

The Reviving Breath of Death: Seeking New Political Beginnings after Epidemics in History

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Received: 10/02/2021

Accepted: 14/04/2021

Abstract

This study investigates the reasons for why people seek new political beginnings after historical plagues. The search for such political restarts appeared during the outbreaks of epidemics, but also they still exist among current historians. This investigation is conducted through historical and contemporary interpretations of epidemics. This study concentrates on examples from European and Muslim worlds, but also looks at that of China. It concludes that the meanings assigned to plagues are intertwined with the historical development of political power and its justification by the societies in question.

Keywords: Interpretation of Plague; Meaning in History; The Mandate of Heaven; The Divine Right of Kings; The Circle of Justice; Political Psychology.

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1. Introduction

The times when epidemic diseases disrupt or interrupt the social order are times when the search for new political beginnings intensifies. Searches of this kind that took place in history were motivated by the desire to eliminate the cause of the epidemic. This desire sometimes led to serious demands for political change, and at other times, to smaller-scale administrative changes (in favor or against the political sovereign). On the other hand, when looking at the epidemics of the past in hindsight, historians tend to see them as the harbingers of a new era. This trend stems from certain assumptions expressed by historians, which will be discussed below in this study. The most important of these assumptions is the idea that human life is not insignificant and meaningless, that the diseases of which millions of people die cannot have been "in vain", and that they must have led to something good.

This study discusses how people perceived epidemics when they prevailed, and what kind of political demands those perceptions turned into. For this purpose, epidemic diseases are approached from a thematic perspective instead of a periodic or geographical one. In this regard, firstly, observable criteria used in dividing historical periods are compared with subjective criteria, which are based on perception. To exemplify, the historical and current perceptions of the Plague of Justinian and the Black Death are addressed, with a reference to the fact that those who experienced the epidemics and those who worked on them saw those epidemics as the signifiers of a new era. After that, it will be explained how the epidemics in the centuries following the Black Death served to expand the spheres of political authority in both Europe and the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the research in this article shows that political authorities in this geography enter into a serious legitimacy crisis during these epidemic diseases. Although the people in Europe and the Ottoman Empire did not challenge the central political authority altogether, this study points out that there was a theoretical ground in Chinese political thought that made the opposite possible. This theoretical ground had the potential to push the Chinese people into new political pursuits.

2.The Importance of the Perceptions of First-Hand Witnesses in Historical Periodization

Historical periods are the building blocks of historical theory. Just as mathematics was born from dealing with numbers, and just as the starting point of geography is mapping, so history began with the occupation of periodization, which itself already includes forms of mapping and counting. Thus, periodization has become the unique scientific theory of the discipline of history. Historians try to make the principles they keep in their periodization objective. In this respect, the distinction between prehistory and history, which started with the widespread use of writing, can be cited as an example to periodization built on objective principles. Another example is that the period when industrialization and increased participation in politics began is generally accepted as the start of "Modernity". The periodization in these two examples are based on observable and measurable criteria.

On the other side of the coin, it could also be argued that how historical events are experienced and given meaning should be at least as important as the objective criteria mentioned above in the periodization of history. What is meant here by meaning is not the package of meaning that the historian wraps around the historical data when combining the parts of the phenomena he finds in retrospect, as set forth in the theories of historiography used in the 20th century. Rather, what is meant is how those who experienced those events interpreted them.

The conquest of Istanbul in 1453 can be considered as a good example in this regard. In terms of a classical theory of history that takes economic changes as a basis, it is of no importance that the city of Istanbul started to be ruled by the Ottoman Empire instead of the Byzantine Empire, both of which stood on the agrarian threshold in terms of mode of production. Today, from a strictly economic point of view, we may not see a difference between cases in which Istanbul is ruled by a feudal Greek lord or a feudal Turkish lord. However, one of the main points to be looked at in order to understand the importance of a phenomenon is how it is given meaning by those who experience the phenomenon. At this point, of course, we know that deformations or manipulations can be found in texts that reflect how the phenomenon is experienced. However, detecting and overcoming these is one of the crucial activities of the historian. Therefore, it would be

erroneous not to know that the Conquest of Istanbul was regarded as a sign of doom in Europe and Islamic geography (van den Oever,2012) that is, in the vast majority of the Old World as it was at that time.

