

History, tourism and epidemics, the example of Thomas Mann's Death in Venice

Recent events teach us how fragile the tourism sector is. The Covid-19 epidemic reminds us of this fact, which has been known for a very long time in a historical perspective: the slightest disturbances - whether geopolitical, military, economic or health-related - have an immediate and profound impact on the entire chain of tourist activity: tour operators, transporters, hoteliers, inn-keepers, leisure activity leaders, etc. The deflagration causes a domino effect that is difficult to stop and it is difficult to restart. The unheard-of violence of the Covid-19 brought to a standstill - for how long? - an economic sector that is said to be the largest employer in the world. It has also highlighted the desperation of thousands of tourists surprised in their places of stay by the restrictions put in place and being forced to stay and wait for a more or less long time, sometimes very anxiously, for the means to get home. The hotel room or the cabin of the cruise ship suddenly turns into a prison that one could have done without. While it is easy after the events to denounce the carelessness of these thousands of people or the immorality of tourist promoters to "think" tourism as they did, it is useful to repeat that there are many historical experiences to remind us of this fragility.

Many blogs, newspaper articles, television and radio programs tell us how old the epidemics are and their impact on societies to make us understand that there is nothing new under the sun and that our belief in the indestructibility of our societies was only an illusion¹. However, there is little research specifically on the links between epidemics and tourism. In 1974, the great malaria specialist L.J. Bruce Chwatt, published an article on the links between air traffic, which was booming due to the growth of tourism, and epidemics, pointing out that "the growth of the tourist industry, has greatly increased the risk of transmission and greatly increased the difficulties of preventive action"². This article led a French scientist, migration specialist and director of research at the National Institute of Demographic Studies, Jacques Houdaille, to extend Chwatt's thinking. Houdaille pointed out that "The international regulations that have been in place since 1951 to prevent the transmission of certain epidemic diseases have been fairly well observed for some fifteen years. However, during the 1960s, the rapid development of tourism prompted the immigration authorities to relax their vigilance. Advances in commercial aviation contributed significantly to this."³ Each in their own way and using their knowledge, these two scientists put their finger on a phenomenon that we did not want or could not foresee: the impact of epidemics. As proof, in the introduction to a special issue of a magazine devoted in 2007 to the economic history of tourism, we ended up asking ourselves whether tourism has a future: "Tired visitors, exhausted sites, discouraged destinations, fraudulent tour operators, overcrowded airports, blocked motorways, everything indicates that,

¹ See, for example, the very interesting blog of the Economic History Society: The Long View on Epidemics, Disease and Public Health: Research from Economic History Part A <https://ehstheconomichistorysociety.org/2020/03/26/the-long-view-on-epidemics-disease-and-public-health-research-from-economic-history-part-a/> and B: <https://ehstheconomichistorysociety.org/2020/03/31/the-long-view-on-epidemics-disease-and-public-health-research-from-economic-history-part-b/>. (accessed 3 April 2020. See also Nicolas Weill, "Face à la maladie, les limites du pouvoir" in *Le Monde*, 3 April 2020.

² L.J. Bruce Chwatt, "Air Transport and disease", *Journal of Biosocial Science*, avril 1974, 6, p. 241-258.

³ Jacques Houdaille. "International tourism and disease" In: *Population*, 30^e year, n°1, 1975. pp. 140-142. The author also wonders why the spread of yellow fever has never occurred.

barring miracles, tourism is heading towards a wall where happiness will certainly not be there"⁴. No miracles have, it is true, occurred, but neither was there any mention of the dangers of an epidemic as if it were indecent to invoke its possibility. The Covid-19 gives us the opportunity to be more attentive to the very essence of tourism which, like the god Janus, has two sides, one happy side, most often put forward - and for good reason - and the other, the dark side. At the beginning of the 20th century, a famous German writer wrote a text of astonishing topicality in these days of confinement. In his short story *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann wonderfully (if one can use that word...) describes the process that leads ... tourists to be caught in the meshes of a net from which they can scarcely extricate themselves⁵. Beyond his masterful literary mastery and his intrigue that sees a writer, Gustav Aschenbach, take on a mad passion for a teenager, he is a very shrewd observer, showing the underhanded spread in Venice of what he calls "Asian cholera".

