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# Teaching Pandemics Amidst a Pandemic

J. R. Webb

While it is not always easy to convince students of the value and relevance of studying societies centuries removed from our own, the current pandemic has understandably led to a renewed interest in pandemics past, especially the terrible onslaught of bubonic plague that struck in the mid-fourteenth century. In my frequent offering in the Core Curriculum, HIST 111: Western Civilization to the Reformation, the broad chronological structure of the course correlates to the seasonal rhythms of the semester. April in a spring semester and November in the fall signal our reaching the end of the period defined as the Middle Ages. With this comes a discussion of the “Black Death” of the late 1340s, the immediate social response to it, and the longer-term trends and changes in its wake. It offers an opportunity to think broadly and globally, as we consider how new empires reconfigured patterns of trade, setting the stage for increased movements of peoples, goods, and pathogens along new and revived routes. While it is not our only meeting to consider the role of the natural world and disease in human history, it is the one most clearly oriented in that direction.

Every class meeting of my Western Civilization course has a brief primary source for students to read and analyze. For this session, we tackle an excerpt from one of the great works in the canon of Western literature, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Many will know this Italian masterpiece, which consists of one-hundred short tales told by a group of ten people over a period of ten days. Despite the nearly seven centuries’ distance, the often-risque stories are sure to both entertain and surprise the modern student. Historians can use these fictional stories as

windows into late medieval Florentine society, but a much more direct view can be had from the author’s introduction to his work, a non-fictional account of the bubonic plague in Florence in the spring and summer of 1348. It provides the setup for why the group of ten people (seven women and three men) had fled their city in order to take refuge in a villa in the nearby hills, in the fourteenth-century equivalent of the “social distancing” of our own time. Prior to the coalescence of this group of storytellers, Boccaccio’s introduction to the *Decameron* serves as

the best surviving eyewitness account of the initial outbreak of the Black Death in a major European city, and it is this portion of the work that forms the assigned reading. While it is more descriptive than the plot-driven stories that follow, its visceral reality makes for even more compelling reading.

Boccaccio’s introduction provides golden opportunities for close readings where the class follows together line by line. As to the causality of the epidemic, Boccaccio, like many of his contemporaries, admits God’s overall command of human affairs and suggests the plague was divine punishment for human iniquity. But Boccaccio also presents another possibility, as evidenced by his either/or statement. It could also be due to the “influence of heavenly bodies,” as our translation has it (Boccaccio’s original gives *per operazion de’ corpi superiori*). While this phrase also tends to keep students locked into thinking about religion, when I ask them to replace “heavenly” with its close synonym, “celestial,” it opens up some other possibilities. In fact, Boccaccio is here expressing the dominant “scientific” theory of the plague at the time, that an unfavorable alignment of planets had led to noxious air that, in turn, caused the pestilence. (This same principle of planetary or stellar influence bequeathed the terminology behind one of the most common illnesses of our time, influenza.) In a mind that subscribes to God’s omnipotence, this can merely be a secondary cause, but Boccaccio seems to want to stress a distinction. The same holds true a few lines later when he describes official efforts to counteract the plague: filth was removed from the streets and the sick refused entry *in addition* to the holding of public religious processions. Boccaccio admits that none of these tactics worked. It would take another five centuries to identify this particular disease, now called *Yersinia pestis*, as a bacterial infection endemic to rodents and transmitted to humans via flea bites.

In one of the most revealing sections of this introduction, Boccaccio characterizes four types of social response to the plague. First, there were the shut-ins, those with enough means to attempt to wait out the plague isolated in their homes, even avoiding news of recent deaths. Then there were the partiers, who tried to cope with reckless abandon through extended pub crawls and parties in newly emptied houses. Another group aimed at business as usual as best they could, and in the fourteenth-century version of a face mask, carried herbs and spices to help purify their brains from the noxious air. (It's this same principle that led to the plague doctor's mask of the seventeenth century, which also, incidentally, indicates how long European society had to worry about plague recurrences.) Finally, there were those who fled, deeming the crowded city too dangerous and possessing the means to escape – Boccaccio's narrators come from this group.

In what tends to be a vigorous discussion by the measure of the course as a whole, I pose the question of then vs. now. That is, to what extent is Boccaccio's account reflective of

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human nature in the face of tragedy and devastation, and to what extent is it tempered by the circumstances of his day? How do attitudes toward religion, science, society, and the state affect conditions and responses? How do you imagine our society would react to a similar phenomenon?

In semesters prior to 2020, there was usually a small but vociferous group that insisted they would participate in the carousing (though of course they would not use that word) that marks a hopeless future. A larger faction of

the class identified with the shut-ins, those who would isolate in the hopes of waiting out a cure. We generally reach the conclusion that medieval faith in religion – which comes more from their assumptions than from Boccaccio's text – provided an explanation and served as a guide. On the other hand, our society's faith in science allows one to hold out hope in nearly any foreseeable medical situation. If students were finding it difficult to imagine modern-day reactions, I would usually suggest that there are movies, tv shows, and video games to imagine these things for them, with the caveat that we are not bringing zombies into the mix. Of course, for the past several semesters, none of that prompting was necessary. The shadow of Covid-19 loomed large, forcing comparisons and contrasts. The scheduled meetings for this particular discussion even seemed to coincide with local infection peaks in late spring and late fall.

