
Thucydides and Hobbes on Epidemics and Politics: From the Plague of Athens to England's Rabies

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Summary

Thomas Hobbes's England was deeply troubled by the successive plague visitations regularly occurring in the late 16th and 17th centuries. The catastrophic outbreak in 1625 found Hobbes working on the first ever direct translation of Thucydides' *History* from Greek to English. This fact allows for the supposition that Hobbes paid special attention to Thucydides' masterful account of the plague at Athens and its social and political consequences. These circumstances authorise the here proposed enquiry into the relation between Hobbes's understanding of the state of nature in *Leviathan* and the epidemics, mediated by his experience of the plague and the translation of the plague narrative in Thucydides' *History*.

Keywords: Thomas Hobbes, Thucydides, Plague, State of Nature, *Stasis*

Introduction¹

Thucydides is widely recognized as an acute analyst of the process of dissolution of society under pressure. *History of the Peloponnesian War* is famous for its frightening description of a breakdown of society occurring as an effect of a civil war. In Book III of *History* Thucydides delivers an extended account of *stasis* at Coreyra

¹ The initial version of this article was delivered as a paper at "Croatian Political Science Talks" in Zagreb in November 2020. It was subsequently presented at the conferences "La filosofia politica di Hobbes" in Milan in October 2022, and "Hobbes: Beyond his Works" in Santiago in November 2022. It was also discussed in the doctoral seminar at CESPRA, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris in December 2022. The article presents the results of a further research stemming from the fourth and the fifth part of my article dealing with the possible impact that Thucydides' *History* had on Hobbes's understanding of the state of nature (Ribarević, 2022, pp. 9-11).

(H, 3.70-84, pp. 198-207).² Yet, already in the preceding Book he dwells on the same subject in his equally famous discussion of the plague of Athens (H, 2.47-53, pp. 115-119). The plague reduced Athens to the similar miserable condition as *stasis* would and eventually did. Both events, one of human and the other of natural origin, produce a condition in which *polis* no longer provides protection for its citizens. On the contrary, living enclosed within its city-walls turns out to be a trap as the danger for each citizen comes not from the outside, but from his former fellow citizens (Kosak, 2000, p. 43; Rechenauer, 2011, p. 259). Since each among them is a potential harbinger of death, it is a situation of the utmost diffidence. At the same time, it is a condition in which a generalised insecurity endangering everyone's life in the same way provides for a perfect equality. Left without the support of the community, no one is in position to secure his own existence by himself.

It is well-known that Thomas Hobbes started his publishing career with the first-ever English translation of Thucydides' *History* directly from the Greek original. That a description of *stasis* in its general outlook very much coincides with Thomas Hobbes's notion of the state of nature was extensively perceived and commented (Brown, 1987, p. 59; Orwin, 1988, pp. 831-832; Slomp, 1990, p. 578; Scott, 2000, p. 122; Evrigenis, 2014, p. 193). Universal diffidence among equals producing violence and unbearable fear in the absence of the functioning society are the main traits of both Hobbes's natural condition of mankind and Thucydides' account of the *stasis* at Corcyra. However, it has not been quite as often observed that such a parallel can be drawn regarding Thucydides' description of the social consequences of the plague as well.

What I propose to do is to offer a parallel discussion of the way Thucydides and Hobbes understood the relation between epidemics and politics. Given Hobbes's interest in the question of the dissolution of a body politic, the discussion is prompted by the fact that Hobbes was translating Thucydides' *History* at the moment in which plague visitations incurred detrimental effects on English society. The underlying intention is not to establish a direct causal link between these circumstances and Hobbes's understanding of the state of nature, but rather to provide the additional elements composing Hobbes's intellectual horizon that might help us analyse it in a more complete way. The first section of the article provides an account of the impact that plague had in Hobbes's England as an overall context for his translation of the plague narrative. It is my suggestion that the influence of the plague, undoubt-

² References to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* specify the book, the chapter, and the page number preceded by the letter *H* indicating the title of the work (*The Peloponnesian War*, University of Chicago Press, 1989). References to Hobbes's *Leviathan* specify the chapter, the paragraph and the page number preceded by the letter *L* (*Leviathan*, edited by C. B. Macpherson, Pelican Books, 1968).

edly formative for everyone living in renaissance England, has not been taken sufficiently into account when it comes to identifying contexts relevant for the understanding of the development of Hobbes's political thought. The second part outlines the status of the plague in Thucydides' text and its link with *stasis*. According to Thucydides, plague produced almost the same results regarding the disintegration of *polis* as *stasis* did. The final part of the article returns to Hobbes and examines the role of epidemics in his notion of the state of nature as set out in *Leviathan*. Despite the historical epidemiological context and Hobbes's familiarity with Thucydides' plague narrative, we do not find either plague or any other biological disease in Hobbes's analysis of the state of nature. Still, in Chapter 29 of *Leviathan* we do come across a discussion of epidemics in relation to politics. Hobbes there frames his analysis of civil war in terms of epidemic. Following Greek tradition, Hobbes constructs rabies as a metaphorical contagious disease, an epidemic of words causing a destruction of a monarchical state by spread of democratic ideas.

I. Plague in Hobbes's England

Born in 1588, Hobbes lived a life which was twice as long as that of an average Englishman of his time. By the time of his death in 1679, Hobbes would have witnessed an impressive span of events that shaped modern England, from the closing years of the Elizabethan era and the accession of the first two Stuart kings, to the Civil wars, Cromwell's Commonwealth, and Restoration. Against these profound changes in social and political scenery, plague provided a continuous grim background. Smouldering for years, it would regularly take on its more sinister face, killing tens of thousands in a matter of months.

If we focus on London as the epicentre of the successive national epidemics,³ we will find that Hobbes's life covers five major outbreaks of plague in England. The

³ It seems that plague visitations in England most probably occurred as a result of importation of fresh, highly virulent strains of *Pesteurella pestis* from the continent, usually from the Low Countries (Shrewsbury, 1971, pp. 189, 264, 266, 314, 368, 371, 464; Wilson, 1927, pp. 85-86, 130; Slack, 1985, p. 313). After incurring a major outburst in the capital, the epidemic wave would spread in a radiant manner throughout the country. It could last for more than a year, moving from town to town, sometimes in a very slow pace dictated by the dynamics of contacts in the rat population, and sometimes rapidly "along the trade routes with the passive transport of *R. rattus* and its fleas" (Shrewsbury, 1971, p. 468). A lingering trail of such an epidemic might be identified for years to come, slowly dying out due to the natural gradual loss of virulence until a new outburst would set in. Cummins *et al.* provide an alternative account of the sources of plague. Their argument for endemicity of plague in London is based on the fact that the initial growth of mortality during major visitations in London took place in poor northern suburbs, and not in port parishes. It is further corroborated by the characteristic spikes in mortality during warm 'plague' months even in years when registered plague deaths were few. Since such spikes persisted well into the 1720s, authors point to the possibility that plague did not suddenly disap-

first of the metropolitan plague crises happened when Hobbes was five, in 1593. The two succeeding outbreaks coincided with the accession of James I and Charles I to the throne in 1603 and 1625 respectively. After the 1636 plague there was a somewhat longer break before one final, violent outbreak struck the capital. Although that was unknown to Englishmen at the time, with the passing of the Great Plague of 1665 the pestilence at long last gave up on England for good.⁴ Luckily for England that was facing an imminent Spanish invasion in the year of Hobbes's birth, plague was not pervasively epidemic and struck only its northern parts in 1588, descending no further than Norwich. However, the following years were marked by a gradual build-up of its strength culminating in the severe epidemic of 1593 (Shrewsbury, 1971, pp. 241-242). Although in London it was not as deadly as the preceding catastrophic outbreak that struck the capital thirty years earlier in 1563, wiping out more than twenty thousand lives or at least a quarter of its population, plague still left a frightening death toll, killing around one sixth of the population, that is, more than fifteen thousand Londoners living in the city, liberties and out-parishes (*ibid.*, pp. 192, 226-227, 487; Slack, 1985, p. 151; Cummins *et al.*, 2016, pp. 12-13).

