

The Perils of Politicizing a Plague

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Politicizing a plague has a long, sordid history, dating back to the Black Death. The medieval political mindset of leaders in many countries today indicates that the more things change, the more they remain the same.



Death celebrates the bubonic plague, from the "Liber Cononicarum," 1493.

(CN) — Politicization of disease has a long, depressing history in what we know today as the Western World. For centuries, it was a series of attacks against Jews — already segregated and ghettoized, forced into

a job (money-lending) that the dominant Christian and Muslim populations claimed to abhor — which made it easier, when plague struck, to kill, sack and deport the residents of the ghettos.

While Jews, so far, have escaped this fate during the Covid-19 pandemic, politicians around the world with medieval mindsets have employed the same tactics — with a twist, or several twists.

One goal of this series is to show how disease has been politicized since the Black Death, the worst pandemic in history, which arrived in Europe by 1347 after killing uncounted thousands in Asia.

A second goal will be to show how today's vicious and increasingly hallucinatory politicization of Covid-19 reflects the pogroms of the past — again, with a twist. When the citizens of medieval Europe sacked and burned Jewish ghettos during the Black Death, claiming that Jews were “poisoning the wells,” the Christians had no idea what caused the plague, or who carried it — what the vectors were.

Today we know. But the pattern is the same: Donald Trump blames China; China retorts, “We’ve controlled it better than you did;” Trump blames New York and California; Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro says it’s no problem at all; India’s Narendra Modi “opens up” his country to appeal to his relatively wealthy voters, despite the mounting and undercounted death toll.

The third goal will be to examine whether today's politicization of disease differs from the previous ones, and if so, in what ways.

The conclusion we will state in advance: Pre-scientific societies, cloaked in ignorance, flailing about for a way to deal with plague, resorted to execration and violence against “socially distant” groups. And though we do not yet understand all the ins and outs of Covid-19, we — modern humanity — have fallen into the same execrable habits: Blame outsiders — the people and governments we already despise. Attack, defame, and loot if you can.

The Courthouse News database already contains more than 100 lawsuits about Covid-19 scams: phony virus tests, bogus vaccines, counterfeit masks, telephone fraud, internet fraud. Even [televangelist](#)

[Jim Bakker](#) has been accused of peddling a phony cure, by the attorney general of Arkansas.

Seen from the awful heights of science today, the residents of 14th century Strasbourg, Basel and Frankfurt may be excused — perhaps — for resorting to mass terror in a time of mass fear.

But what excuse can government leaders make today for spending so much time politicizing a lethal disease, rather than devoting all their efforts to trying to limit its spread, seeking a cure, and spending money on the science needed for it, rather than on propaganda?

There is no excuse for this.

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has claimed more than 500,000 lives and continues to stalk the world, it is worse than sad — it is a comment upon humanity — that so many so-called leaders, in so many countries — above all in Brazil, the United States, India, Russia and China — try to use a global catastrophe for small-minded, partisan political advantage that hurts their own people.

Plague Politics in Europe

Courthouse News outlined a history of plagues in a [previous series](#). This series will focus on how Western societies and governments have weaponized diseases and politicized them.

We begin with the Black Death, the worst pandemic in history, which killed one-third to one-half of the people of Europe. Most accounts peg its arrival in Europe at October 1347, when ships fleeing plague in the Crimea — or perhaps merely merchant ships — arrived in Messina, Sicily.

By then, the zoonotic disease, *Yersinia pestis* — transmitted to humans by fleas deserting the rats that died of it — had already killed uncounted thousands in China and across the Asian steppes as traders and warriors carried it west.

Zoonotic diseases are diseases that jump across animal hosts, sometimes from one species to another, and then to humans. The Black Plague jumped from rats to fleas to humans. Covid-19, according to the best scientific guesses today, may have jumped from bats to other mammals to humans.

Weaponization of the Black Death preceded its politicization. The earliest record of [the arrival of Y. Pestis in Europe](#) is probably the 1348 account of [Gabriele de Mussi](#) (ca. 1280-1356), which begins: “In the name of God, Amen. Here begins an account of the disease or mortality which occurred in 1348, put together by Gabriele de Mussis of Piacenza.”

Catapulting Corpses

The chronicler probably was not in the Crimean city of Caffa (now Feodosija) when the plague arrived, but his account was nearly contemporaneous.

He wrote: “In 1346, in the countries of the East, countless numbers of Tartars and Saracens were struck down by a mysterious illness which brought sudden death.”

This happened as the Tartars, or Mongols — descendants of Genghis Khan’s Golden Horde — were besieging Caffa.