Certainly, when we look at history, many other events are considered as signs of doom. In this respect, concluding that a phenomenon identified as a harbinger of apocalypse should be read as ‘the opening of a new world by closing the world known as it was then’ may offer us a new perspective to evaluate such expressions in historical writings. In the end, not only different religions perceive the concept of doomsday differently, but also there may be different conceptions within the same religion. Therefore, when historical observers claim an event to be a sign of doom in the face of a big event, we should not effortlessly assume that we understand what they mean. Their concept of apocalypse might be different from what we understand as apocalypse today. If possible, we should try to understand the event and in what way the observer regards it as a sign of doom.

3. Historical and Contemporary Interpretations of the Justinianic Plague and the Black Death

The Justinianic Plague can be given as an example of the fact that when someone calls an event “apocalyptic,” it means it ended the world as that person knows it. In 536, the fallout scattered into the air as a result of a series of volcanic eruptions spread across Eurasia for a year and a half, reducing the brightness of the sun so much so that contemporaries said that the dim light of the sun looked more like moonlight than daylight (Harper, 2017:251). Just after that, the Plague of Justinian spread throughout the Old World. When it first hit Constantinople, it killed more than half of the population within a few years (Mordechai and Eisenberg,2019:34). Andrew Sullivan, who wrote with the insight provided by living through the COVID-19 epidemic, comments on what it would mean to witness all this for someone living in the city at the time:

“This must have seemed like the end of the world. For most, there was no other explanation. To have the skies go dark for more than a year, and then to see a hideous disease fell half your family and friends, destroying agriculture, city and town life, and religious practices, was an extraordinary trauma. Even the countryside was afflicted, because the rats could scurry and survive anywhere there was food, and, at the same time, the failed harvests following the year of darkness led to widespread malnutrition,

weakening immune systems. Imagine living in a city that, only a couple of years previously, had had twice the population: the empty streets, the vacant houses, the silence, and the near madness of the survivors, stricken with PTSD, crippled by grief, desperate for food.” (Sullivan,2020)

It is obvious that such a traumatic experience will have different impacts on people. One of the psychological effects of epidemics on people is the feeling of guilt or scapegoating. Since it was thought that the disease would not come without a reason, various answers were given in history to the search for who the culprit could be. Such answers included a minority within society, society itself because of the sins they committed, a certain segment of society such as the poor, another society that is a neighbor or enemy of that society, or those who govern society. For example, in a treatise by Guy de Chauliac, the doctor of Pope Clement VI, all of these answers were observed together during the first and fatal wave of the Black Death in Europe (Montgomery Campbell,1931:3). In this respect, during the Antonine Plague, which especially affected the Roman Empire in the 2nd century BCE, Christians, those who were still a minority in society at that time, were blamed and a significant number of people turned to an archaic belief, the Apollo cult, which had no longer been observed for a long time (Harper:65-118). However, the continuation of the epidemic made Christianity gain strength. During the Justinianic Plague, Christianity was now the dominant religion of Rome. This time, the first reaction would be directed against pagan practices and the remedy would be sought by holding onto Christianity more tightly (Harper:249).

When it comes to events that were thought to be the signs of doom and emerged at the turns of historical ages, besides the Justinianic Plague of 6th century, the Black Death that emerged in the 14th century should also be mentioned. The first one marks the end of Late Antiquity and the second the end of the Late Middle Ages. Ibn Khaldun’s lines in the epilogue of this article constitute a striking example in this respect, with an unprecedented acuity and foresight, in terms of describing how the plague created a brand-new world. Although his family fell victim to this epidemic, he stated that the world, which he witnessed become completely different with the epidemic, was extinguished with the call of the voice of existence, and then transformed into a fresh being, and emerged again. The plague epidemic, known as the Black Death, came to the city of Tunisia, where Ibn Khaldun

lived, in 1348, when he was sixteen years old. During this epidemic, his mother and father, as well as some of his teachers died. Although he witnessed the effects of the great epidemic in 1347-50 as well as those of its recurring outbreaks in the following decades for most of his life, Ibn Khaldun mentioned the great plague epidemic in his autobiography very briefly and only in two places (Ibn Khaldun, 2004: 23, 56). Ibn Khaldun, while talking about this epidemic in *Muqaddimah*, which he gave its final shape after more than half a century after the plague, sounds extremely restrained, but also reveals the horror of the epidemic with the expressions mentioned above. Another fact is that he astonishes the readers of today with the sharpness of his predictions. The reason for this astonishment is that discussing the role of the Black Death in the formation of Early Modernity has been an issue more of today than the past. Whether or not the Black Death caused population deficiency as well as the related economic and social transformations, has been evaluated since the 19th century, and has gained increased attention in the last half a century.