In 1603, at the age of fifteen, Hobbes started his studies at Oxford. In March that year queen Elizabeth passed away and by the time the new king reached London in May, the plague already caught the attention of the city authorities. James I was crowned on July 25, but his 'Triumphant Passage' was postponed due to the epidemics. The quick dispersion of the crowd attracted by the accession was soon followed by the flight of those Londoners who had the means to flee from the plague-stricken city. Among those who took refuge outside the city were many of the magistrates, ministers, and doctors, thereby adding to the disorder that gained ground as the epidemics advanced (Wilson, 1927, pp. 85-113; Shrewsbury, 1971, pp. 264-269). Those who stayed suffered dreadfully: in the city and the liberties more than thirty thousand

pear with the last recorded death from it in London in 1679, but lingered on, probably wrongly identified as typhus, without turning into full scale epidemics for another forty years (Cummins *et al.*, 2016, pp. 17-20, 24-25).

⁴ This is not to say that in between the mentioned outbreaks London was free from plague. According to Paul Slack, "plague was present in twenty-eight of the sixty-four years between 1603 and 1666". Plague was "therefore endemic in London for much, perhaps most, of the early seventeenth century" (Slack, 1985, p. 147). The remnants of the outbreak of 1603 were still present in 1611, the plague of 1636 dragged on until 1648 (*ibid.*, p. 146). Similarly, the last cases of the 1665 plague in London were recorded in 1679 (*ibid.*, p. 69). Ole Peter Grell gives an even bleaker account, stating that in the period between 1563 and 1663 the plague was absent from London for only 24 years, from 1616 till 1624 and again between 1650 and 1664 (Grell, 1990, p. 424). Ian Munro thus concludes that "in the early seventeenth century London's plague was not a calamitous singularity but a constant presence, ebbing and flowing throughout the years but never disappearing" (2000, p. 242).

lost their lives in what turned out to be, in terms of mortality at least, the worst visitation to hit London in the 17th century and one of the most devastating visitations ever occurring in England from the times of the Black Death in 1348 (Shrewsbury, 1971, p. 267; Slack, 1985, p. 151). Hobbes's experience as a student must have been very much formed under the influence of this eruption of bubonic plague. He started his studies at Magdalen Hall in Oxford in 1603, the very year in which "the colleges and halls kept their gates constantly shut day and night, the shops were all shut, the market closed, and the streets emptied of people" (Shrewsbury, 1971, p. 270). As there was a renewal of pestilence at Oxford again in 1605, with removal of the sick to the temporary pest-houses (*ibid.*, p. 282), we can assume that Hobbes spent a good part of his studies under the conditions dictated by the recurring epidemics.

In March 1625 king James I died. He was buried in May, but the coronation of his son Charles was postponed to October because of the fears of rising epidemics. By the time Charles I was joined in London by his newly wedded wife Henrietta Maria in June, plague was already swiftly spreading all over London (*ibid.*, pp. 319-321). Once again, the exodus of many mainly well to do citizens flooded the countryside, further dispersing the infection. At the peak of epidemics in August and September, when "no person of any consequence remained in the capital", the desperation of the poor and sick reached its climax. The fear of disorder was omnipresent (Wilson, 1927, pp. 140-146, 153-155). According to an eyewitness, crippled city authorities "in desperation abandoned every care; every one does what he pleases" (Shrewsbury, 1971, pp. 326, 324). During the plague months of July, August, and September, the mortality bills, climbing to over five thousand dead a week, clearly showed that "London was in the clutches of a plague more deadly than any experienced since the days of the Black Death" (Wilson, 1927, p. 136). Recasting the predicament of 1603 on a larger scale due to the increase in the city population, the final death-roll of this epidemic for London was higher than ever before, with more than thirty-five thousand perished.⁵

The Great Plague of 1625 is of major importance for our purposes. Hobbes finished his translation of Thucydides sometime before he had it printed during 1628 and published in 1629. The sheer size of the project in question implies that by the time of that very visitation his work on Thucydides had already been

⁵ The estimates of the plague casualties in 1625 vary from twenty-six thousand in London and liberties (Slack, 1985, p. 151) to almost fifty thousand for London, liberties, and out-parishes (Shrewsbury, 1971, p. 333; see also Wilson, 1927, p. 174). To get a more precise idea of the magnitude of the calamity that struck London in 1625, we need to take into account the overall mortality for that year. According to J. F. D. Shrewsbury, by including deaths from typhus fever and smallpox, the death-roll "may have approached 100,000", that is around one-third of the population of London at the time (Shrewsbury, 1971, p. 334).

started.⁶ If nothing else, the catastrophic outbreak of disease in 1625, one of the deadliest that have ever hit London, surely had driven Hobbes to pay particular attention to the plague narrative in the *History*.⁷ In 1635 a new strain of plague bacillus entered the English ports of Yarmouth, Hull, and London. Although the ensuing plague in London in 1636 had a much lower mortality than those of 1625 and 1603, it still managed to kill ten and a half thousand of its citizens (Wilson, 1927, p. 174; Shrewsbury, 1971, pp. 371-373; Slack, 1985, p. 151). The last in the series of the great plagues,⁸ which was also the last epidemic of bubonic plague to strike London, took place in 1665. Despite the overall lower mortality when compared to outbursts in 1625 and 1603, this visitation earned its infamous status in the history of the plague in England by claiming the greatest number of lives in the relentlessly growing London (Slack, 1985, p. 151). During its peak in September, London was losing around seven thousand people weekly, and these figures come from the official Bills of mortality which most likely provide an underestimation of the real numbers. According to the burial registers in parishes, the 1665 plague killed almost seventy thousand people in London with liberties and out-parishes (Shrewsbury, 1971, pp. 445-481).

Despite the fact that the plague's capacity to kill through pervasive spreading was not as pronounced during the seventeenth century in England as it was in southern Europe, and Italy in particular, its impact on the whole of English society was still very strong.⁹ With a typical mortality rate between ten and twelve percent,

⁶ See Hoekstra and Iori, 2022, p. 168. Richard Tuck, considering Hobbes's statement about having finished the work on the translation long before publishing it, believes that the project might have started much earlier: "It is also perfectly possible that Hobbes's study of Thucydides (...) was already far advanced by 1620" (Tuck, 2000, p. 100). Likewise, Christopher Warren points to 1621 as the year in which Hobbes came into contact with Thucydides while translating a letter sent by Fulgenzio Micanzio to his patron, William Cavendish (Warren, 2009, p. 266).