“All medical advice and attention was useless; the Tartars died as soon as the signs of disease appeared on their bodies: swellings in the armpit or groin caused by coagulating humors, followed by a putrid fever.”

The description of the swellings, or buboes, makes it clear that this was the bubonic plague. The “putrid” adjective indicates stench, which surely influenced European theories that contagions were carried by “vapors” in the air.

De Mussi continued: “The dying Tartars, stunned and stupefied by the immensity of the disaster brought about by the disease, and realizing that they had no hope of escape, lost interest in the siege. But they ordered corpses to be placed in catapults and lobbed into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside. ... Moreover, one infected man could carry the poison to others, and infect people and places with the disease by look alone. No one knew, or could discover, a means of defense.”

De Mussi said that some Caffans escaped by sea to Genoa and Venice, carrying the plague.

The chronicle, cited by microbiologist Mark Wheelis in “Biological Warfare at the 1346 Siege of Caffa,” in the September 2002 issue of [Emerging Infectious Diseases](#), makes it clear that plague sufferers knew that the disease spread from human contact, though they did not know how. Wheelis then was a senior lecturer in microbiology at the University of California, Davis. Repeated calls to UC-Davis went unanswered.

The reference to the “intolerable stench” was repeated for hundreds of years, even in the United States, where “miasma” or “nighttime humors” were believed to spread disease.

Wheelis did not believe that the refugees of Caffa were responsible for bringing the Black Death to Europe: It would have arrived anyway. But de Mussi’s account shows an early example of the weaponization of disease.

This is different from the politicization of it — which was not far behind.

(During and after World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union, among others, devoted substantial resources to weaponizing diseases, including Y. Pestis, anthrax, botulism, staphylococcus, brucellosis (undulant fever) and tularemia.

(This allegedly stopped in the 109 countries that signed the Convention on the Prohibition and Stockpiling of Bacteriological and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, which allegedly took effect on March 26, 1975. But weaponization of disease has not stopped. It continues, often under the guise of “biodefense.” Russia’s biological warfare program is extensively detailed in Russian defector Ken Alibek’s 1999 book, “Biohazard.”)

Politicization of the Black Death



A Jew 'poisons a well' in a 14th century French woodcut. (Museum of Archaeology, Herne)

By 1348, Y. Pestis was ravaging Europe, and by 1349 Christians were massacring Jews by the thousands, blaming them for “poisoning the wells.”

One of the first mass murders came in April 1348, in Toulon, Provence, where Christians sacked the Jewish quarter and murdered dozens of Jews in their homes. More mass murders and robberies soon followed in Barcelona and elsewhere in Catalonia.

The height of the massacres came in 1349. On Jan. 9 in Basel, 600 Jews were burned to death, including their rabbi. Two thousand Jews were burned alive that year in the Valentine’s Day massacre in Strasbourg — even before plague came to the city. An indeterminate number were murdered in Erfurt on March 21: Estimates range from 100 to 3,000. More massacres followed in Flanders, Frankfurt am Main, Cologne and in Mainz, where 3,000 Jews were killed.

After the genocides, Christians sifted through the ashes to enrich themselves from the Jews’ belongings. More than 500 Jewish quarters were sacked and burned in the first two years of the pogroms.

Profiteering from the Covid-19 pandemic may not be as blatant as sifting through medieval ashes for melted gold and silver, but it has become a multimillion-dollar business in the United States and elsewhere.

The biggest known haul was British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's ill-advised \$20 million purchase of home-test coronavirus kits from a Chinese company, all of which were bogus, according to [The New York Times](#).

Smaller-scale frauds, still running into the millions of dollars, abound across the United States. More such lawsuits are being filed every day.

During the Black Death, some Jewish ghettos did suffer fewer per capita infections than in the quarters from which they had been banned. Historians have attributed this to better hygiene, with emphasis on hand-washing before and after meals, dietary restrictions, and the social isolation already being enforced on the ghettos.

Pogroms waned by 1351, after the plague had killed more than one-third of the people of Europe, but did not stop. On May 22, 1370, citizens of Brussels killed dozens of Jews and banished the survivors. The spark was the supposed desecration of hosts at a synagogue. Christians claimed the Jews had stabbed the hosts, which miraculously shed blood.

The allegedly stolen hosts were recovered and revered by Brussels Christians as the "Sacrament of Miracle" until after the Holocaust of WWII made that unpopular. The reliquary that contained the hosts is still housed in the Brussels cathedral.