According to the claims of the proponents of the idea that the Black Death brought the end of the Middle Ages and started Early Modernity, one third of the people living in Europe during the Black Death died in the first wave. Around two thirds of the population died in total, and the European population fell from about 75 million to around 20 million (Gottfried,1983: 77;Turner,1997). This led to a dramatic decline in the number of peasants working in the fields, causing the landowning overlords to treat the peasants better and even donate them land to encourage work. In addition, as the amount of money per capita increased, the transition from a land-based economy to a cash-based economy took place. The shortage of labor led to an increase in the wages of those who worked for money (Gottfried,129-160). In situations where these changes were resisted, large-scale peasant revolts occurred (Cowie,1972:71-75). These changes stimulated commerce and ultimately brought with them the distinctive features of Early Modernity: the leading art movements, political authorities gradually gaining their independence from the Church, and, finally, capitalism, all of which were primarily dependent on the accumulation of capital.

Those who argue that the Black Death did not have a dramatic effect on the change of history showed in their studies that the plague did not cause population decline to the extent it was claimed. They also demonstrated that

the administrative, commercial, and financial changes that were claimed to take place after the epidemic, had emerged in their initial phase at least half a century before the epidemic, that is, by the beginning of the 14th century (Gillespie,1975). In this regard, they observed continuity rather than rupture when they studied city councils, kingdoms, and their related administrative institutions as well as land-based economic systems such as farms and villages in the years that followed the Black Death (Getz,1991).¹Likewise, studies showed that peasant revolts, which had been previously associated with the Black Death, were not seen in the decades following the Black Plague (Gillespie,1975). These studies undermined the role of Black Death as a history-maker. It has been claimed that the historical role attributed to the Black Death was influenced by the romantic and gothic movements of the 19th century, when academic and especially bio-historical studies on the Black Death emerged. Similar to all other ideas influenced by romantic and gothic movements, it takes its strikingness from exaggeration. At this point, it is especially remarkable that Jean-Noël Biraben, French physician and demographer, is noted to liken the Black Death to Napoleon “with considerable awe,” who overthrew the gaudy kings, forced huge armies to retreat, and unified humanity under his terrible rein (Getz:281).

However, even though studies on numbers such as population, wages, land sharing, etc. or observations made on the historical continuity of institutions have removed the Black Death from its history-making role, someone who lived in that period might have described this epidemic as the most important apparent reason for the closing of an era and the opening of a new era. As a matter of fact, Ibn Khaldun said that while the plague epidemic wiped out the previous world, a brand-new world came into being after the epidemic. Thus, he contributed to one of the favorite debates of recent historians as a voice from long time ago as an on-site observer, on the favor of a strengthening relationship of causality between the Black Death and Early Modernity. Ibn Khaldun might not be the only writer who observed that the age he lived in at that time was a brand-new age. However, he has a special place for pointing out the epidemic as the reason for novelty in social and political life.

1.The starting point of the discussion Getz is involved is the Kelly Turner article referenced above.

4.Epidemics as an Opportunity for Political Authority to Expand Its Sphere of Influence

Regardless of how much impact the Black Death had on Early Modernity, there is a consensus on the notion that the epidemics that occurred in the Early Modern period contributed significantly to the expansion of the sphere of influence of political authority in Europe and the Ottoman Empire. This issue is read through the measures taken by central authorities or city councils to prevent outbreaks, especially to prevent the spread of epidemics. Practices such as preventing contact with patients and restricting travel noticeably penetrated the lives of people while expanding the jurisdiction of political and administrative authorities. People, initially or eventually, accepted the legitimacy of this expanding jurisdiction and influence (Slack, 1988). Public health measures taken in the Early Modern and Modern periods played an active role in the public acceptance of the apparatuses of political sovereignty and the boundaries of people's expectations from the political authority. A development in this direction was observed in the Ottoman Empire in the same period and in a similar way to that in Europe. Nükhet Varlık, who mentions that there are three concepts of transformation in the perception of the epidemics by Ottoman scholars, counts these as naturalization, medicalization, and canonization (Varlık,2015:207-247).¹ In this respect, the stages of medicalization and canonization, especially in the 16th century, are stages in which the epidemic is seen as a medical case against which precautions can be taken rather than as a desperate calamity. In fact, Varlık showed that, although before this period there was no indication that the metaphysical explanations were not taken into consideration by the state, when it came to the 16th century, those who came to the Ottoman Palace with such explanations to impress the Sultan were removed from the Palace without being taken seriously (Varlık, 236-238). Thus, the acceptance of the epidemic as a medical case and the implementation of measures recommended by physicians accordingly were carried out by the state (Varlık: 240-246).