⁷ At the end of that fateful year Englishmen learned of the failure of their Cadiz expedition which could have reminded an attentive reader of Thucydides of the much more devastating failure of Athens to expand her empire by embarking on the Sicilian expedition at the time it had barely recovered from the plague. Moreover, the ships returning from Spain were carrying disease which sailors then spread across the country, similarly to what happened after another defeat of the English forces at La Rochelle in 1627 (Slack, 1985, pp. 86-87, 97; cf. Hoekstra and Iori, 2022, pp. 174-175). For the discussion of the impact of war on plague-writing prompted by the 1625 plague, see Rolfe, 2019.

⁸ The visitations of 1563, 1603, 1625, and 1665 were all, one after the other, labelled as the great or the greatest. That provides a strong indication that *P. pestis* did not lose its high virulence throughout the period in consideration (Slack, 1985, p. 54; Wilson, 1927, p. 175).

⁹ In the seventeenth century Italy was hit by only two major plague waves, starting in 1629 and 1656, which, combined, covered the whole of the peninsula. Guido Alfani (2013) shows that in Italy, in spite of the fact that no community was struck by epidemics twice in the course of the

continual outbreaks of plague in England, concentrated mostly in urban areas, took lives of two-thirds of a million of people between 1570 and 1670 (Slack, 1985, pp. 66, 174).¹⁰ As we have seen, the London area was hit powerfully: with mortality around 20 percent in 1563, 1603, 1625 and 1665, the plague took a substantial toll on an ever-increasing metropolitan population, especially in poor parishes. London lost more than two hundred thousand citizens during the century in question (*ibid.*, pp. 151, 155-157, 174; Cummins *et al.*, 2016, p. 4).

Although plague's demographic impact was obvious, it was not its constraint on population growth that was its most prominent characteristic in England of the time. In seventeenth century, England with Wales lost between 8 and 10 percent of the population to plague, the least among all the European countries (Alfani, 2013, p. 408). A more severe demographic impact would have made impossible a two-fold rise in England's population during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Slack, 1985, pp. 186-187). Instead of demographics, both Alan D. Dyer, in his concise assessment of plague's consequences for early modern England (1978), and Paul Slack, in his classical study *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (1985), give prominence to plague's economic, political, social, moral, and religious consequences.

In England plague was predominantly an urban phenomenon, an "inevitable hazard" of living in urban areas (*ibid.*, p. 110).¹¹ By crippling urban life, plague usually had an unproportionate influence on trade and economy in general when compared with actual losses in human life. Interruptions in trade, both international and domestic, generated serious economic setbacks which proved to have not only detrimental effects on the temporary well-being of the citizens but sometimes also far-reaching consequences for the developmental prospects of some townships

century, plague's exceptional territorial pervasiveness coupled with high mortality rates, falling between 30 and 40 percent, and with peaks reaching as high as 50, or even 60 percent, brought thorough devastation reflecting in negative population growth and urbanization rates, as well as in economic and political decline in relation to most other European countries.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the bubonic plague was not the only disease responsible for decimating the English population during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. An array of different diseases were, sometimes on their own and sometimes in sync with the plague, regularly producing severe mortality crises as well: 'sweating sickness', influenza, 'burning fever', 'gaol fever', typhus fever, relapsing fever, typhoid fever, dysentery, malaria, pneumonia, measles, whooping cough, and "tuberculosis as a steady, constant killer in the background" (Shrewsbury, 1971, p. 368; Slack, 1985, pp. 69-78; Cummins *et al.*, 2016, pp. 14-16).

¹¹ Which at the same time explains how English towns, and most notably London, could quickly regain lost inhabitants. London was able to continue its rapid growth despite a calamitous series of deadly epidemics only thanks to the constant arrival of immigrants estimated at six thousand per year during the seventeenth century, mostly from the relatively unaffected countryside (Shrewsbury, 1971, p. 478).

(*ibid.*, p. 188). The predicament was only further aggravated by the flight of the richer classes which resulted in the freezing of even local economic activities in the infected towns. In turn, that provoked strong resentment among the labouring poor who were especially vulnerable to such crises. Practically left alone to cope with the sickness, they would quickly lose their means of sustenance. The concomitant flight of the municipal authorities would often deprive them of any kind of public support as well. By escaping, the official clergy similarly provided fertile ground for the flourishing of non-conformism. At the same time, it made the abandonment to worldly pleasures even more attractive for many. Such a “dwindling sense of civic-mindedness and a disintegrating awareness of communal bonds and loyalties” (Dyer, 1978, p. 319) strengthened or even created deep cleavages in society, “between many established social groups, between family, neighbours, and friends, rich and poor, town and country” (*ibid.*, p. 321; Slack, 1985, pp. 192, 269, 271, 288, 293-294, 309-310). Ruptures in hitherto relatively cohesive urban communities resulted in conflicts taking shape of “a partial revolt, with the threat of a far more serious uprising in the background” (Dyer, 1978, p. 319). These disintegrative processes pervaded all layers of society, including family. Every kind of relation between individuals suffered from deterioration since the plague “led to the abandonment of the deepest instincts of sociability” (*ibid.*, p. 320). In the words of Samuel Pepys’ London diary, written down in September 1665, the plague was “making us cruel as dogs one to another” (*ibid.*).

When it comes to London, a geographical differentiation evidently took place by the beginning of the seventeenth century. Plague was progressively becoming a disease of the poor living in the parishes outside the walls. Rapidly growing population, especially on the city fringes, resulted in overcrowding and dismal living conditions that facilitated the spreading of the epidemics. Poor parishes bore the brunt of each of the successive major visitations starting from 1593 (Slack, 1985, pp. 112-113, 143, 151-169). With the connection of plague with poverty becoming more obvious, the former was increasingly conceived in a social perspective, as a problem that needs to be tackled with and that can be resolved by publicly enforced measures (*ibid.*, pp. 195, 240, 309).

Such a development was given an additional impetus by “the spectres of public disorder and popular licence” (*ibid.*, p. 334). One can grasp the fear the upper classes felt by reading in the contemporary documents of “those that are rebellious and will not be ruled” and of the “unruly infected”, of the “dangerous tumults” and of “outrageous disorders”, of the “great unjust rude rabble” and of “rebellious people” rioting (*ibid.*, pp. 258-259, 283, 305). In the end, the English social fabric showed to be resistant to the disintegration under the conditions of extreme stress caused by the major visitations. However, a breakdown of public authority did occur in Salisbury and Exeter in the 1620s. In Manchester the situation went completely out

of control during epidemics of 1605 and 1645 when “all internal government collapsed” and the order had to be imposed by county justices and parliamentary soldiers (*ibid.*, pp. 258-259). In 1603, 1625, and 1665 not even London was immune to the threat of social chaos (Wilson, 1927, pp. 94-95, 102, 140, 145-146, 153-154, 166; Shrewsbury, 1971, pp. 324, 448).

