodeiktes: Greek Studies in Honor of Martin Ostwald.* Michigan; and D.G. Smith, "Thucydides' Ignorant Athenians and the Drama of the Sicilian Expedition" *SyllClass* 15 (2004) 33-70.

[6] My understanding of attachment and the motivational power of emotions is informed by S. Krause (2008) *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation.* Princeton

Tags: citizen, cognitivism, collective emotion, democracy, dêmos, emotion, erôs, Peloponnesian War, pleasure, political participation, psychology, reason, Sicilian Expedition, theôria, Thucydides, tragic chorus

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Eirene Visvardi (PhD Stanford University) has been Assistant Professor of Classical Studies at Wesleyan University since 2009. Before that she held a two-year joint fellowship in the departments of Classical Studies and Theater Arts at Brandeis University. Her research interests include the conception and interpretation of emotional experience in Greek drama and philosophy of the classical period, modern theories of the emotions, Greek lyric poetry, ancient aesthetics, questions of genre, and performance and political theory. She has written on the politics of pity in Euripides' Hecuba and Trojan Women and on his Alcestis. While at the CHS, she will be completing a manuscript titled Dancing the Emotions: Pity and Fear in the Tragic Chorus in which she turns to the quintessential tragic emotions from the perspective of the tragic chorus – the element that Aristotle essentially ignored. She argues that the choral discourse of pity and fear problematizes and expands the emotional discourses that pervade the public spaces of Athenian civic life (esp. the political assembly as we know it from Thucydides and the courts of the orators) and suggests new ways to envision and practice social and political participation.
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