Florence Under Siege: Surviving Plague in an Early Modern City

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REFERENCES

The economic and social impact of epidemics in pre-industrial societies has long been a topic explored and debated by historical research, with the plague acting as an undisputed protagonist. In recent years, these studies have found new life and enjoyed fresh approaches of analysis, also thanks to the formulation of new research questions and the application of innovative methodologies. Efforts have been made to better understand the precise mechanisms and ecological triggers causing the spread, and persistence, of epidemics, as well as to evaluate their impact in society and culture, and the modalities and effectiveness of the institutional responses to the emergencies, stressing the need to escape from geographical, but also chronological, generalizations. For example, to what extent the picture emerging by the studies on Western European is in line or differs from what happened in other parts of the world? Is it possible to identify similar processes in the aftermath of epidemics affecting the same places but at different times?

A significant amount of new research has therefore tried to point out the divergent effects of pestilences on the economies in the short and long run, the impact of demographic shocks caused by the plague on the distribution of wealth and income, the labour markets and the social mobility. The recent global pandemic, fortunately less lethal than the plague but whose effects on societies and economies are far from negligible, has multiplied the studies on these topics, both contemporary and over the long run. John Henderson, with his latest book, is, however, above all suspicion about having taken advantage of this new wave of fashionable research, firstly because of the date of its release, secondly—and more importantly—because this work is the result of a long and meticulous archival research and the culmination of a series of studies on the topic carried out by the Author over the years.

Florence Under Siege: Surviving Plague in an Early Modern City is a vivid reconstruction of the experience of a city in 17th-century Italy, Florence, during a plague epidemic that caused the death of about 12% of the population, which at the time amounted to 75,000 souls. The overall picture the book provides is deep and richly structured, also because it is massively based on the extraordinary documentation preserved in the Florentine archives, which the Author was able to take advantage of by choosing and effectively combining sources of various nature. Most of these are official records, such as the history of the epidemic written by the librarian of the Grand Duke Francesco Rondinelli or the collections of edicts, but also the diaries of eyewitnesses and, above all, the precious material produced by the Health Officers (Ufficiali di Sanità), that is, the correspondence between the officers, and the judicial records. The latter in particular are the perfect source to deliver a cross-section of everyday life of different social
classes during ‘a year of plague’. I use this expression not by accident, because from this point of view Florence Under Siege recalls Giulia Calvi’s 1989 book, Histories of a Plague Year. The Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence (translation of the Italian published in 1984), which used the same documentation to develop an analysis of the structures and the symbolic codes of the Health Commission’s criminal proceedings. Henderson’s study, building from this work, adopts on the one hand an analytical approach, by carrying out a numerical analysis of the trials, their seasonal and gender dynamics, the types of crimes committed and the categories of punishments that were imposed. On the other hand, it places the crimes committed against ‘public health’ in the broader context of the public struggle against the plague, even emphasizing its demographic and socio-economic impact.

In short, the Author’s aim is to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to compose a wide-ranging outlook able to portray the effects of the plague in Florence in the years between 1630 and 1633, focusing on health, religious, administrative and economic aspects alternately. This kaleidoscopic methodology also intends to move away from a narrative exclusively focused on the opposition between the rich and the poor, between ‘the government and the governed’, by offering an interpretative grid in which the horizontal links operating in the society prevail over the vertical and hierarchical ones where the lower levels simply suffered and passively accepted the measures decided from above.

The structure of the book is a direct consequence of the Author’s intentions: while Part I analyses the development of the public health policies operated by the government, with a particular attention to the environment (both urban and rural), the role of the medical science and the various forms of quarantine, Part II is thematic and examines the phenomenon through the lens of religion, isolation hospitals and the survival strategies put in action by the Florentines dealing with disease, death and massive regulation. An Epilogue reflects around the attitude of the Grand Ducal administration towards the brief but shocking return of the plague in 1632. While this scheme helps to manage the amount of information that the sources are able to supply to the scrupulous researcher, it necessarily ends up causing some repetition of concepts or, at least, the recurrence of topics already introduced in previous sections, as a consequence of the change in the point of view from which the facts are analysed.

In particular, the first chapters—after a review of the bibliography on the origin and the spread of the plague in Early Modern Northern Italy—report on the preventive measures taken by the health administration as the disease approached Tuscany, including the provision of cordons sanitaires along the borders, and then address the problems associated with the calculation of mortality through an in-depth examination of a wide range of documents of a demographic nature. Chapters 3 and 4, on the other hand, emphasise the many challenges faced by the Ufficiali di Sanità, especially in terms of understanding the environmental factors associated with the diffusion of the plague, and the solutions that they gradually decided to adopt. In this broad section of the book the ambivalent nature of the government’s attitude towards the lower strata of society emerges, a balance between intolerance (the ‘poor’ seen as co-responsible for the worsening of the epidemic because of their uncivilized lifestyle) and charitable and caring feelings. From this perspective, the stereotyped figure of the poor who often appears in legislation fades to emerge as a person living in flesh and blood, embedded in a network of social relations indispensable for the development of effective survival...
strategies. These elements are made explicit in chapter 5 which examines in detail the impact of health policies (such as quarantine) on the population through the analysis of the factors underlying the outbreak of the plague. The parish of San Lorenzo is used by the Author as an observatory, and its number of infected and buried inhabitants was analysed in relation to the topographical and social profiles of the specific streets. It was therefore possible to assess the impact on mortality of the policies for the removal of the sick and their confinement in lazzaretti (“feared more than death itself”) or in other isolation establishments.

The Author remarks, however, that in Baroque Florence the power of ‘spiritual medicine’ was considered stronger than any measure adopted by governments. This consideration is the starting point for chapter 6, which deals with the religious strategies and practices adopted by the Church to appease God’s wrath; the religious aspect is also an important theme in chapter 7—dedicated to the lazzaretti—since Florence relied largely on the adaptation of existing convents and churches (as well as patrician villas on the outskirts of the city) to guarantee the isolation of the infected. Combining again a quantitative and qualitative analysis, the Author underlines the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of these institutions, and emphasizes the dichotomy of the attitudes towards them: they were used as a means for moral and social control, as well as for the marginalization of poverty, but they also were an effective instrument for the provision of medical services and the public expression of Christian charity.

Chapter 8 suggests, finally, a more systematic analysis of the connection between the government and the governed, offering, as mentioned above, a quantitative review of the trials celebrated by Health Officers. The judicial records revealed a complex world of offences, punishments, attempts by citizens to circumvent the law and contradictions in the management of cases by judges, often reflecting the compassion for the offenders or the confusion of being involved in the network of the judicial process. How much was Florence able to learn from the experience of the 1630-31 epidemic? Which policies were ultimately effective and worth re-proposing and consolidating? The Epilogue helps to answer these questions by comparing the impact and the reactions to the return of the plague in 1632-33.

In conclusion, adopting an exquisitely interdisciplinary approach, the book offers an effective ‘total history’ (albeit local) of the response of an important city such as Florence to a health emergency whose socio-economic effects are observed from different points of view, the government and ‘the street’ levels (even if a greater emphasis could perhaps have been placed on the fact that, although the attitude towards the poor was the result of complex dynamics, the consequences of the plague were not ‘socially neutral’, hitting the lower strata of society harder) and framed within the wider range of the relationship of interdependence existing between the Capital city and its countryside.