

BOOK REVIEW

Epidemics: Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS **by Samuel K. Cohn, Jr.**

Hardback, 656 pages
Oxford University Press
April 2018

This remarkable book is an exhaustively researched history of 265 epidemics from ancient Egypt to the present. Anyone interested in the history of medicine, current medical practitioners and most especially those involved with healthcare policy should read it. Each description is a fascinating read.

Cohn clearly demonstrates that previous histories of epidemics have been insufficiently nuanced or even omitted important associated issues. Far from causing hatred and division in societies, the author demonstrates that previous understandings focus solely on the negative and fail to see that epidemics more usually unite and strengthen societies. Many times, Cohn goes to the original sources and does not find evidence of later claims of persecutions. Giving one illustration, we learn that “medieval persecution” of lepers was largely a myth created in the 19th century by politicians and governments to justify their own brutal policies against lepers.

The previous historical perspective has been overshadowed by the hatred, violence and blaming of the Black Death in the 14th century – the largest in world history – and cholera outbreaks in the 19th. But Cohn convincingly demonstrates that, terrible as the violence was in these epidemics, such an outcome was the exception. Concerning the Black Death, his review of primary sources challenges the standard view, described by him as “modern historians’ musings, not medieval sources”.

There were diverse social responses to different diseases with a near absence of compassion for smallpox and the opposite for cholera. For example, 19th-century cholera riots in the UK and Europe were due to the high and rapid lethality of cholera. The few survivors leaving the hospital triggered local violence against physicians and destruction of hospitals with liberation of cholera patients. Other provoking factors were heavy-handed and culturally insensitive actions by the authorities.

Syphilis, making its advent in the late 15th century, initially confounded medical opinion, being given a variety of different names based upon its alleged origin, carriers or skin pathology, but as Cohn exhaustively relates – and in doing so overturns previous medical historical dogma – without blame being ascribed. Although sexual transmission of the disease was quickly recognised, there was no concerted action against women and prostitutes to curtail its spread.

There will inevitably be future epidemics. In the vast majority of accounts, stricken humanity in most time and places worked together to deal with novel illnesses, often poorly understood in terms of causation, prevention and treatment, through “charity and sacrifice”. The underlying theme of *Epidemics* is one of hope.

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