Syphilis



Palmar sores of secondary syphilis. Such sores could occur all over the body. (Centers for Disease Control photo)

Syphilis, which began ravaging Europe in 1494, was known in Italy as the French disease, and in France as the Italian disease. Theories that it was brought back by conquistadors from the New World, where it was a relatively benign disease, have been discredited, but continue to circulate. What's certain is that the natives of the New World suffered far greater mortality per capita from measles, smallpox, influenzas and other diseases introduced by the invaders than Europeans suffered from syphilis.

Syphilis, because of its sexual transmission, fortified the prescientific delusion of disease as a moral stain, punishable by God. According to this religious view of disease, if plague was an act of God against sinners, the “cure” could be to murder the people who were accused of spreading it.

Smallpox ...



Scars of smallpox could cover one's entire body, and were most visible on the face. (Centers for Disease Control photo)

The death toll from smallpox across millennia may approach or surpass the mortality from the Black Death. As many as 300 million people died of smallpox in the 20th century alone. Its morbidity rate is as high as one-third, though many people survived it, among them Queen Elizabeth I and Beethoven. The earliest record of it is “the

pustular rash on the mummified body of Pharaoh Ramses V of Egypt, who died in 1157 B.C.,” according to a BBC report of 2011, “[Smallpox: Eradicating the Scourge.](#)”

... and Vaccine

The British physician Edward Jenner invented vaccination in 1796. Clued in by folk tales, and observing that milkmaids who contracted a mild form of the disease, known as cowpox, seemed to be immune from smallpox, Jenner extracted pus from the hand of a milkmaid and inserted it into an incision he made in the arm of an 8-year-old boy. By 1801 Jenner was publicly promoting his procedure as proof against smallpox.

Public reaction was immense — and often hostile.

Some clerics called it “un-Christian” because cowpox came from an animal.

“Scientific” objectors denounced it, because smallpox and other diseases were known to come from “vapors” in the air, particularly at night.

But with smallpox continuing to devastate England, and the world, the English Parliament approved a Vaccination Act in 1853, mandating vaccination of children. In 1867 the Parliament toughened the act to require vaccination of everyone up to 14 years old, and added penalties for violators.

Opponents echoed the religious objections and called it invasion of privacy. They formed an Anti-Vaccination League and Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League, and began publishing pamphlets, according to a 2002 article in BMJ (formerly the British Medical Journal), “[Anti-vaccinationists past and present.](#)”

In an anti-vaccination march in 1885 in Leicester, a center of vaccine resistance, thousands of protesters carried banners, a child’s coffin and an effigy of Jenner, according to a 2000 article in The Society for the Social History of Medicine, “[They might as well brand us: Working class resistance to compulsory vaccination in Victorian England.](#)”

The resistance led the Parliament to create a commission to study vaccination, which found in 1896 that vaccination did prevent

smallpox, but suggested removing penalties for failing to vaccinate. This led to the Vaccination Act of 1898, which included a conscientious objector clause that parents could invoke — just as parents in the United States today can object to public school districts' requirements that their children be vaccinated against a host of diseases to be enrolled.

English resistance led to similar resistance in the United States, including the Anti-Vaccination Society of America, founded in 1879, and similar societies in New England (1882) and New York City (1885). American anti-vaxxers fought in court to repeal vaccination laws in several states, including Illinois, California and Wisconsin.

The anti-vaccination movement reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1905, in *Jacobson v. Massachusetts* — the first Supreme Court case about the power of states in public health law. The case originated in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1902, where the city Board of Health ordered all city residents to be vaccinated against smallpox. Henning Jacobson objected, on privacy grounds, and was criminally charged. Jacobson appealed, and the Supreme Court ruled that states could enact compulsory laws to protect the public from communicable disease.

The 'Spanish' Flu

[Estimations](#) of mortality, hard to confirm for lack of data, have been revised upward for the “Spanish flu,” which killed at least 50 million people in the aftermath of World War I.

Nowadays, historians and epidemiologists use a broad spectrum of mortality, ranging from 2.5% to 5% of the world's population, which translates to *50 million to 100 million deaths* — from a flu.

The pandemic, therefore, was five to 10 times deadlier than the First World War, according to an April 23 article in [Humanitarian Law and Policy](#), a publication of the International Red Cross.

“The lives lost during this episode teach us a valuable lesson: transparent information is crucial at all times,” the journal reported. “To respect and implement public health measures, the population needs to trust the authorities. In 1918, after four years of conflict and propaganda, that trust was simply broken. What was true then is even more so in 2020. Mistrust of information from health authorities is

still a challenge. Modern means of communication and the recent development of digital social networks make it even harder. Undocumented claims, false information, conspiracy theories, and dangerous conclusions can spread as quickly as viruses.”