As far as causation and treatment were concerned, students unsurprisingly considered our time wholly superior to Boccaccio's. Modern medicine can properly identify disease etiology, distinguish between viral and bacterial infections, and devise effective preventative measures. Students in April 2020 anticipated a vaccine; a year later they were waiting for their turn to receive one. This view is to



Image 1: From an early French translation of the Decameron: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 239, fol. 1r (fifteenth century).

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be expected. Medieval medicine was totally unprepared for a pandemic on the scale of the Black Death.

The most fruitful discussions came with a consideration of the social responses. Nearly everyone identified themselves with the first group in isolation. But, importantly, this was less a result of choice on their part than from a government-mandated response. In this, they were able to appreciate the vastly increased reach and function of the state in the twenty-first century, and this even without a concerted initial response at the federal level.

Some in the class saw a connection between the eat-drink-and-be-merry crowd and images of college students on spring break in Florida in 2020. Another parallel was made between wealthy New Yorkers fleeing the city for country residences upstate (or Bostonians to the Cape) and Boccaccio's storytellers.

These parallels and connections can help students appreciate one of the main purposes behind the study of history. We are looking for evidence of human responses in unrepeatably historical scenarios. Again, how much



*Image 2: Detail from Paris, BnF, fr. 239, fol. 1r.*

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Guidance from institutions like the CDC helped establish local policy, at least in Massachusetts. There was no equivalent body in 1348. Regulations and mandates would not have worked even if they had known something about the nature of the disease, since, as Boccaccio himself admits, the civic apparatus of the Florentine republic was collapsing with the death toll of city officials. "The revered authority of the laws, both divine and human, had fallen and almost completely disappeared."

of what Boccaccio describes should we attribute to universal human reactions to harrowing loss, and how much of it is dependent on the worldview, power structure, social customs, economy, and technology of fourteenth-century society?

While the game of ranking tragedies can get tedious quickly, it must be noted that the scale of the Black Death dwarfed that of Covid-19 in every respect. In a cramped, rat-infested place like Florence, where mortality rates were the highest, over half of the

population succumbed to the disease. Without downplaying the ever-rising death toll of the current pandemic, for a closer parallel, we would have to imagine what our society would do if the coronavirus were over a hundred times more deadly. And the Black Death seems to have been more of an equal-opportunity killer. The urban poor probably were more likely to die due to a lack of resources and servants to care for them, but the plague did not discriminate much between age, gender, status, or perceived piety. (In the hierarchical society of the fourteenth century, this feature was observed by contemporaries with great interest.) Moreover, the plague did not merely come and go in 1348. It stayed with European society for the next several centuries, returning at varying intervals. Some survivors of later outbreaks noticed that children seemed especially vulnerable, but this was probably due to a much larger proportion of children in the general population of the later fourteenth century and not from any conferred immunity, which is much weaker in bacterial than in viral infections. Among the observations that demographers of fifteenth-century Florence have noted is the age

imbalance left in the wake of various visitations of the plague.

Our course meeting on the Black Death concludes with a silver lining: that, for many survivors of the plague, the conditions of life improved. While plague remained a frequent hazard in subsequent decades and centuries, for the general population, and especially the wage-earning and non-propertied classes, the conditions of labor improved. The simple process of supply and demand economics made labor more valuable in every area. Despite efforts of some of the more centralized medieval kingdoms to roll the clock back to pre-plague rents and wages,

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Will there be any hopeful developments to come out of the Covid-19 pandemic? Many are wondering what effect these years will have on

and the reach of the state *almost* as significant as the difference in the nature of the two diseases. The bacterium *Yersinia pestis* is one of the deadliest pathogens human societies have ever faced. Had something like Covid-19 struck Europe in the fourteenth century, it may not have even registered in the historical record. Recent research into the history of disease – using phylogenetics, not written sources – suggests that one of our endemic coronaviruses, less virulent than Covid-19 to be sure, first appeared in human populations in the later Middle Ages. If a pandemic in the future claimed the lives of anywhere near half of the population, are we certain that our own institutions would not crumble, as they did in Florence in 1348? Alas, history does not offer predictions; it merely reveals something of the range of human behavior and possibility.



Image 3: Depiction of the plague (*morìa grande*) of 1348, from Giovanni Sercambi, *Croniche Lucchese*: Lucca, Archivio di Stato, ms 107, fol. 49v (ca. 1400).

it proved impossible to do so. In some cases, family wealth became more concentrated in fewer surviving relatives, allowing for some further economic advancement. A reaction against these trends appeared in the increase of sumptuary laws in certain cities and kingdoms, whereby *nouveaux riches* were restricted from adorning themselves in a manner not befitting their place in the social hierarchy. European society survived the plague, but it was on a slightly different trajectory.

the shaping of attitudes toward work, health, family life, and our economic and political systems. Will the mass actions on behalf of immediate global health lead to needed action on behalf of the long-term health of the planet in the face of the slower-yet-looming threat of climate change? It is still too early to tell how things will play out.

One could reasonably view a comparison between the 1340s and 2020s as a study in near complete contrasts, with the differences in medical knowledge



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