Book of epidemics

Frank M. Snowden: Epidemics and society: from the black death to the present. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019, 600pp, \$65.98 HB

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Epidemics and Society was published in November 2019, a few months prior to the outbreak of the worst pandemic we have known this century. Originally compared to a minor form of flu, SARS-CoV-2 has turned out to be much deadlier and more difficult to manage. But above all, SARS-CoV-2 is neither SARS-CoV, nor MERS-CoV, nor the Spanish flu. This book is a reminder for us to be cautious about how we interpret the past. Diseases, epidemics and pandemics are inscribed in specific contexts, times, spaces, societies and ways of thinking. Serious historians are wary about drawing lessons, let alone obvious ones, from the past. It is important to insist on the qualification ‘serious’. This does not include politicians or people who want to take advantage of the crisis to gain attention (while they might well have nothing interesting to say) and especially not improvised historians who have become specialists of COVID-19 overnight in an opportunistic manner.

While we cannot readily draw lessons from the past about epidemic and pandemic crises, we can note certain repeating features, for instance, the old technique of quarantine. When we know little or nothing concerning the pathogen, this ancestral practice is used—now broadened as ‘lockdown’. Another instance of such repetition is the search for scapegoats; failing to explain, it is easier to blame. But what *Epidemics and Society* highlights above all is the profound impact of epidemic disease over the course of history and how mass infectious outbreaks of disease have shaped societies. As the author puts it: “epidemics are not an esoteric subfield for the interested specialist but instead are a major part of the ‘big picture’ of historical change and development”. (2).

The book is divided into 22 chapters, with one or two chapters dedicated to each specific infectious disease. Among these disease chapters, the author has placed some more theoretical and contextual chapters (for example, Chapter 12 ‘The Germ

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Theory of Disease’). One might think that these contextual chapters would slow down the reading and hamper the reader’s understanding of the book; but this is not the case. Indeed, to help correctly understand the impact and influence of a specific disease in its time, the author reflects on the way people thought about disease, avoiding anachronism, among other pitfalls. These chapters could have been directly integrated into the chapters on each disease, but I find it a judicious approach to separate them out.

One of the most interesting things about this book is that it has no overarching thesis that it is arguing for. Maybe because it was published before our COVID-19 health crisis? As the author explains, this book began as an undergraduate lecture course at Yale University. Students dealt with infectious diseases from scientific and public health perspectives, but the teaching did not really consider epidemics in their social context and in their relationship to politics, the arts and historical change. The author adds: “More broadly, it also became apparent that the study of the history and impact of epidemic diseases was an underdeveloped subject in the undergraduate curriculum of US universities in general” (xiii). *Epidemics and Society* offers space for discussion and interdisciplinary perspectives that allow the reader to grasp the role played by infectious diseases in shaping human societies in all its complexity. Snowden is not a specialist of the plague, smallpox, yellow fever, dysentery, typhus, tuberculosis, polio, HIV/AIDS, SARS and Ebola—all diseases discussed in the book. He is, however, a specialist on malaria and cholera (also discussed in the book) in Italy. So for each disease, he proposes a way to approach it. The aim is to preserve the accessibility of the material by not assuming any prior knowledge of history or epidemiology on the part of the reader. For those interested in going further and for those who wish to explore any individual disease in more detail, the author provides a bibliography of additional readings. Finally, as he puts it: “My primary aim is not to furnish an original contribution to the subject but rather to place existing knowledge in a broad context of interpretation” (xiv). In my opinion, he achieves this objective admirably. Although *Epidemics and Society* may not be intended as a textbook, it can undoubtedly be used as such.

Two chapters are particularly fascinating—chapters 8 and 9, both called ‘War and Disease’. In these, the author deals with yellow fever, dysentery and typhus, in order to partly explain the two routs of the Napoleonic army also known as *La Grande Armée*. In France, we learn these stories as part of our national history, but it was the first time that I had heard these events analysed from the angle of infectious disease. From my point of view, these two chapters are the most significant for fully conceiving the burden of an infectious disease, and its multiple consequences. It is sometimes difficult to conceptualize the impact of an epidemic, to quantitatively appreciate its functioning in time and space, with a lot of fluctuating parameters. This is clearer in wartime, particularly, it seems, at the time of Napoleonic wars. Here, there were a large number of soldiers, the epidemic strikes, a large number of soldiers died or were disabled, and the war was over. A rough summary of events, but this episode captures the impact of an epidemic. We can almost physically feel the consequences of the disease over this short time period in an isolated population, although thanks to COVID-19, we all learned once again not to touch, or at least to quickly wash our hands afterwards. Anyway, this Napoleonic outbreak and its consequences seem

more perceptible and readily comprehensible than several centuries of plague which killed a much larger percentage of the world's population. This brings us to what is maybe one regret about the book: that it does not treat the impact of infectious diseases on the First and the Second World Wars. We know the heavy toll taken by typhoid fever during WWI and the fear of typhus during WWII. I would have been curious to read Snowden's analyses of the influence of infectious diseases on these two major events of the last century. Maybe in a follow-up? The original book was already been reprinted in 2020, with a new preface, thanks to COVID-19.

In conclusion, at 600 pages, it is a lengthy tome, but it is all worth reading, even though probably not in one sitting. It was a faithful companion for me in preparing my teaching on the subject, although I was not always satisfied, especially with the chapters on smallpox and polio. Snowden has done a very good job with this book, comparable to *Contagion and the State in Europe, 1830–1930* by Peter Baldwin (Baldwin 1999) or Mark Harrison's *Disease and the Modern World* (Harrison 2004). It is a thorough work of synthesis and compilation about infectious diseases and their impact on societies. Moreover, there is a useful list of resources at the end of the book as a complement to the references used by the author. *Epidemics and Society* is a suitable tool for historians, produced by a serious historian. In a few years, historians will write the history of COVID-19 with its many repercussions. I look forward to reading what Snowden has to say concerning this disease, this crisis, and how it has shaped our society.

References

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- Harrison, Mark. 2004. *Disease and the modern world: 1500 to the present day*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

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