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FROM THE EBOLA HANDSHAKE TO SOCIAL DISTANCING

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Abstract

Human history has seen many epidemics and pandemics. Each time culture had a different reaction to the tragedy of illness and death but there are feelings and reactions common to the human species, when confronting the fear of illness and the pain of death.

Key words:

Pandemic, Epidemics , Plague, Coronavirus, Bewilderment

Human history shows us how societies have always had to confront epidemics (and pandemics) and how often they emerged from them changed. The Giustinian plague in 541 B.C., caused the death of 25 million people, the Black Death, killed more than half the population in Europe alone in the XIV century , the Spanish flu in 1918 had

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50 million victims, and more recent examples like Ebola in 2014 had more than 11 thousand victims. A new anti-epidemic kind of greeting was invented during the last of these, the 'Ebola handshake', where instead of using hands, people could touch each other's elbow. Today we can talk to each other through a mask from a meter away.

The world has changed much from the past: from the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages where societies were more static than today with globalization and widespread global travel. Under these conditions a virus can rapidly cover the entire world like never before. At the same time we have medical knowledge and a medicalization of population health that was unthinkable in the past.

Nonetheless, reading the historical accounts we can find words and images that makes us uncomfortable and scared, because they sound familiar. Since biblical times lepers have been shunned and isolated. In the medical and religious records of the Black Death we can just see how the fear of an invisible enemy and the uncertainty of the future prevailed over everything else. Human relations were harshly tested; in the Introduction to the First day of the Decameron, Boccaccio says: "*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*".²

In the general feeling of helplessness people looked for a scapegoat (usually found in Jews and foreigners, accused of being anointers), cities were closed and life itself was put on hold waiting for things to end. Agnolo di Tura, one of the most important Italian chroniclers of the XVI century, born in Siena, describes fear and uncertainty for the future "*The bells stopped singing, and nobody was crying for their dead, no matter the cause of death, since everybody waited for their death; and things went in such a way that people were convinced that no one could survive, and many people kept saying: this is the end of the world.*"

² Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Translated by G. H. McWilliam. 2nd ed. London: Penguin Books, 1995, 8–9. Annotated by Shona Kelly Wray.

Voltaire with all the genius of his witty satire, tells us in *Candide* of a disease that was all about human relations “*Pasqualina had it (syphilis) from an erudite friar, that originally got it from an old duchess, that had it herself from a cavalry captain, that had it from a marquess, that had it from a page, that had it from a Jesuit that got it during his novitiate directly from a Cristoforo Colombo comrade. I will personally give it to no one, because I am dying.*”.

Syphilis was imported from the New World and quickly became a head-scratcher for the physicians of the time (and for many generations to come), that couldn't find the etiology and for a long time couldn't even treat it. In 1496 the first syphilitics came to Paris, ignoring the ordinance that forbade them from entering the city under penalty of death (as it was for lepers). The disease was thought to be the expression of the wrath of God to punish lewdness and human concupiscence. It could be thought that this was a religious interpretation of a phenomenon for which there was no explanation, in a world dominated by ignorance and superstition. Even today there are people who think that the coronavirus is a ‘warning from the Holy Mother’, to remind us that religious practice and explanation is not something that can be confined to a superstition of the past.

In 430 B.C. the ‘plague of Athens’ caused the death of one third of the population who lived inside the walls. The historian Tucidides tells us in his *Historiae*: “*There was no memory of a disease so severe that brought so many deaths. Physicians couldn't deal with it, and initially fought it without knowing the nature of it, and they were the first to die because they stayed near the sick people, and no human skill could do anything about it; prayers in the shrines, and asking for help to the oracles, nothing worked; and in the end, overcome by misfortune, they gave up every attempt*”. (Vol.II, 47, 3-4).