Mann's text helps to see how the epidemic has spread in Europe and particularly in Venice and how it affects the city and its inhabitants, especially tourists. In his "demonstration", Thomas Mann describes a process that can be divided into several stages:

1. Asian origin of the epidemic -> 2. Arrival of the epidemic in Europe -> 3. Identification of "patient zero" -> 4. Transmission of the epidemic -> 5. Symptoms -> 6. Measures taken by the authorities -> 7. Public reactions -> 8. Implications (departure or containment).

Let's review these steps and see how Mann develops them⁶.

First, Thomas Mann places the origin of the epidemic in Asia.

« Engendrée par la chaleur dans le delta marécageux du Gange, avec les miasmes qu'exhale un monde d'îles encore tout près de la création, une jungle luxuriante et inhabitable, peuplée seulement de tigres tapis dans les fourrés de bambous, l'épidémie avait gagné tout l'Hindoustan où elle ne cessait de sévir avec une virulence inaccoutumée ; puis elle s'est étendue à l'est, vers la Chine, à l'ouest, vers l'Afghanistan, la Perse, et suivant la grande piste des caravanes avait porté ses ravages jusqu'à Astrakan et même Moscou. »

Secondly, Mann describes the arrival of the epidemic in Europe. He identifies precisely those responsible:

« [C]'est avec les marchants syriens venus d'au-delà les mers qu'il [le mal] avait pénétré, faisant son apparition simultanément dans plusieurs ports de la Méditerranée, sa présence s'était révélée à Toulon, à Malaga ; on l'avait plusieurs fois devinée à Palerme et il semblait que la Calabre et l'Apulie fussent définitivement affectées. Seul le Nord de la péninsule avait été préservé. Cependant cette année-là – on était à la mi-mai – en un seul jour les terribles vibrions furent découverts dans les cadavres vidés et noircis d'un batelier et d'une marchande des quatre-saisons. »

⁴ Laurent Tissot, «Le tourisme: de l'utopie réalisée au cauchemar généralisé ?» In: *Entreprises et histoire*. - Paris. -No 47(2007), p. 5-10.

⁵ In her blog of February 23, 2020, GeoSophie - Geopolitical Landscapes, geographer Sophie Clairet takes up without analyzing them the excerpts from Thomas Mann's short story in the context of Covid-19. <https://geosophie.eu/tag/tourisme/>. (accessed April 5, 2020).

⁶ We used the French translation of Félix Bertaux and Charles Sigwalt published by Fayard in 1971 in the 1984 edition of the *Livre de Poche*, pp. 115-122.

The third stage of the mechanism is the identification of "patient zero" and then the infections that gradually surround the whole city despite the denials of the city authorities:

« Un habitant des provinces autrichiennes venu, pour quelques jours à Venise en partie de plaisir, mourut en rentrant dans sa petite ville d'une mort sur laquelle il n'y avait pas se tromper et c'est ainsi que les premiers bruits de l'épidémie qui avait éclaté dans la cité des lagunes parvinrent aux journaux allemands. L'édilité de Venise fit répondre que les conditions sanitaires de la ville n'avaient jamais été meilleures et prit les mesures de première nécessité pour lutter contre l'épidémie. »

Fourth stage: the expansion takes place through the infection of food products and their transmission to humans:

« Mais sans doute, les vivres, légumes, viande, lait étaient-ils contaminés, car quoique l'on démentît ou que l'on arrangeât les nouvelles, le mal gagnait du terrain ; on mourait dans les étroites ruelles, et une chaleur précoce qui attiédissait l'eau des canaux favorisait la contagion. Il semblait que l'on assistât à une recrudescence du fléau et que les miasmes redoublassent de ténacité et de virulence. »

In the fifth stage, Thomas Mann presents the symptoms of infected patients.

