

The history of pandemics, going back to the first documented event, the Bubonic Plague, fascinates historians. We Americans have a pretty short attention span, in accord with our short history as a country (short when we compare ours with China's, for example). We have revisited the strange history of the Spanish Flu pandemic that followed World War I, a deadly plague that killed millions of people worldwide, yet vanished in memory almost immediately afterwards. We have paid much more attention to that pandemic today than we did in its original aftermath when modern society opted for amnesia, quickly forgetting its horrors.

Humanity has experienced periodic plagues from the beginning of "civilization," when the development of agriculture led to settled communities that quickly evolved into cities, city-states, and then kingdoms and empires. Most pandemics were initiated by animal and bird diseases that jumped over to human beings. With herding, the contact between human beings and farmed creatures made this inevitable, something we know today but did not in our species' earlier years.

In antiquity, plagues were thought to be punishments of angry gods, punishments that could only be ended by sacrifices of food, animals, or in extremity, hapless human beings. Sacrificing what was dearest to the community most often meant children, girl children. The sacrifice of children permeated Greek myths (the Trojan War), Jewish Biblical stories (Abraham and Jacob), and Christianity (God's very son himself).

We now know better (at least most of us do). We know about diseases, vaccinations, and sanitation to mitigate even new plagues that come into our midst. We know that diseases do not respect national boundaries. They travel with all the millions of travelers who traverse the globe daily. That is why an epidemic becomes a pandemic, a global event. We are in this together.

We are approaching the end of our own time's most deadly plague, and it is time to look ahead to see what followed former great pandemics in history. How did they change the world?

The Bubonic Plague wiped out almost half the world's population in successive waves from China across Eurasia and ending at the Atlantic Coast of Europe. The only areas spared were sub-Saharan Africa and the as yet isolated Western Hemisphere. This bit of history explains one terrible thing that followed the plague: a shortage of slaves, which was until then recruited from the Slavic populations (Slav means slave), and the beautiful women from among them from the voracious Muslim slave market to serve harems.

With the deaths of so many slaves from the Caucasus and Slavic tribes, the plague survivors had to look elsewhere for enforced labor, and sub-Saharan Africa became the market. Black tribal chiefs themselves eagerly engaged in selling their own slaves to the Portuguese. Unlike white slaves, these couldn't run and hide.

The death toll of the Bubonic Plague was most devastating to the lowest classes, the peasants and servants. In Europe, the system that had replaced Roman slavery when Christianity prevailed was serfdom, a system of binding peasants to the land, punishing running away as treason to the landowner. Fear of this punishment vanished when the obvious labor shortage that followed the plague became a real opportunity for enterprising runaways to rise up the ladder from serf labor to artisans, tradesmen, and merchants. The former virtual caste system became a flexible class system instead.

The aftermath of every epidemic and pandemic led to new knowledge: the beginnings of clean water and sewage disposal systems. The Scientific Revolution launched by Western Europe was a byproduct of the plagues that swept through, one after another.

Vaccinations were introduced that put an end to smallpox, a perennial plague. Cities were redesigned to clean them up. Hygiene greatly enhanced life expectancy, and its science was incorporated into our food and drug industries. There is no doubt that terrible as the Covid-19 pandemic was, we were better prepared as human beings to mitigate and survive it.

Next week, I will explore the sorts of options for change open to us from the lessons we learned from Covid-19. It may have changed us forever.

684 words

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