Crises like these encouraged the creation and imposition of more and more strict plague regulations. Since the disease was understood to be at the same time the cause and the effect of a moral and social disorder, the beginning of English public-health policy was marked by an attempt to fight both the disease and the disorder. That is, the aim of central government was not only the curbing of the contagion, but also the establishment of public order through a more efficient social control (Slack, 1985, pp. 199, 283, 304-305). Much later than on the continent, and in the same year that the College of Physicians was founded as a body charged with improving medical standards in the country, the first set of orders for dealing with plague was promulgated by the Privy Council in 1518.¹² The gradual process of incorporating the proclaimed orders into life of English towns and villages was completed by the first half of the 17th century (*ibid.*, p. 200; Shrewsbury, 1971, p. 413).¹³

The main distinguishing trait of English policy on plague was a norm of strict isolation. The problem was that the segregation of infected households was hard to implement, especially during the major visitations, when it usually collapsed alongside other public endeavours at establishing order. In the first place, it was costly since it required relief for those families that were unable to sustain themselves once severed off from the rest of the community.¹⁴ Secondly, and no less importantly, it was met with a determined resistance, thereby further straining the relations between the authority and its subjects. Not only did it appear as unchristian since it transformed neighbourly assistance into a crime and denied spiritual support to those most in need of it, but it was also frequently perceived as a punishment con-

¹² These orders, providing for the marking of infected houses and their inhabitants, were over time amended, with two major revisions in 1578 and in 1666 (Shrewsbury, 1971, p. 539). London, due to its size and importance, had its own plague orders dating back to 1543. The orders printed in 1583 provided the basis for all their further recensions, until the last collection in 1665 (Wilson, 1927, pp. 14-16).

¹³ For an elaborate analysis of the plague orders in England with its complex system of measures and officials, see Wilson, 1927, pp. 14-84. On the development of a policy for control and on the resistance to it, see Slack, 1985, pp. 199-227, 284-310.

¹⁴ Even though substantial funds for relieving the poor among the victims of the plague were collected either through national collections or through local taxes, financial burdens imposed on townships due to epidemics oftentimes reached unprecedented levels.

demning many to death by shutting them up with the sick and the dying.¹⁵ It was this harsh policy of quarantine that was continuously producing severe tensions between public authority and its subjects till the very disappearance of the plague from England. The more the authorities insisted on it, the more forceful was the resistance, in turn calling for bolstering already rigorous forms of social control.¹⁶ That plague sooner or later became “a basic fact of all urban life” (Dyer, 1978, p. 319; see also Slack, 1985, p. 112) in Europe is attested by a letter written from Geneva by Hobbes to Sir Gervaise Clifton in April 1629, while Hobbes was on a continental tour with his son. In the letter he informs his patron of the decision not to travel south through France and then by sea to Italy because of the plague raging in Provence.¹⁷ Eventually, the travellers failed to reach the Apennine Peninsula due to the war of the Mantuan succession (1629-1630) during which Spanish and French troops introduced a devastating plague into Italy (Alfani, 2013, p. 414).¹⁸

Lives of Hobbes and his contemporaries were intensely marked by the rhythm of the plague visitations. Although their frequency and virulence varied, in a world in which they lived, as Paul Slack aptly remarked, “the threat of disaster was always

¹⁵ Ole Peter Grell (1990) provides an interesting account of the response of the Dutch community in London to plague. It established an advanced system of care for its members which was at the same time in tension with public measures regarding confinement of the infected.

¹⁶ For a valuable insight into how the English plague regulations regarding quarantine operated on the micro level of a particular parish, see Newman (2012).

¹⁷ “There went from Lions while we were there two Englishmen into Italy, whereof one perhaps you know, his name is Mr Smithy, the other is one Captayne Say or Sale. They go down the Rhosne a good way, and then by Land through Prouence to Tolon, a iourney of seuen or eight dayes in wch they can ly in no towne that hath not the plague, and most of the townes in Prouence haue it in vigor. from Tolon they make the rest of their way by water, wch will be 4 dayes at least, and comminge so into Italy are sure to be receaued into no towne there till they have bene 40 dayes ayred in the fieldes, on these termes we might haue gone wth them, but I refused. Wee are I thanke God safe from all dangers of kind here in Geneua. and it were not discretion to passe through the plague on no greater an errand then curiosity of trauellers” (Hobbes, 1994, p. 11).

¹⁸ The continuous presence of plague in England provided for an easy establishment of additional connections between the epidemics and Hobbes’s later biography. For instance, the eruption of civil war coincided with plague visiting Hobbes’s hometown. J. F. D. Shrewsbury notes that “in the fateful year of 1642” Malmesbury was one among the “provincial foci of the plague” (1971, p. 400). Furthermore, in 1666 the disease struck the village of Eyam. Epidemics at Eyam earned its infamous status in the annals of plague in England as its single most lethal outburst, killing up to three-quarters of its disciplined villagers who stayed isolated from the outside world. What is interesting is that Eyam lies in Devonshire, only a few miles away from Chatsworth and twenty miles from Hardwick Hall, the two homes of the Devonshire family to which Hobbes served as a tutor and a secretary the greatest part of his life. William Cavendish, the Earl of Devonshire and Hobbes’s patron, promised in a letter to help the villagers as long as they stay in isolation (*ibid.*, pp. 522, 529).

there” (Slack, 1985, p. 69).¹⁹ That fact is clearly reflected in the literary world. The first ever printed book in English on medicine was a *Little Book* on plague, published around 1483 in London. In fact, each outbreak of plague was followed by a wave of printed material dealing with the sickness. Slack has identified no less than thirty-six relevant publications in the wake of the shattering epidemics of 1625 (*ibid.*, pp. 23-24). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Hobbes paid special attention to Thucydides’ plague narrative while he worked on the translation of his *History* amidst that very same outbreak (cf. Hoekstra, 2016, p. 561).

II. The Plague Narrative in Thucydides’ *History*

Thucydides introduces the plague for the first time at the very beginning of the *History*. In the list of the natural phenomena that had stricken Hellas during the war the plague takes the place of the crowning evil, overshadowing earthquakes, solar eclipses, droughts, and famine (H, 1.23, p. 14). The plague narrative proper (H, 2.47-54, pp. 115-119)²⁰ starts in the early summer of 430 BC, in the second year of the Peloponnesian war when a Spartan army invaded Attica for the second time. As soon as they arrived and started to lay waste to the countryside, another, more horrible enemy followed – a plague suddenly fell upon Athens. The sickness which we are today no longer able to identify, ravaged Athens for two years and reappeared after a year’s pause in 427, lasting altogether for four and a half years (Rechenauer, 2011, p. 244).

The plague at Athens is one of the central events of Thucydides’ *History*. Indeed, “so great a plague and mortality of men” that “was never remembered to have happened in any place before” (H, 2.47, p. 115) played a major role in Thucydides’ case for the Peloponnesian war as the greatest war in Greek history. Its consequences for the Athenian polis and its ability to wage war were dire. The plague not only “devoured the army” besieging Potidaea (H, 2.58, p. 121), but it took the lives

¹⁹ Such a feeling of continuous danger is conveyed by the words of Ralph Josselin, an inhabitant of Earls Colne in Essex, who noted in his diary in December 1666: “One wave after another is this life’s portion.” See Slack, 1985, p. 108.

