

Notes from a Historian

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Continuously caught in waves of “surprises” in the daily media’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is obviously a challenge to allow historians to speak, if the public were to believe that current events are in fact truly “unprecedented.”

Forget for the moment of precedents in the high Classical Era, even though archaeologists fed us fresh evidence of the Athenian Plague (430-427 BCE) as recently as 1993-1994. With massive grave of hasty burials of young and old, confirming Thucydides’ telling (2 millennia ago) of the horrific plague that overwhelmed the Peloponnesian War, which put the end to Athenians’ battling with Spartans, and their tug of war with the Persians. Why startled? If people’s attentions had been on something else, the glory of wining both the battles nearby against the internal foe (Spartans) and the war beyond their border over the sea (with the Persians).

Benefited from hindsight, which progresses with evolving knowledge in bio-medicine, we now see that the Greeks should have also noted the public health hazards they had situated themselves up against, with the pouring in of refugees, crammed together, short of food, space, in deplorable hygiene. These they knew less, nor should they be faulted for.

Just as the general populations’ oblivion of the threat that movements of goods along with people across the Eurasian Continent in the 14th Century, unaware of the mounting public health pressure mounting from the East, on the eve of the bubonic and pneumonic plagues known as the Black Death (1347-1351), trailing after imperial expansions and marvellous trade.

Surely historians should have been alerting the general public that, ironically, meaningful or positive outcomes may also come of such massive disasters as well. The ending of the Classic Era and unfolding of the Hellenistic world might be seen as what the Peloponnesian War and the Athenian Plague partly prepared the stage for. Medieval European historians certainly taught their audiences that’s what the unbelievably tragic Black Death had cleared the ground for as well, ushering in lives of towns and countries in the post pandemic 15th century Europe. New found lands swept by the plagues could now be worked by valued labours, the hustles and bustles of towns and cities treated the survived

Europeans with prosperities and gaities of urbanization. Such then paved ways for the pleasures and liveliness people later called “Renaissance.”

Surely none had been planned as such, lest history ever experienced with anticipation. With our usual narratives, stories of the plague and the people were rarely worked into the main story, even after William McNeil. Not in Western Civ kind of general history, not in thematic period episodes (eg. the Classical Era, Medieval Period), nor standard national or regional histories that followed. Epidemics are unwelcomed startles not only to the ancient populations, they continue to be strangers to historians and their crafts alike; history continues to be lived, historiography produced, for some other purposes. Thus were the outcries of endless “unprecedentedness.” Plagues and pandemics will always plague the “unconscious consciousness.”

Small surprise then if diseases were made to wear wrong names, (e.g. the Spanish Flu). Things as we know them hardly ever get better. How could they? Such as the “Manchurian Plague (1910-1911).” National or regional labels adorned, in the midst of imperial power fights. Shall we yield that these were stock problems before trans-national and trans-cultural discourses any ways? Exactly from where critiques on these “naturalized” story telling could have come from? When will “global history” be readdressing what pandemics really represent for the humanity?

Back in the 7th Century, when the trans-cultural Tang Empire ruled China, in close connection with Inner Asia and the Eurasian Continent beyond, Prime Minister Wei Zheng (魏徵 580-643) wrote in his memorial to Emperor Tang Taizong (598-649) that, in addition to adjusting his own cap and gowns looking into the mirror made of bronze, imaging what if he were also to look into the mirror made of history (以史為鑑)? For seeing the whys and hows in the “rises and falls of matters” (知興衰).

It was also in this same era that the best of physicians in the empire, such as Sun Simiao (581?-682), reminded medical colleagues that the supreme of goals in medicine ought to be treating ailments before they arise (上醫治未病).” Public health or preventive medicine were yet to be, but the ideas were clear.

When will they ever learn? With the SARS, petrified East Asian populations were educated a bit more than their fellow citizens elsewhere. Street people in Hong Kong, Taiwan, China admitted that the nightmarish experience 17 years earlier taught them to concede. They surrender to mask wearing and social distancing, educated by history, recently occurred, broadly illustrated.

Is this what epidemics in history should have been about? In addition to social distancing and lock downs, what sort of communal soil could the collectivates have to work with if we were to have different History circulating and going viral against the COVID-19? Will global historians team up with the social media and medical workforce, if there were ever another crisis? Or to get over this one?

For the possibility to “let live,” if we want “to live?” including the virus? Which we now insist as our common “enemy.”