1.In summary, what Varlık means by the concept of naturalization is that the disease is seen by the people of Istanbul as a local rather than a foreign phenomenon. Medicalization is the replacement of the mystical interpretations of the disease with plague tracts and medical interpretations. Canonization refers to the accumulation of canonical literature on how to behave when faced with the disease.

5. Political Legitimacy and Epidemics

The question of where the legitimacy of political authority comes from intrigued both political theorists and philosophers in history. While the problem of political legitimacy resulted in the concept of "the divine right of kings" in premodern Europe and the idea of the "circle of justice" in the Ottoman Empire, one of the determining concepts of Chinese politics and the key phrase of political legitimacy in premodern China was the concept of "the mandate of heaven." According to this concept, the Chinese emperor had the permission and will of the heavens to rule people, that is, he was the deputy of the heavens on earth. However, this mandate was not absolute and indefinite in theory. In case the emperor could not take adequate precautions against situations such as famine, drought, epidemic and widespread misery in the country, this situation could be interpreted as that the emperor no longer had the mandate of heaven and that the heavens would have someone else rule the people on earth (Safire, 1976). After all, the concept of the mandate of heaven emerged after the Zhou dynasty replaced the Shang dynasty in China in the 11th century BCE. The new dynasty established its political legitimacy with the propaganda that the old one failed at ruling the people (Zhao, 2009: 419). Thus, the concept contained within itself the justification of successful popular uprisings. When the living conditions of the people deteriorated, a rebel could revolt against the ruler and if he succeeds, he would take over the mandate of heaven, and this change would be read as a reflection of the will of the heavens.

The problem of political legitimacy in Europe was solved with the concept of "the divine right of kings." This concept claimed that the ruling king and his dynasty were chosen by God; therefore, the administration had to remain within this dynasty, at least on a theoretical level (Elton, 1974: 199-202). This, of course, did not mean that kings or dynasties were never questioned in practice, but at least it meant that they received their legitimacy not from the practical situation but from a theoretical acceptance. Still, this theoretical acceptance had a dimension in the welfare of the people (Bolgàr, 1959).

However, in Islamic societies, one cannot speak of a chosen dynasty. The legitimacy of the dynasty came from its just and fair administration. The criterion of just administration was the lack of arbitrary rule in the country, that is, the ruler observed the Sharia and people were prosperous. In this case, consistent legality, which was also referred to as the circle of justice,

that is, the application of justice in accordance with the sharia and the welfare of the people, resulted in the legitimacy of the Sultan. Of course, although the king had “the divine right” in Europe, this right would be also severely restricted over time by law on the basis of the welfare of the people.

The concept of “the mandate of heaven” was put aside in China starting with Mao’s Cultural Revolution, as the concept had the potential to put pressure on the central authority during epidemic times. The leaders after him did not bring it up again. China's current political leader, Xi Jinping, who saw no problem in reviving some of China's traditions, is said to stay away from this concept (Anderlini,2020). As stated above, the reason for this is that although this concept gives the ruler legitimacy, it also gives the people the right to revolt or the chance to attempt to seize power for the periods in which political administration fails or shows impotence. Indeed, the concept once again emerged during demonstrations that started in Taiwan in 2014 and in Hong Kong in 2019. Apart from these recent uprisings, neither of which ended with the success of the demonstrators, the last successful revolt against China's central government using this concept took place in 1911 in Wuhan against the Qing dynasty. It was frequently stated that the epidemic that started a century later in the same city, similar to the one in Chernobyl, provided grounds for the claims that Xi Jinping proved that he did not have the right and ability to rule China anymore (Hulsman,2020).

This was due to the fact that while the justification of the mandate of heaven, that is, the legitimacy of the ruler, lied in the welfare of the people in the traditional period and on the ideological ground in Mao's period, it shifted to capitalism and nationalism with Deng in the 1980s (Hulsman, 2018:256-257). However, recently, with China's growth slowing, Xi has become unable to generate legitimacy from any of the other options mentioned above, except for nationalism. This is why it is argued that the underlying reason for the Chinese government's efforts to suppress or manipulate the news concerning the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic might stem from their desire to prevent the resurfacing of this premodern thinking practice (Hulsman,2020).