« Les cas de guérison étaient rares, quatre-vingt pour cent de ceux qui étaient touchés mouraient d'une mort horrible, car le mal se montrait d'une violence extrême, et nombreuses étaient les apparitions de sa forme la plus dangereuse, que l'on nomme la forme sèche. Dans ce cas, le corps était impuissant à évacuer les sérosités que les vaisseaux sanguins faisaient filtrer en masse. En quelques heures le malade se desséchait et son sang devenu poisseux l'étouffait. Il agonisait dans les convulsions et les râles. »

The sixth stage can be seen in the measures taken by the authorities, or rather the denials for fear of alarming the tourists and seeing them fleeing from La Serenissima.

« Mais la crainte d'un dommage à la communauté, la considération que l'on venait d'ouvrir une exposition de peinture au jardin public et que les hôtels, les maisons de commerce, toute l'industrie complexe du tourisme risquaient de subir de grosses pertes au cas où, la ville décriée, une panique éclaterait, tout cela l'emportait sur l'amour de la vérité et le respect des conventions internationales, et décidait les autorités à persévérer obstinément dans leur politique de silence et de démentis. Le directeur du service de santé de Venise, un homme de mérite, avait démissionné avec indignation, et en sous-main on l'avait remplacé par quelqu'un de plus souple. »

In the seventh point, Thomas Mann focuses on describing the reactions of the public.

« Cela le public le savait, et la corruption des notables de la ville, ajoutée à l'incertitude qui régnait, à l'état d'exception dans lequel la mort rôdant plongeait la ville, provoquait une démoralisation des basses classes, une poussée de passions honteuses, illicites, et une recrudescence de criminalité où on les voyait faire explosion, s'afficher cyniquement. Fait anormal : on remarquait le soir beaucoup d'ivrognes ; la nuit, des rôdeurs rendaient, disait-on, les rues peu sûres ; les agressions, les meurtres se répétaient, et deux fois déjà il s'était avéré que des personnes soi-disant victimes du fléau avaient été empoisonnées par des parents qui voulaient se débarrasser d'elles ; le vice professionnel atteignait un degré d'insistance et de dépravation qu'autrement l'on ne connaissait guère dans cette région, et dont on n'a l'habitude que dans le Sud du pays et en Orient. »

The eighth stage is the decision stage. An English employee of a travel agency admits that the situation is very serious and that the only conclusion to be drawn is to leave Venice without delay, before the quarantine is installed for all its inhabitants, to which - unlike all the other tourists who "were leaving, fleeing, the table d'hôte was getting thinner and thinner, and it was rare to still see a stranger in the city" - Aschenbach cannot get down to it, bewitched as he is by the passion devoted to Tadzio, the angel of death.

The short story of Thomas Mann cannot be seen as an exact replica of what is happening with the Covid-19. It would be pointless, even silly. Of the eight steps mentioned, most do not factually fit the present situation, even though the effects of globalization (Syrian merchants landing in Europe) or government reactions, or the manifestations of the disease are in many ways the same in both cases. It is not a question of taking at face value the writings of a writer whose immense power of imagination and suggestion is well established. We know that the paths between literature and history are very complex and problematic⁷. An in-depth study of the sources used by Thomas Mann to describe the "Asian cholera" epidemic would be interesting. His description does not spare us either stereotypes about populations (people from the South and the East) or geographical areas (Asia). But his text helps us to analyse the infection process in its tragic sequence: from the arrival of the epidemic to implications in the form of departure or quarantine. This sequence leads to an inevitable halting of tourist activities... With Thomas Mann, their death, personified by the hero, is the only outcome. It is to be hoped that after Covid-19, a rebirth will take place.

Laurent Tissot (University of Neuchâtel)

⁷ A very good clarification can be found in Haddad Élie, Meyzie Vincent, « La littérature est-elle l'avenir de l'histoire ? Histoire, méthode, écriture. À propos de : Ivan Jablonka *L'histoire est une littérature contemporaine. Manifeste pour les sciences sociales*, Paris, Seuil, 2014, 333 p., ISBN 978-2-02-1137190 4 », *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine*, 2015/4 (n° 62-4), p. 132-154. DOI : 10.3917/rhmc.624.0132. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-d-histoire-moderne-et-contemporaine-2015-4-page-132.htm>. See also, Nikolay Koposov, *De l'imagination historique*. Paris, Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2009.