²⁰ In a recently published article Kinch Hoekstra and Luca Iori have chosen the plague narrative as a sample with which to present their future critical edition of Hobbes’s translation of Thucydides’ *History*. Translation of “The Plague of Athens” is accompanied by a comprehensive apparatus, scrupulously annotating important omissions, additions, errors, and other departures both from the original and from the editions and scholarly resources that were available to Hobbes. Moreover, the translation is preceded by a valuable analysis of different contexts against which Hobbes’s edition should be read, as well as with a discussion of his translation method (Hoekstra and Iori, 2022).

of around one third of Athens' population.²¹ The devastating impact of the pestilence was of such magnitude that it made Thucydides judge unequivocally that “nothing afflicted the Athenians or impaired their strength more than it” (H, 3.87, p. 208). If it was not for Pericles, disheartened Athenians, assaulted by both the plague and the Lacedaemonians, would have sued for peace (H, 2.59, p. 121; 2.64, p. 125). The consequences of “the great plague” were so profound that it was felt in Athens for years to come. The city finally recovered in terms of manpower and finance only at the time of preparations for the Sicilian expedition that took place more than ten years later, in 415 (H, 6.12, p. 383; 6.26, p. 392). However, it never recovered from the loss of Pericles whom the plague, according to Plutarch's *Death of Pericles*, took together with his sons, leaving Athens to be ruled by reckless demagogues that paved the way for its ruin.²²

According to Thucydides, the plague broke out in Ethiopia and then spread through Egypt, Libya, and other territories of the Persian empire. Following the routes of Athenian naval imperialism, the plague first appeared in Piraeus and from there it seized Athens causing widespread epidemics of exceptional mortality. Thucydides, himself a survivor of the sickness, gives a highly detailed description of the course the plague took when it attacked a human body. It is a terrifying account of “the disease, which took first the head, began above and came down and passed through the whole body” (H, 2.49, p. 117). What Thucydides depicts is a methodical destruction of the individual. Since there was no effective treatment for the plague, its victims, democratically chosen irrespectively of “any difference of body, for strength or weakness”, were “carried all away” (H, 2.51, p. 117). Thucydides' vivid portrayal of the horrors the sickness inflicted upon its victims forces his readers to share in the close perspective of a plague's survivor. That makes them acutely aware of their own vulnerability in the face of such an unexpected and overwhelming evil that “exceeded the human nature in the cruelty wherewith it handled each

²¹ This estimate is given by James Longrigg (1992, pp. 41-42). Georg Rechenauer (2011, p. 245) arrives to the same conclusion on the basis of the precise numbers Thucydides gives regarding deaths due to the pestilence among the army at Potidaea. Athenian commander Agnon, son of Nicias, returned from Potidaea “having of four thousand men in less than forty days lost one thousand and fifty to the plague” (H, 2.58, p. 121), which makes for mortality of young and able male adults of just above 25 percent. When summarising Athenian losses caused by the epidemics, Thucydides says that among the soldiers plague killed “no less than four thousand four hundred; and horsemen, three hundred” and among “the other multitude, innumerable” (H, 3.87, p. 208). Plague and war caused a severe depopulation of Athens: “there were less than half as many Athenians in 403 than in 431” (Strauss, 1986, p. 70).

²² It seems that Alcibiades was sentenced to death under a law proscribing heresy introduced during the epidemics. Therefore, the plague might also be responsible for Athens losing its most able general (Longrigg, 1992, pp. 41-42; H, 6.15, p. 385) who, moreover, betrayed Athens and directly helped Sparta win the war (Ribarević, 2022).

one” (H, 2.50, p. 117). Thucydides makes clear that even his masterful rendition of its devastating course through the human body pales in comparison with the reality of epidemics by emphasising that the plague “far surmounted all expression of words” (H, 2.50, p. 117). Plague, that is, defies *logos*.²³

Due to its systematic and medically informed character, Thucydides’ plague narrative was oftentimes the subject of interest of historians of medicine.²⁴ However, it seems that Thucydides’ main interest in composing it was lying elsewhere. Namely, it is the plague’s social and political consequences that Thucydides describes with the utmost care – a progressive dissolution of the human body caused by the disease finds its mirror image in the destruction of the Athenian body politic (H, 2.54, p. 119; cf. Kallet, 2013, p. 358). Most of the Athenians got “infected by mutual visitation” wherefrom resulted “the greatest mortality”. The plague thereby took “the honestest men” who, despite the obvious danger, attended the sick. On the other hand, it also killed those that were left alone (H, 2.51, pp. 117-118). The result was the destruction of the nucleus of the social life, the family. Furthermore, the plague generated widespread *anomia*. In a *crescendo* stretching over two consecutive passages Thucydides describes its eruption in a society decimated by epidemics. We learn that “oppressed with the violence of the calamity and not knowing what to do, men grew careless both of holy and profane things alike” (H, 2.52, p. 118).²⁵ The plague triggered “the great licentiousness” (H, 2.53, p. 118) since it shrank the time horizon in which people operated. Recognizing that they had no time left, men and women indulged without hesitation in pleasures that beforehand they deemed shameful and abandoned all the pursuits of the honourable that in-

²³ According to Adam Parry, the plague “is in short the most sudden, most irrational, most incalculable, and most demonic aspect of war in Thucydides’ view of history” (1969, p. 116; cf. Longrigg, 2000, p. 57).

²⁴ Apart from his detailed presentation of the sickness’ symptoms and its development, Thucydides is usually credited with being the first to use the concepts of contagion and acquired immunity.

²⁵ How close Athens was to anarchy during the plague is clearly visible from the complete disregard for the laws regarding burials that occurred at the height of the epidemics. Within the horizon of the Greek world, shared alike by Sophocles’ *Antigone* and warring parties in the Peloponnesian war who went to great lengths to retrieve and take proper care of the dead bodies of the fallen soldiers (Longrigg, 1980, pp. 216-217; Cvijanović, 2019), it must have been inconceivable to treat the dead with impudence and impiety to which Thucydides himself testified (H, 2.52, p. 118). It was a step further even from the scandalous and unprecedented decision of the Athenians to leave their temples and ancestors’ graves in order to fight the Persians (see Forde, 1986, pp. 436-437, 444-445). At the same time, it was something to which Hobbes himself was also able to testify. At the peak of major visitations in England decent burials were no longer possible and plague-pits devouring innumerable bodies were the only way in which a plague-stricken city could dispense of its dead.

volved any pain (H, 2.53, p. 119; Rechenauer, 2011, p. 259). This exchange of honour for pleasure clearly evidenced the moral corruption of the Athenian society. In the end, seeing that gods were not providing any protection and disregarding civil power punishments in the expectation of an imminent death, “neither the fear of the gods nor laws of men awed any man” (H, 2. 53, p. 119). In short, plague engendered a dissolution of kinship, a collapse of morals, and *anomia*, regarding both human and divine laws.²⁶ The result is the resolution of the Athenian society into a multitude of individuals acting unilaterally in accordance with their short-term goals (cf. Rechenauer, 2011, pp. 259-260).

