

The Great Plagues of Europe: How does Covid-19 Measure Up?

A Platonist Perspective.

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One certainly doesn't wish to add to our gloom in the midst of the present crisis, but I thought that a brief retrospective of the chief great plagues that have afflicted Europe since the period of the later Roman Empire might serve to place the onset of the present Covid-19 virus in a certain perspective, focusing both on its relative triviality *as a disease*, at least for the great majority of sufferers, but also its enormous significance socially and economically.

I do this from a certain perspective, first as a devotee of the philosophy of Plotinus, but also as a believer in the force of Gaia, as expounded by that interesting thinker James Lovelock, and its (or her) relation to the lower aspect of the Plotinian World-Soul, or *Physis*, which I feel is very much in play here. We must, after all, I think, take under advisement that Gaia, or the World-Soul, while being essentially a positive and nurturing force, is yet not prepared to stand by and allow the carefully-fostered ecological balance that it has achieved on this planet over so many millions of years be overthrown by the recklessly expansive and unbalanced behaviour of one species that it has brought into being, albeit its most intelligent and innovative achievement. We see ourselves at the moment as being afflicted by a viral pandemic, but the truth is that the real virus is *us*, the human race, and in particular the so-called 'advanced' or 'developed' world. In our own interest, as well as in that of earth's ecology in general, we must be slapped down, albeit by a benign maternal paw, and hopefully, by this means, brought to a better frame of mind. If we have the wit to see this, and the political will to translate this insight into action, then the day may yet be saved, and Covid-19 turn out to have been very much of a blessing in disguise.

In my survey of great plagues, I deliberately omit what is, for me as a Classicist, the most notable – the Great Plague of Athens, which ran for around four years at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War (430-426 B. C.), and is given

immortal fame by the genius of the historian Thucydides – simply because it was not a global pandemic, but only, so far as we know, afflicted the city of Athens. I will give honourable mention, however, to what is termed the Antonine Plague, which swept the Roman Empire in the latter part of the second century A.D. (165-180 A.D.), killing about 5 million people, including the Emperor Verus (the colleague of Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, after whom the plague is called), as it seems to exhibit many characteristics of the later plagues that swept Europe in subsequent millennia.

All of these plagues, including the Antonine, have been brought in from ‘the East’, whether the Middle East or further afield, and as a result of trading or military activities, specifically carried by fleas on the backs of rats, who slipped on board to feast on the grain or other eatables that were being conveyed back by merchant ships. Once arrived, they spread like wildfire, wiping out large swathes of the population, and wreaking destruction on both society and the economy, until burning themselves out, usually after a couple or more of years, leaving the survivors immune to that particular strain of disease.

It is generally accepted that there have been six such major plagues that have afflicted the continent of Europe in the last 1500 years, if we take our start from what is often termed – a little frivolously, perhaps – ‘Justinian’s Flea’, the plague that struck Constantinople, and then all of the Byzantine Empire, in 541 A.D. This was a bubonic plague, which arrived on merchant ships from Egypt, and killed at least 25 million people, which was over half the population of Europe and North Africa, before it finally blew itself out, fully four years later. Even Justinian himself was afflicted with it (like Boris Johnson with the present one), but, like Boris, he managed to recover.

Following on this, there seems to have been nothing major in the way of plagues until the so-called ‘Black Death’ of 1347, which was once again a bubonic plague. Once again, also, it came by ship from the East, in this case through Genoese sailors returning from a trading mission to the Crimea – though the plague itself originated somewhere further east again, possibly modern Kyrgyzstan, and travelled west along the Silk Road from China. The ships made landfall originally in

Sicily, but the disease spread pretty rapidly from there to Pisa, and then to Northern Italy in general. The Black Death lasted until at least 1353, and is estimated to have destroyed (though who, one might ask, was counting?) 30% to 60% of Europe's population, perhaps up to 50 million people. It decimated whole communities, and brought economic life to a virtual standstill for years -- but it has been suggested that it ultimately worked to the advantage of lower class workers, who benefited from increased economic and social mobility.

This was Europe's greatest plague (so far!), but it was by no means the last. A further considerable plague broke out, once more in Northern Italy, in 1629, when troops returning from the Thirty Years War carried bubonic plague into Mantua. Over the next two years, the plague crept over the whole of Northern Italy, infecting Verona, Milan, Florence, and ultimately Venice -- who banished their plague victims to a pair of islands in a nearby lagoon, but still lost nearly a third of its population of 140,000. It is suggested, indeed, that this marked the beginning of Venice's decline as a major player in world trade and politics.

So far, as we may observe, Northern Italy has figured rather prominently in the history of European plagues, but the next notable one -- not too long after this, in 1665-6 -- broke out in London, and ravaged the city's cramped and insanitary slum areas, prompting the aristocracy, including King Charles II, to flee to their country estates. Attempts were made by the authorities to impose quarantine on the infected by confining them in their homes, which were then marked with red crosses, but still between 75,000 and 100,000 are believed to have died -- almost a quarter of the population. Once again, this was bubonic, transmitted by rat fleas, but it is not clear where it ultimately originated -- though no doubt trade with the East had something to do with it.