Epidemics are undoubtedly historical moments in which political legitimacy is questioned in the rest of the world, as well. In this respect, how people

make sense of epidemics and feel in the face of epidemics are of direct concern to political power. The first thing to be said about the meanings given to epidemics is that people refuse to acknowledge that epidemics start by accident. The common and most dominant theme of hundreds of treatises in the Muslim and Christian realms written on epidemics in the premodern era suggests that epidemics are caused by a reason, whether spiritual or material, physical or political (Stearns,2011).¹This bias is shared also by historians in their retrospective reading of historical events. One of the important impulses underlying historians' view of the Black Death as the precursor of Early Modernity is to believe that such a disaster, which resulted in the death of tens of millions of people, could not have happened without it leading to something better. On the other hand, the same line of thinking could also conclude that, as Getz points out, the remedy for social renewal is the death of tens of millions. Undoubtedly, such a reading makes one shudder at the thought. As Getz said in her article examining the claim that the Black Plague was the prelude to Early Modernity, these historians believe that "History, like a novel, ought to make sense, and how could the death of most of the population of Europe have happened for no good reason?" (Getz:265).

In the case of China, the arrival of epidemics meant that the heavens deprived political leaders of the authority to govern the people, while in Europe epidemics were believed to be caused by the sinful deeds of the people, and it was not only the clergy who came to this conclusion (Gottfried,69,73-74). Gabriele de Mussis, a fourteenth-century lawyer, expressed this idea in the interesting form of a dialogue between God and the World (Aberth,2005:98-100). In this respect, people were advised to stop committing sins, such as committing usury, and administrators were called to apply the law and prevent such sinful acts that fall under their authority (Tuchman,1978:32-37,121-123). As for the sins causing epidemics, the relationship between crime and punishment in the Old Testament was brought to the fore. In addition, it was argued that sins

1.Stearns' *Infectious Ideas* offer a comprehensive study on how premodern Muslims and Christians interpreted the epidemics. The issue of causes is discussed in various aspects throughout the book. The fourth chapter is particularly interesting in this regard, as it includes a discussion of phenomena such as miasma and the evil eye (Stearns,2011:91-105).

spoiled the spiritual air, and the deteriorating spiritual air caused the material air, which was the food of the physical soul, to deteriorate, causing a person to get sick in a similar way to eating bad food (Getz,272-274). This was why epidemics were believed to be caused by bad weather (miasma). Therefore, physical measures taken to clear the miasma must have been accompanied by spiritual measures. Political governments were responsible for taking both measures (Slack,440-443).

The deterioration of the spiritual air not only made the individual sick, but also degenerated the social ties that bound people together as a society. It was believed that this was the reason behind behavior such as selfishness and disregard for neighbor rights that emerged in the epidemics. Political authorities were also called upon to take measures in these situations. Thus, the expansion of such measures, taken by central or local administrations, eventually resulted in the expansion of political authority over the people in the long run. For this reason, the measures taken for epidemic diseases definitely encountered resistance (Slack,443-446).¹

As a result, although the measures taken by states were resisted against to various degrees, political legitimacy has not been shaken in Europe and the Islamic world in the Early Modern and Modern period. On the contrary, it is possible to assert that public health measures have expanded the authority of the state over the people. Quite to the contrary, outbreaks in China made it possible to question the political legitimacy of the ruler.

6. Conclusion

This study discussed the psychological impact of epidemics on those who experienced them. In addition, it was also examined how the historians who discussed the subject in hindsight interpret epidemic diseases. Moreover, the study also scrutinized how such experiences and interpretations pushed people to pursuit new political beginnings. The effect of such pursuits for those who experience the epidemic was expressed as a desire to make a direct change in their lives. On the other hand, historians' search seems to have led to the belief that epidemic diseases lead to new periods in history. At the center of the political quest, of course, the legitimacy of political authorities was questioned. In fact, European and Ottoman concepts of

1.Hays offers a broader discussion of resistance to authority and the struggle between authorities (Hays,2006:39-42).

"ruler as the shadow of God on earth" as well as the Chinese concept of "the mandate of heaven" depend on the welfare of the people at the theoretical or practical level. Rulers who could not directly ensure the welfare of the people during epidemics tried to control how epidemic diseases should have been understood, and tried to maintain their political legitimacy by modifying the meaning people gave to the epidemic. Sometimes they were successful in this practice, but there were also times in which strong public reactions eventually led to riots. For example, Ottoman and European scholars started to use medical concepts rather than religious concepts in explaining the causes of epidemics in their treatises written in the Early Modern period and, thereby, transformed the public perception of epidemics from metaphysical to medical. Thus, by controlling the meanings of words and facts, they were able to control the people who used and experienced them. In China, on the contrary, epidemics have provided the people with a legitimate reason for revolt, even up until this day. As a matter of fact, the relationship between epidemics and riots has been tighter in China than anywhere else in the world.

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