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Pandemie d'Italia. Dalla peste nera all'influenza suina: l'impatto sulla società

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Pandemic diseases have coexisted with mankind for millions of years. Non specialists would think that when a pandemic disease hits a population, the consequences are limited to high mortality. What the book by Alfani and Melegaro shows is that, apart from the mortality crisis, pandemics cause a host of other issues, involve different actors, and are shaped by and shape the culture of the population they hit.

The authors guide the reader through the past six and a half centuries of history of pandemic diseases in Italy and Europe, using an interdisciplinary approach, involving the interplay between social and demographic history and epidemiology. The book is divided into 6 chapters which, century after century, epidemic after epidemic, give an overview of the evolution of the history of pandemic diseases. The book begins with the announcement of a pandemic influenza - the Swine flu - officially recognized by the WHO in June 2009, and then, in the first chapter, brings the reader back to the mid-14th century, to "the queen of pandemic diseases": the plague. The authors provide an overview of the main waves of the plague, beginning in 1348, when the Black Death, which originated in Central Asia, invaded all the European territories, and ending in the mid-17th century. The second chapter is devoted to the cholera epidemics, while the third chapter focuses on sexually transmitted pandemics, with particular emphasis on syphilis and HIV, the most serious of today's pandemics. The first pandemic influenza, the Spanish flu, which occurred in 1918-20, is described in the fourth chapter. The last two chapters offer a reflection on the very recent past, covering SARS, avian influenza and the swine flu. A preface by Francesco Billari nicely completes the book by underlying its relevance to current debates.

The book is very well documented and informed. While relying on the most influential scientific publications in the fields of epidemiology and history, other sources include classics in the Italian literature (e.g., Boccaccio, Petrarch, Manzoni), newspaper articles, official documents, physicians' diagnoses and interviews. The reader learns that not all pandemic diseases equal: some have a higher mortality risk while others are much less virulent. The reader would also appreciate digressions on the identification of the various diseases, the description of their symptoms, their treatments, and targeted policy interventions. The reading of the book is particularly enjoyable thanks to the frequent references to interesting details, an example being the spread of the cult of Saint Sebastian invoked against the plague during the 6th century pandemic (the "Justinian plague"), of Saint Roch in the case of the Black Death, and of the Virgin Mary in the case of Cholera.

Adopting a long-term historical perspective, Alfani and Melegaro find multiple connections between the past and present pandemics. The authors observe that the main common factor across pandemics is the way the population react to contagion. One common behaviour is the identification of “guilty” people. During the first plague waves, first the Jews were faulted and later the poor. In the case of cholera it was physicians, or the governments that were poisoning the poor, could have eliminated poverty from the state or, in the case of the Spanish flu, could have reduced the size of the population during the first World War. The authors also find a common thread across sexually transmitted pandemics; namely the belief that the disease was restricted to a specific population (soldiers and prostitutes in the case of syphilis, homosexuals and intravenous drug users in the initial phase of the HIV pandemic).

The book offers a reflection on the consequences that pandemic diseases have and had on individuals and the societal spheres. These effects are fostered by the psychological and demographic consequences of increased mortality. Today, just like in the past, at the individual level, pandemics alter daily habits and change the frequency and forms of interaction with other people. In particular, the fear of contagion leads to the isolation of infected people. The authors document cases of physicians and priests refusing to treat and assist infected individuals out of fear of being infected themselves. Also, pandemics tend to interfere with one’s view of religion. The production of art flourished during pandemic waves, and was directly related to the instability of the human condition.. At the societal level, pandemics can affect the economic system, for example by altering the distribution and concentration of wealth and increasing inequality as was the case for the Black Death.

The book further offers a reflection on the role of national and international institutions explicitly designed to manage pandemic crises and coordinate with other institutions. The authors discuss how permanent health care commissions were born in late medieval times, and were a precursor of the WHO. The authors note other common elements across pandemics, which have some positive externalities for the society as a whole. These include improvement in living conditions and hygiene standards, the creation of infrastructures, (i.e., the sewage system during cholera), and the introduction of new practices (i.e., the use of condoms during the syphilis pandemic). For example, after consensus was reached on the association between pandemics and poor living conditions, the most widespread reaction was to segregate the poor to avoid contagion. After cholera arrived in Europe during the 19th century, the reaction shifted, to one where public authorities actively tried to improve the living conditions of the poor to prevent the spread of the disease.

Notwithstanding the mentioned common traits with past pandemics, the most recent crises - SARS, avian influenza and the swine flu - did have their own peculiarities. Although the recent pandemics are by and large incomparable to past ones because of their lower risk of death, the role of the media in dis-

seminating information and fear, and the rapid spread aided by the global mobility of people and information in today's world, they all were characterized by a generalized fear of contagion. The governments' intervention, under the double objective of prevention and communication, further fostered a sense of fear in the population.

The book offers a reflection on the way individuals and institutions react to pandemics. Adopting a long-term perspective, Alfani and Melegaro shed light on the present, concluding that the common societal mind-set takes a very long time to change and for this reason, societies tend to react to pandemics following the irrationality of their emotions rather than relying on scientific data and objective considerations. The authors invoke the need for coordination within and between states or territorial units, and the absolute need for institutions to release updated and scientifically-based information.

In conclusion, the book by Alfani and Melegaro is a must for epidemiologists interested in the social aspect of pandemics and for social scientists interested in epidemiology. The book stands alone for being one of the rare examples of very well written and engaging interdisciplinary research.

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