This plague, however, does not seem to have spread round the continent, and nor did another outbreak, early in the next century (1720-22), which afflicted Marseilles, and then most of Provence, but fortunately went no further. It, once again, was brought by fleas on rats on a merchant ship from the Middle East. The plague had in fact broken out on board before the ship arrived in port, and

quarantine was initially imposed – as in a number of contemporary cases! – but the owner happened to be deputy mayor of Marseilles, and he overruled the health officials to have his cargo unloaded – which released the rats!

The mid-nineteenth century, beginning in 1855, actually saw a pandemic arise, beginning in China, in the province of Yunnan – not too far from Wuhan, in fact – which spread round the world in the next few decades, again conveyed by infected rats on steamships, and killed at least 15 million people round the world, but did not this time greatly impact Europe, mainly devastating China itself and India, and to some extent South Africa. One positive outcome of this outbreak is worth recording: a French doctor working in Hong Kong, Alexandre Yersin, succeeded in identifying the bacillus that was causing this disease and all the previous ones, which is named in consequence the bacillus *Yersinia pestis*, while a colleague a little later identified bites from rat fleas as the medium of infection to humans.

The final great outbreak before the present one was, as is well known, the so-called ‘Spanish Flu’, the influenza pandemic of 1918, arising early in the final year of the First World War, and lasting until December 1920 – though it had largely faded by mid-1919. News of the beginnings of it, starting in January 1918, was suppressed by the combatant regimes as being bad for morale, so it had something of a free hand initially, in the trenches and elsewhere. Spain, it seems, was the first to admit its existence, in face of the grave illness of King Alfonso XIII, so it got the honour of naming it!

This was really the first pandemic that was not bubonic -- that did not arise from the depredations of rat-fleas. Its deadliness, especially in respect of young adults, was increased by malnourishment, overcrowded camps and hospitals, and poor hygiene. It seems in fact to have started in a seriously overcrowded British hospital camp in Etaples in France, which also had a piggery and poultry farm adjacent, to provide food for the troops. It is suggested that a virus from the poultry infected the pigs, and then the men. At any rate, it spread rapidly around Europe,

and, *via* returning soldiers, to the United States – first noted in Kansas, but then in Queens, New York, and Boston.

This flu ultimately infected around 500 million people around the globe, and killed at least 50 million – though some estimates are prepared to almost double that! – between 1% and 6% of the world's population. It was apparently particularly virulent among young adults, because it triggered what is termed a 'cytokine storm', an over-reaction of the body's immune system, which ravages the stronger immune systems of young adults, and was to that extent a most unusual plague. It came in two waves, the second one, beginning in autumn 1918, being much more lethal than the first, and a consequence of the premature relaxation of restrictions.

This swift and rather superficial survey of the chief historic plagues that have afflicted Europe has been undertaken just to put our current misfortune in some historical perspective. What we may observe, I think, is that the present plague is, on the one hand, far less virulent, for the great majority of the population, than the bubonic plagues of old, or even the flu. The numbers likely to die, or even to become seriously ill, at least in the developed economies where data are being systematically recorded, seem likely to be drastically lower than was the case with the major plagues of the past. On the other hand, though, the effect on these countries, and on the world economy as a whole, seems likely to be more profound, precisely by reason of the enormous sophistication of their economies, and in particular because of the proportion of those economies which is given over to what one might characterize, rather churlishly, as non-essential, and even frivolous, activities – by which I mean mass tourism, sport, musical and other entertainment, and the frequenting of restaurants, cafés, bars and night-clubs. One might well respond that it is precisely these elements which make life worth living, and it is indeed a happy circumstance that they form so large a part of modern economic life, but the fact is that it is precisely this aspect of the modern advanced economy that is rapidly destroying our environment, and may well have brought on this plague in the first place – seeing that it transferred itself at record speed from the depths of China to virtually the whole of Europe, the United States, and then the rest of the world.

Is there anything to be learned from all this, then, and will we learn it? I wish I could be confident that we will, but all the signs are that the sole aspiration of world leaders is to get back to exponential economic growth as quickly as possible after they have shaken off this temporary nuisance, and lurch on towards the next crisis, which will probably be meteorological, and far more devastating than what we are experiencing now. COVID-19 is really just a discreet tap on the shoulder from Gaia, but it is essential that it be duly heeded, and not blithely brushed aside, or ignored. As it is, she has targeted our way of life, rather than individuals (the great majority of whom, as I say, are not seriously affected, and will recover quickly), and she is giving us a chance – perhaps one last chance – to take heed.

For those who are wondering what it is that we can, and must, do, may I recommend a most inspiring little book, by the distinguished British economist Ann Pettifor, *The Case for the Green New Deal* (Verso Books, 2019), which sets out clearly and persuasively the way forward out of this morass. We must not return to mass tourism, or to the cheap airfares and intensive flight schedules that have enabled this; we must move to control the noxious accumulation of wealth in ever fewer hands (the notorious 1%!), and the uncontrolled movement of funds from country to country, and to offshore havens; we must drastically reduce our CO2 emissions, by rapid transfer to renewable and non-noxious sources of energy, and the drastic reduction of non-electric private transportation – and we must find suitable occupations, or at least financial support, for those many people who will lose their employment as a result of these measures.

Not an easy task, I fear, but we must accomplish it, as Gaia is not going to cut us much more slack!