It is important to emphasise that the plague narrative follows immediately after Pericles’ Funeral speech (H, 2.35-46, pp. 108-115). It provides a comment on “the noblest of all visions of political life” (Orwin, 1988, p. 844) by contrasting it with a vivid picture of an irresistible decay that opens up “a hellish state of nature” (Evrigenis, 2014, p. 190; Rechenauer, 2011, p. 256). First, we witness a celebration of both the Athenian body politic and the individual bodies of its citizens that have found glorious death in sacrificing themselves for the *polis*. And then we are made eyewitnesses to a disintegration not only of the individual bodies who perish in an agonizing death devoid of any dignity, but also of the entire body politic. The plague narrative can actually be read as treating the “change in the body” as “an image for the change in the body politic” (Padel, 1992, p. 53) and thereby as pre-figuring the harrowing discussion of the *stasis* at Corcyra in book III of the *History* (Pouncey, 1980, pp. 31-33, 147). Clifford Orwin appropriately remarked that while Thucydides’ analysis of the sedition in Corcyra (H, 3.70-83, pp. 198-206) revealed the devastating effects of a thorough politicization of society, his description of the great plague dealt with the very similar consequences obtained by society’s radical depoliticization prompted by epidemics (Orwin, 1988, p. 843).

What initially sparked the internal dissension between the few and the people at Corcyra was a “world war” between oligarchic Sparta and democratic Athens.²⁷ Even though the stimulus for the *stasis* came from without, the internal strife soon

²⁶ As Hoekstra and Iori note, in translating Thucydides’ depiction of the social chaos engendered by the plague, Hobbes opted to emphasize the *anomic* character of the situation. Instead of funeral customs, in Hobbes’s translation we read of funeral laws. Furthermore, according to Hobbes they were “all now broken” instead of “all thrown into confusion” (H, 2.52, p. 118; Hoekstra and Iori, 2022, p. 210). Interestingly, in the next passage, we read that “neither the fear of the gods nor laws of men awed any man” (H, 2.53, p. 119) even though the Greek word that was translated by awe denotes restraint (Hoekstra and Iori, 2022, p. 211). In the light of later Hobbes we are familiar with from the pages of *Leviathan*, his using of the term awe might signal that what we read about is an account of a state devoid of the state (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 180-181).

²⁷ For my discussion of the relation between Thucydides’ *stasis* and Hobbes’s state of nature that I draw upon here, see Ribarević, 2022, pp. 9-10.

acquired its own momentum, moving beyond the control of the outside forces (H, 3.75, p. 201). The conflicts rapidly grew in intensity resulting in horrific crimes. It took no more than seven days, during which “all forms of death” were seen (H, 3.81, 204), for the entire Corcyraean social fabric to collapse. Acting as if they were infected by the plague, the Corcyraeans by themselves achieved very much the same result that the epidemics in Athens produced previously: there were no bonds of kinship, no morals, and no human or divine law left to uphold the existence of the polis and restrain the violence. The corrosion worked its way right down to the individual level, lessening even the grip that the factions in conflict exerted on their members. In the end, the Corcyraean polis was practically broken down to warring individuals whose natures became free from all restrictions. Since “the nature of man, which is wont even against law to do evil, gotten now above the law”, justice was overthrown, and passions ruled without any regard for order (H, 3.84, pp. 206-207).

Caught in *stasis*, Corcyra disintegrated as a body politic since its inhabitants ceased to be citizens, losing everything that bound them together. They were bereft even of their language as a foundation for political action: “the received value of names imposed for signification of things was changed into arbitrary” (H, 3.82, p. 204; see Wilson, 1982; Loraux, 2009). Miriam Reik shrewdly observed that for Thucydides “civil disruption can be described as a breakdown in the proper functions of language, and with it, the breakdown of the shared values of the community that language stabilizes” (1977, p. 42). However, it seems that what happened at Corcyra was even more sinister than what occurred at Athens during the plague. Instead of a breakdown of values that Thucydides made us witness in Athens, *stasis* encouraged their inversion (Loraux, 2009, p. 273; Edmunds, 1975, p. 88; Orwin, 1988, p. 835). As the Peloponnesian war further unfolded, events at Corcyra were bound to be repeated in numerous *poleis* all over Greece. Instigated from outside, *stasis* could easily set in in any given *polis* since they were all internally divided between the two opposing factions (H, 3.82, p. 204). In the end, Athens itself fell victim to the same disease. In the wake of the Sicilian expedition, already weakened Athens faced widespread revolts of the subjected cities. Caught “in sedition among themselves” (H, 8.96, pp. 560-561), the Athenians eventually overthrew democracy and established oligarchy in its stead.

The relation between the two accounts dealing with the dissolution of society under pressure was often remarked by interpreters of Thucydides’ *History* (e.g., Brock, 2000, p. 30; Kosak, 2000, p. 46; Rechenauer, 2011, p. 248). Since both plague and *stasis* produced a very similar outcome, Leo Strauss was right to identify *stasis* as “a man-made” plague (Strauss, 1964, p. 147). In fact, he was in that respect only following the Greeks themselves who brought into close connection the sickness and *stasis* by the intermediary of the image of the sick city, *polis nosousa* (Padel, 1992, p. 53). Although we owe the first literary report of an epidemic

to Homer's *Iliad* (Longrigg, 2000, p. 55), "the equation of disorder in the state with a sickness of the body politic" is something that, according to Roger Brock, we do not find until the time of Solon and Theognis (Brock, 2000, p. 24). However, as Jennifer Kosak shows, it is only with Herodotus, Aristophanes, and Euripides that we encounter a clear understanding of a city in *stasis* as suffering from a disease (Kosak, 2000, pp. 45-46; see also Loraux, 2009, pp. 263-264; 1997, pp. 21-23). Not only did the Greeks start to think of a civil strife in terms of sickness, but they went a step further, identifying *stasis* with disease (Kosak, 2000, pp. 46-47). Even though Thucydides himself does not employ the said imagery verbatim, his parallel discussion of the plague and *stasis* reveals that he was one of the most prominent writers in that tradition of thought about civil strife.

III. "Democratic Rabies" in *Leviathan*

When we turn to Hobbes, we find that the link between his notion of the state of nature and Thucydides' understanding of *stasis* was established early on. It was already in 1975 that Richard Schlatter noted in his edition of Hobbes's translation that "these famous paragraphs on the horrors of war and revolutionary spirit are pure Hobbes and might have come from the pages of *Leviathan*" (Thucydides, 1975, p. 580). In a recent article, I have tried to show that Thucydides' text might have informed Hobbes's ideas to a certain extent while he was working on the different aspects of his description of the state of nature (Ribarević, 2022). First, when formulating his famous description of the life in the pre-political state of nature existing before the founding of the state, Hobbes's *Leviathan* closely echoes Thucydides' depiction of the manner of life in the ancient Hellas. Furthermore, by locating the sources of the conflicts in the state of nature in the human nature and by identifying them as competition, diffidence and glory, Hobbes reiterates the account Thucydides' Athenians give of the causes that compelled them to establish an empire and consequently trigger the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war. But it is thanks to the notion of *stasis* that the connection between Thucydides and Hobbes is most directly established. Hobbes's description of the state of nature in its political aspect as following the collapse of the state due to a civil war, matches to a large extent Thucydides' classical model of *stasis*. On that point Hobbes's *Leviathan* is quite clear: "it may be perceived what manner of life there would be, where there were no common Power to feare; by the manner of life, which men that have formerly lived under a peacefull government, use to degenerate into civill Warre" (L, 13.11, p. 187). In Thucydides's *History* we see how *polis* disintegrates under pressure of competing political factions led by glory-seeking individuals, leaving no common ground between former citizens.

