

Paul Slack

Plague: A Very Short Introduction

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There are names designating nothing else but a particular disease. Plague is certainly not one of those: rather than a name, it is a list of associations, a cultural phenomenon that has helped (or dishelped) shaping human history, not only demography, as one would expect, but also politics and economy, art and literature, psychology.

The amazing series of Oxford University Press' „Very Short Introductions“ (more than 300 titles as yet!) is expected to provide basic information and overview of (often) complex topics. However, this edition, written by Paul Slack, Emeritus Professor of Early Modern Social History at Oxford University, Fellow of British Academy, ex Principal of Linacre College, and the author of *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (1990) and other works, has pleasantly surprised even the most spoiled readers: rather than compiling a chronicle or mere chronography, Paul Slack re-created a long continuum of time in a vivid and dynamic way, similar to a fiction, but well documented and thus powerful. By his own words, „Mine has been an historian's view [...], designed to show how [the reactions to plague] were all shaped by the circumstances.“ In the best tradition of the *Les Annales* school of the second half of the 20th century, Paul Slack has shaped a real social history of plague, devoting more attention to the everyday life (and death), using mostly Italian, English, French, and Spanish sources and literature. In that particular (and necessarily limited) framework, Dubrovnik appears as „Venetian port“, and, when it comes to the analysis of art pieces related to epidemics, a lot of attention is devoted to Camus and Bergman, but there is no mention of Borislav Pekić's novel *Besnilo* („Rabies“; later filmed, too), for instance.

The structure of Slack's „Introduction“ to plague, already steps off the usual road of presenting historical matters: the author first deals with the name („important because it creates identity“), dipping immediately into the toughest question – of

diagnosing plague and comparing epidemics from various epochs. Here, the author analyses the most recent scientific literature and frames the most reasonable and probable conclusion on the plague's variations not in symptoms, but in epidemic pathways over time and space. (Hereby, the term „frame“ is liked by Paul Slack in particular, taken over from Charles Rosenberg and referring to the reaction of society to the „picture“ of a disease.)

In Chapter 2, three major plague pandemics are discussed: the first is supposed to be related to c. 541-c. 750 in Mediterranean and Europe, the second to the period of 1347-c. 1771 in Europe, and the third, beginning in 1894 in India and China and still lasting. According to Paul Slack, all single epidemics, even if distributed over a long period of (re)appearances, can be explained by those three pandemic phenomena. Curious is that, while in the 14th-century Europe, the mortality was about 50-60 %, in the later epidemics, the mortality reached 20 % (17th-18th c.) or even less.

Of course, the major sub-topic of the booklet must be the Black Death in the mid 14th century, the impact of which is the central theme of Chapter 3, while the „private horrors“ caused by this most horrible epidemics in human history, of Chapter 4. Since doctors were not particularly able to provide assistance to the diseased, the folk, logically, oriented more toward the saints-protectors, of which especially beloved was St. Rochus. (In Istria, in Western Croatia, Rochus had not been only the most venerated in the time of plague, with some 30 churches build either *ex voto* or in greatfulness, but his cult was revived during the later epidemics of cholera, in the 19th century.)

In Chapter 5, dealt is with the emergence of public health measures, with all the difficulties related to cultural differences in accepting their forced imposal. Actually, one might say that plague „invented“ public health and that, particularly because of that fact, plague has to be considered important „teacher“ on the transmission of diseases, on the importance of personal hygienic habits and flexibility and preparedness of a local community (as proved in Marseilles in the 14th c.). Finally, Chapter 6, entitled „Enduring images“, lists and comments on the long series of the pieces of art and literature, provoked by or devoted to plague. Fascinating sounds how motives and taste were changing in visual arts, introducing and demistifying death (including the famous motive of *dance macabre*), and how fashion books on *ars moriendi* entered literature and started to prepare readers for a more peaceful end. In a short conclusion, Slack, like every serious scholar, humbly relativises his work and theses, stressing the unpredictability of plague, but also the lessons we have learned from the epidemics in human history.

We certainly do not know everything about the plague epidemics of our past: we do not know whether central Asia is really the reservoir of rats responsible for major European epidemics; or whether the quick propagating of the disease, seen in only some epidemics, may have been related to the life habits of the black rat or to the „direct“ transmission from the flea to the man. However, it is quite certain that, after having read Paul Slack's „Very Short Introduction“, we are not only more informed, but far more impressed by the broadness of changes plague epidemics provoked, as illustrated in Slack's „miniatures“ on the flagellants, the culpriting of Jews, the sudden „advancement“ of the poor after the disappearance of their lords (with the resulting increase of wages, decline of serfdom, change of clothing fashion, reduction of the number of children in order to keep new higher standard, etc.).

At the certain moment, Slack states that „One of the continuities in the history of plague which justify this book was its educative function.“ A proper, real history is never just a (hi)story: for if it is proper, it must teach in order to avoid repeating mistakes, and it must inspire in order to shorten the way to the solutions of similar problems. Paul Slack's history of plague is proper not only because we are aware that plague is a re-emerging disease: it is proper because the author's wit and persuasive style, as well as the documentedness of the narrative, make us believe the story of plague be important part of the most delicate process of human progress.

Amir Muzur*

* Contact address: Amir Muzur, M.D., M.A., Ph.D., Full Professor and Head, Department of Social Sciences and Medical Humanities, Faculty of Medicine, University of Rijeka, Rijeka, Croatia, B. Branchetta 20, 51000 Rijeka, Croatia, Phone: +385-51-651-213, Fax: +385-651-219, E-mail: amir.muzur@medri.uniri.hr