Polio

Poliomyelitis has killed and paralyzed humankind since at least 1,400 B.C., when an Egyptian stela depicted a sufferer with a withered leg.

Probably because the disease was still crippling and killing more than 500,000 people a year, there were no widespread protests in the late 1950s when the United States began vaccinating millions of children with the Salk and Sabin vaccines in public schools.

Memories of the late, wartime President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a polio sufferer who used a wheelchair, surely contributed to Americans' acceptance of the vaccines.

DPT and MMR Vaccines

Introduction of the DPT (diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough) and tetanus) and MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccines in the 1960s and '70s did not go as smoothly.

The MMR vaccine began being widely distributed in 1971 in the United States. Measles then was killing more than 2 million people a year worldwide, mostly children.

Interestingly, semi-widespread public resistance to the MMR vaccine did not begin in the United States until a generation after its introduction.

In 1998, British scientist Andrew Wakefield claimed that he had found a connection between the MMR vaccine and autism. The Lancet, the respected British medical journal that published Wakefield's article, [retracted it](#) in 2010.

The British General Medical Council found that Wakefield had a “fatal conflict of interest” because he had been paid to seek evidence to support a lawsuit filed by parents of autistic children. Wakefield was barred from practicing medicine in Great Britain.

Numerous studies since then have found no link between the MMR vaccine and autism, but the anti-vaxxer crusade continues in the United States — even denouncing the search for a vaccine for Covid-19. One researcher who asked to remain anonymous told Courthouse News he believes that parents of autistic children drive the campaign, searching for someone to blame for what remains a scientific mystery — a recurrence of the medieval linking of disease to moral stain.

AIDS

The politicization of AIDS was so obvious, and is so recent, that it is hardly necessary to recount. The late Randy Shilts's 1987 book, "And the Band Played On," describing the Reagan administration's sluggish reaction to what some called "the gay plague," laid it out in detail. As with syphilis, and "blame the Jews" for just about anything, reactionaries cast the disease as God's punishment for a moral failing — the unspoken corollary being that those who died of it deserved it.

Lessons? Learned?

Governments, authoritarian or ostensibly democratic, will always try to seize upon social chaos to try to cement themselves in office. Rulers, by instinct, will blame "outsiders" to try to shore up their power by exploiting fear in a time of unrest.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, the United States, Brazil, China, India and Iran have done this more brazenly and shamelessly than most other nations. Suffice it to say that the United States, by any estimate the most technologically and economically advanced country in the world, with 4.25% of the world's population, has suffered 25.4% of the world's confirmed deaths by Covid-19.

The politicization of Covid-19, so far, has not been as overtly violent as the weaponization of the Black Plague. But in the 21st century, after humans have all but conquered smallpox, polio and other fatal diseases, it may be even more shameful.

The Senate Judiciary Committee last week discussed a bill to [hold China responsible](#) for billions of dollars in damages that Covid-19 has wrought upon the United States. It was an act of pure political grandstanding that could not be enforced even if it were passed. It was political panic.

The rulers and citizens of Europe had no idea what caused the Black Plague and spread it. So they panicked.

We know what causes Covid-19, though there is much more to learn about it. But governments around the world, including our own, have no excuse for spending so much time, treasure and effort in politicizing a disease rather than trying to control it.

It's important to note that governments today are panicking, far more than their citizens are. Most citizens around the world try to abide by protective suggestions and orders. It's the governments and politicians that are panicking.

The Black Plague itself — the disease — was never politicized — politics were directed against the people who supposedly carried it.

The politicization of Covid-19 is a bizarre throwback to the medieval age: the wild claims on right-wing U.S. websites that Bill Gates, George Soros and the World Health Organization designed Covid-19; that vaccines will kill you or control your mind; that, as Donald Trump Jr. said, reports on the pandemic are a fraudulent plot by the Democratic Party and “the media” to steal this year's presidential election.

These politically inspired fantasies are believed, apparently, by millions of people in the United States, where even bacilli, viruses and chemical reactions have been politicized.

Once upon a time, the United States was a world leader in science. We still are, but for how long?

The sad conclusion must be that with billions of people living in poverty around the world, without access to basic health care, medicine and even clean drinking water, while their oppressive governments reject science and increase appeals to extremist religions — Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu — without deep-ranging government reforms, which are unlikely to happen, there is no reason to expect that this plague will end soon, or will be our last.

Part II of the Courthouse News series on politicizing plagues, concentrating on the world's present pandemic, will be published Tuesday.

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