However, the same outcome was produced in Athens by the plague. What is more, in a certain sense it is the plague that provides a perfect model for the com-

plete dissolution of society. The epidemics pushed the idea of war of every man against every other to its limits by transforming each man and woman, irrespective of their subjective intentions, necessarily into a mortal danger for everyone else. The plague thereby brought to life the Hobbesian nightmare of a multitude of wolves. Still, in literature we do not cross as often as in the case of *stasis* the idea that the plague too provides an example of the Hobbesian state of nature (see Brown, 1987, p. 59; Slomp, 1990, pp. 572, 579; Evrigenis, 2014, pp. 190-194). And the discussion regarding the place of epidemics in Hobbes's understanding of the state of nature is scarce at best.²⁸ Indeed, one might say that there is a very good reason for its absence. As much as Hobbes might be incorporating different aspects of Thucydides' multifaceted analysis of a disintegration of society in Chapter 13 of *Leviathan*, we would be at loss to find sickness among either the causes or the examples of the predicament which the individuals face in the state of nature.²⁹

²⁸ In a short article published at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Thomas Poole turned the attention of scholars to relations between Hobbes, the plague, and Thucydides. Building on the work of Francesca Falk who identified the two persons appearing on the frontispiece to *Leviathan* as plague doctors and established a connection between Hobbes's conception of sovereignty and sanitation and biopolitics (2011), Poole argues that Hobbes had "a broader conception of public safety" taking into account biological and psychological threats alongside the martial (Poole, 2020). Although the small size of the figures in question precludes the possibility of their definite identification, a deserted town in which they appear, accompanied only by armed patrols, is evocative of English towns under plague. In that perspective the figure of Leviathan, operating through soldiers and doctors as its agents and containing in itself the bodies of the missing subjects, might be conceived as the salvation through which their lives are saved. See also Agamben, 2015, pp. 55-56.

²⁹ As for Hobbes's discussion of the plague as a biological disease, we find it in *Decameron Physiologicum*, his last work written in 1678. Focusing on the much-debated question of its cause, Hobbes in his *Decameron* opts for a contagionist understanding. He rejects implicitly the theological theory, which interprets the plague as a result of God's inscrutable will, and explicitly the miasma theory, according to which poisoned air engenders contagion. Referring to "Monsieur Des Cartes, a very ingenious man" as the source of inspiration for his explanation, Hobbes points to the "little flies", "infectious creatures in the air, whereof so many die in the plague". Hobbes argues that the "killing thing" must be some "creatures (...) that invade us from the air", "a fly, whereof great numbers get into the blood, and there feeding and breeding worms, obstruct the circulation of blood, and kill the man". Having in mind that it was not until the very end of the nineteenth century that the rat-flea-man sequence was scientifically established, this was an extraordinarily advanced way of understanding the way plague is propagated. Additionally, Hobbes points to overpopulated suburbs inhabited by the "the multitude thronged together", "the poorest of the people" as a part of the answer to the riddle of the plague's aetiology. That he was very much aware of the class character of the plague is further attested by his observation that "when a town is infected, the gentlemen, and those that live on wholesome food, scarce one of five hundred die of the plague" (Hobbes, 1845, pp. 136-137).

That is, we encounter only its results, but not the epidemic itself.³⁰

However, Hobbes does engage with the problem of sickness attacking a body politic in a different chapter of *Leviathan*. At the end of its second part, which focuses on the Leviathan as the state, he compiles a sort of catalogue of diseases that are “the causes of his Mortality” (L, 28.27, p. 363). In a Greek manner, Hobbes in Chapter 29 identifies various political doctrines as illnesses that take aim at the absolute sovereignty of the state.³¹ The doctrines in question operate in two different contexts. On the one hand, if unchecked, they start spreading in the civil state, infecting citizens and fuelling discord. On the other, it is those very same doctrines that provide the reasons for a continuing conflict between former citizens as they find their state destroyed by a civil war. In contrast to the original aspect of the state of nature that existed before the advent of the state and in which it was the human nature that supplied the causes for conflict, in the state of nature in its political aspect the main reasons for a universal war stem from the religious and political doctrines lethal to the existence of Leviathan. Therefore, Chapter 29 should be read as an appendix to the discussion of the state of nature, providing the missing explanation for the identification between the state of nature and the civil war that was merely asserted in Chapter 13 (Ribarević, 2022, p. 9).

In Chapter 29 Hobbes is dedicated to listing those doctrines that fuel “intestine disorder” (L, 29.1, p. 363) and linking them to various diseases. It turns out that such a way of proceeding evokes Thucydides and his understanding not only of *stasis* but also of its prefiguration, the plague. In paragraph 13, among different historical examples of civil disorder, we encounter *stasis* as well. Hobbes there speaks

³⁰ If indeed plague might be taken for a representation of the state of nature in its purity, then why does Hobbes not use it in his argument in a straightforward manner? There are two possible and contrasting answers to this question. One is provided by Ioannis Evrigenis who argues that society under plague is atomized to such an extent that it has reached a point of no return and therefore cannot be of interest to Hobbes who needs examples which do not preclude the establishment of a civil state (Evrigenis, 2014, pp. 194-195). However, to think of plague as of “anarchy *in extremis*” (*ibid.*, p. 195) would require transforming a peak of an epidemic into an ongoing state. Which leads us to the other answer which takes into account historical experience. The plague in Hobbes’s England, despite its potential for regularly causing “carnavalesque social mayhem” (Munro, 2000, p. 247), never pushed the entire society into a state devoid of public authority. The lapses were few, short-term and local. Furthermore, the plague in early seventeenth century became more and more conceived of as a socially conditioned illness. In contrast, Hobbes understood the state of nature in its directly relevant political aspect as provoked by beliefs and actions of members of the upper classes. Still, these considerations need not prevent Hobbes from thinking of the state of nature in terms of epidemics. For example, Gabriella Slomp notes that both Thucydides and Hobbes “recognize the ‘epidemic’ nature of the desire for power” and points out “the contagious character of glory-seeking behaviour” (Slomp, 1990, p. 576).

³¹ For a discussion of the diseases of the body politic in *Leviathan*, see Springborg, 2018.

of “Cities of *Greece*” that were “continuously disturbed with seditions of the Aristocraticall, and Democraticall factions” which erupted in “almost every Commonwealth, desiring to imitate the Lacedaemonians; the other Athenians” (L, 29.13, p. 368). Hobbes here uses the same term, sedition, which he employed when translating Thucydides’ *stasis* more than two decades before.