The severity of this event changed the Athenians: they became ruthless, seeking only pleasure, forgot the fundamental values of honour and honesty and lost religious sentiment. The population developed theories of a Spartan conspiracy: “*(the plague) suddenly fell upon Athens; the first victims where the people who lived in Piraeus, so that there started a rumor that the Peloponnesians had poisoned the wells (there weren't any fountains at that time). Later the disease reached the high city, causing an increase in the number of victims*” (Vol II,48, 2). The Athenian democracy was greatly

weakened by these events and it was the beginning of the end of the Athenian hegemony on the Greek world.

The black death completely changed the balance of power in Europe and caused the collapse of the feudal system. The disappearance of many of the serfs and the resulting shortage of labour gave them much greater bargaining power and freed them from dependance on their traditional masters. This eventually led to the freeing of resources and the flourishing of ideas that led to the renaissance.

Luckily for us, today we find ourselves confronted by a different scenario from that of measles, that wiped out entire societies of Mesoamerica when the Spanish arrived or the Black Death, cholera, or the Spanish flue that decimated Europe. Comparing events that differ one from the other in timing and transmissibility and lethality, we can only give suggestions, rather than formulaic responses. However, there are some elements, apart from the universal element of fear, that keep recurring and seem to guide humans in these difficult times: the search for answers, often involving questioning the reality in which we live, and establishing our priorities as to what is really important for us.

The main reaction of people to coronavirus was that of a spasmodic search for information, through all existing media and communication methods and through comparing news, sources, opening debates with colleagues and friends, in a search for truth. Is it really a life-threatening disease? Does it stick to surfaces and for how long? Is it true that only older people are at risk, is there an ethnic difference in susceptibility? In discussing conspiracy theories about China and the Chinese I would point out the reactions of the Italian population against the Chinese community in the first weeks of the emergency; and the comparison with the Black Death spreaders doesn't seem absurd.

In Italy, apart from the 'viral' information that has certainly had an influence on people's behaviour, everybody, none excluded, struggled in the search for the 'real' news.

That is because the only way to control fear is by trying to understand what is happening, to know the enemy we have to deal with, and when we don't have

adequate answers, look for the best answer there is out there for us (coherent with how we see the world, even if we have to change things a bit). So the religious interpretation of the Venus's curse we spoke of is not that far away; there are many now who are convinced that the world is punishing us as we're the most pernicious species of the planet earth (with which I don't fully disagree), but their vision tends to have a strong spiritualist connotation.

Looking for answers is an important asset for the individual, it can lower the level of fear, train the ability to think if used correctly, and eventually better understand what we believe and where we stand. What is most important, is to avoid the manipulation of this research and of people's fears to control public opinion.

This research can also help to avoid that feeling of bewilderment, that the historian of religion E. De Martino thought as a very risky state, where individuals fear they are losing their domestic points of reference that give meaning to everyday life. This 'bewilderment' can be caused by difficult events or situations (illness, death, moral conflict, migration), and individuals can be overwhelmed by uncertainty and not able to act.

The individual that feels unstable, is worried and scared, not only tries to understand what and why something is happening, but also how the reality around him (other people, the community, the government) are dealing with these events. As social animals we have to feel part of a mechanism that works. Rousseau's social contract wouldn't make sense if it wasn't doing any good to the individual. Would you go hunting wild boar with a bunch of people armed with a swiss knife?

People search for information about what's happening (numbers, life stories and experiences), how and why (where does it come from? Whose fault is it? why is it happening?), criticizing the system (positively or not) and its capability to deal with the emergency.

They reconsider their idea of reality as a status quo that cannot be changed, not only from a geopolitical point of view, but mostly for what concerns their everyday lives. We can all think about that for a moment.

Compared to other pandemics in history we have the huge advantage of our knowledge of past events, and having such knowledge and technology that can make a difference in dealing with the emergency; we should use them wisely.

For what concerns the universal human, we are still here with our unanswered questions, as we were when confronted with the Black Death. Each one of us will be able to rethink his personal views, and the values of the society he lives in, and most important of all reset his priorities for when his/her social life will start again.

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