However, regarding the possible link with the epidemic, it is the next paragraph that is revealing. There Hobbes once more turns the attention of the reader to “the books of Policy, and Histories of the ancient Greeks, and Romans”. For those who have not yet received the antidote provided by Hobbes’s civil science, being exposed to such teachings can induce an infection, especially among “young men”. The infection manifests itself in monarchical subjects harbouring ideas inimical to monarchy. The first idea is that prosperity is dependent on introducing a popular government, second, that subjects in democracy live in liberty and those in monarchy are reduced to slavery, and finally, third, that it is “lawfull, and laudable” for anyone to kill a king, “provided before he do it, he call him Tyrant”. According to Hobbes, there is nothing “more prejudiciall to a Monarchy” than allowing the public teaching of such doctrines since it is their propagation that brings back the state of nature, albeit in its more sinister political guise. These texts contain a strong “venime” that was responsible for “frequent Seditions, and Civill warres” and that is still capable of instigating subjects to revolt against monarchy (L, 29.14, pp. 369-370).

Hobbes compares the illness in question to a viral infection that by far surpasses all other contagious diseases in mortality. “*Hydrophobia*, or *fear of Water*” is more deadly even than the plague itself, killing each and every of its non-inoculated victims. It spreads by the bite of “a mad Dogge”, turning the one bitten into a mad dog too (L, 29.14, p. 370). In a monarchy these mad dogs are none other than “Democraticall writers” who propagate a sort of collective madness. It is not only subjects that are sick with hydrophobia, but the state itself. The water it desperately needs and abhors at the same time is the absolute sovereignty which, due to “a certain *Tyrannophobia*”, its subjects will not stand. The identification of the absolute sovereignty, as the only remedy to a civil war, and tyranny precludes the possibility of the salvation of the state. Following the Greek tradition, Hobbes creates “democratic rabies”³² as a new sort of epidemic menacing the existence of a body politic (Ribarević, 2022, p. 11).³³

³² For a rare discussion of Hobbes’s “politics of rabies”, developed in the larger context of his “politics of animalization and rehumanization”, see Rosello, 2012, pp. 270-271.

³³ Hobbes was familiar with yet another famous text depicting the social outcomes of plague in the tradition of Thucydides and Lucretius. As much as Thucydides’ text might have informed Hobbes’s idea of the state of nature to a certain extent, the wording of Boccaccio’s depiction of the social outcomes of the Black Death in Florence in the “Introduction” to the “First day” in

As Kinch Hoekstra has convincingly shown, Hobbes's initial response to the challenges of rising democratic oratory in English monarchy during the 1620s, threatening to drag England into the wars on the continent, was translating Thucydides (Hoekstra, 2016). His *History*, understood in a proper manner thanks to Hobbes's new translation and its prefatory materials, should have silently instructed the English public regarding risks such a policy would expose England to. However, by 1651 Hobbes had long since changed his mind and turned from history to philosophy in order to provide "the Antidote of solid Reason" (L, 29.14, p. 369). In the changed political circumstances of the post-revolutionary England, the question is who and why should receive such an immunization?

With monarchy giving way to republic, a new light is cast upon the meaning of Hobbes's intervention. It is self-evident that democratic ideas pose a threat to a monarchy. What needs to be clarified is whether democratic ideas bring an end to every state, regardless of its form. To be precise, is "democratic rabies" an anti-statist pathogen, inimical to every state including a democratic one? In other words, is democracy itself incurably ill?

Leaving aside all that might be termed democratic in Hobbes's theory of state (to mention just equality, consent, and original democracy), I will briefly underline only the deficiencies of democratic state from the point of view of my present argument. The problem with democratic assembly is that each subject is at the same time a member of the sovereign body. In the absence of the sovereign representa-

Decameron has an even more Hobbesian air, as illustrated by the following sentences: "In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city. For like everybody else, those ministers and executors of the laws who were not either dead or ill were left with so few subordinates that they were unable to discharge any of their duties. Hence everyone was free to behave as he pleased (...) It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another, and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbours and rarely or never visiting their relatives, addressing them only from a distance; this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them" (Boccaccio, 1972, pp. 7-9). What we witness here in *Decameron* is once again a complete dissolution of, in this instance, the Florentine society into a multitude of individuals lacking any respect for family ties, law and morals. It should be noted that *Decameron* was well known in England at the time, especially after its English translation appeared in 1620. That it was widely read is confirmed by successive reprints in 1624, 1634, 1657 and 1684. Hobbes himself must have been well acquainted with the text, since we find *Decamerone* alongside two other Boccaccio's works in Hardwick library's *Old catalogue* written in Hobbes's own hand (Talaska, 2013, p. 118). The fact that Hobbes decided to entitle his late work *Decameron Physiologicum* allows for the conclusion that he held Boccaccio's masterpiece in high esteem (see Wright, 2014, p. 190).

tive who serves as a focal point providing a will unifying the whole body politic, the danger of dissolving the central regulatory instance into a multitude of centres competing for power rises sharply. We know that Hobbes emphasised Thucydides' praise of Athenian democracy under Pericles, when "it was democratical in name, but in effect monarchical" (Thucydides, 1989, p. 573). What ensued after Pericles' death was a struggle for power that was fought in a significant part over words. The result was a corruption of language, a politically fatal process that Thucydides registers in his account of *stasis*. The plague, on the other hand, pushes us to contemplate its consequences *ad extremum*, providing for a liminal situation in which virtually any communication becomes impossible, similarly to the way in which the notion of the state of nature in its original, pre-political aspect makes the emergence of a language a puzzle that stubbornly defies non-theological accounts.

Such a scenario that brings the state as close as possible to the state of nature must have horrified Hobbes. From his perspective, a democratic state finds itself necessarily in an uneasy balance between Leviathan and Behemoth. Which means that Hobbes does not see danger only or even predominantly in the dissemination of democratic ideas in non-democratic settings. Rather, it is a question of democratic dissemination of those ideas that are pernicious for the existence of the state as such. The main threat for human survival is not a disease in the biological sense. What he fears is a sickness that, although of a different order, has as devastating an effect on the society as the plague. It is *an epidemic of words*.³⁴

³⁴ Sharon Achinstein (1992) establishes a link between government's struggle with the plague and its efforts to suppress the publication and sale of ballads in the early 17th century England. The circulation of the popular literature that was deemed corrupted was seen as inducing infection as deadly as the plague itself since, according to the renaissance concept of contagion, moral and material causes of the disease were not separable. Moral degradation, easily spread by printed texts, leads to physical weakening and social disorder that eventually provoke the sickness in both the individual and the community. That is why, "as a metaphor for verbal communication, the plague could also signify the spread of subversive ideas, religious dissent, or even treason" (*ibid.*, p. 36). She points to Thomas Dekker, a well-known dramatist and writer of pamphlets, who in *The Wonderful Year*, a famous account of the 1603 plague, notes that his book is "some-what infected" with the plague, thereby correlating "political or moral corruption with the dissemination of ideas in print" (*ibid.*, p. 35).

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