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The Age of Plague - Medicine, Society and Epidemics, 1348 & Beyond

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## Trends in Societal Responses During Pandemics

### **Introduction**

Throughout time, there are instances of environmental pressures that have driven societies to react destructively, sometimes causing a lasting impact in their community. During pandemics, specifically, the hysteria and paranoia that came with the uncontrollable and rapid spread of death lead to violence and anger towards societies as a way for others to cope with the sudden environmental pressures through assigning blame. The Bubonic Plague of 1347 - 1351 was a relatively short-lived outbreak that devastated the population. It was met with a huge lack of scientific understanding, and as such, people were reliant on religion. The societal values of the time dictated public response, which was largely to blame the “other”, pushing the responsibility of the plague away from themselves. The Spanish Flu, which took place from 1918-1919, caused mass paranoia to stem within societies, making citizens afraid to do everyday tasks. Due to the lack of an effective vaccine and treatment, public health officials became the primary target of blame, inciting large amounts of violence and uncertainty within communities. Cholera affected all people of different class and race, with those affected blaming higher authority. The paranoia caused from the mass deaths created an atmosphere of spite towards doctors and government officials because some believed that cholera was scientifically engineered to kill off the poor or wealthy. The paranoia towards a powerful high class is

magnified in the cholera pandemics but can be seen through all pandemics. During the AIDS pandemic, the first few cases of people happened to be gay, leading to amplified hatred and violence towards the LGBTQ community, especially because of their rising movements for equality. The already present hatred towards this community was amplified through the collective blame placed on them for being the cause of this pandemic, and even proper government response for those affected by the pandemic was also delayed by thirty years. The effects of the prejudice and hatred towards the LGBTQ community has left a lasting impact, visible today in society. COVID-19 is a coronavirus that forced the world to go into lockdown beginning in December of 2019. Since then, the virus has spread around the world and has instilled fear into many living during this pandemic. These five instances of pandemic highlight patterns within societal responses during such situations. This paper examines how during pandemics, society tends to marginalize and place blame on certain groups and communities due to the paranoia and hysteria caused by the crises in order to cope with current stress and fear.

### **Bubonic Plague** (Varsha Maddasani)

The Bubonic Plague, otherwise known as the Black Death at the time, is caused by a bacteria called *Yersinia pestis* and is spread by ticks. The bacteria blocks the digestive system in ticks, so when they go to bite rats or other rodents for blood, they are unable to stomach it, and throw the blood, now contaminated with the bacteria, back up into the bite site. As a result, the ticks starved and tried to feed on humans' blood, passing the disease. (Meek) The best indicator of the disease is the development of black swellings at the lymph nodes near the armpit and groin area, which would form within a few days of infection. The Bubonic Plague raged from

approximately 1346 - 1351 and again in the 1360s, killing at least 25 million and going up to 75 million people in Europe.

Due to the lack of scientific knowledge and heavy reliance on religion, the plague was largely attributed to Divine Will. People believed that God sent the plague to punish humans for their sins (Carmichael). However, there were some who questioned this because young children were dying as well, and others justified this by speculating that the children may not have honored their parents as they should have. People also believed that the Jewish were to blame, gathering “evidence” that they were conscripted by Jewish religious leaders to poison the wells (Nutton). Given the long-standing history of the persecution of Judaism, devout Christians were convinced that the Jewish were the driving force behind the disease, and thus had another reason to torture them. There were others, in order to take a more “scientific” approach, who said that the plague came about due to bad air quality. The upper class blamed the poor for the bad air, because they lived in unsanitary environments. They believed that since there were large numbers of poor people, the uncleanliness accumulated in the air. On the other hand, astrologers built off of this idea and cited astrological “phenomena”, like the planets lining up a certain way or Mars sending noxious airs to Earth. The idea of a contagion was not widely accepted nor understood, although it was observed that people could get the plague by being in close contact with someone who was infected, like a family member.

The scapegoating of the Jewish and the poor gave people a reason to believe that they themselves were not the cause of the disease. The idea of the “other” made the seemingly abstract concept of disease physical, making their situation easier to deal with. Even with the Divine Will idea, many Christians believed that the disease was not necessarily meant for them,

as they believed that God most likely sent the plague to warn other religions and groups of people to stay in their place. The idea that the plague came from “the outside” was very prevalent in England as well, mainly due to the slight geographic barrier, but the idea still holds true. Since they do not know where the disease came from, they push the blame onto other groups. Such ideas, mostly based on lack of scientific understanding, reflects the societal values of medieval Europe, and echoes profoundly throughout time.

Tying into the bad air quality idea, some people started to carry herbs and spices around them to ward off the unhealthy air and the smell of sick/dead bodies. The crow masks that physicians wore had such herbs in them, placed to protect them as they worked with different patients. Despite taking such precautions, however, physicians were dying and there was a large demand for treatment. This opened the door for “charlatan physicians” to prey on the desperation of people (Findlen). Some, particularly the middle/upper class decided to flee their homes, hoping that they could escape the disease. Since the poor were essentially trapped in their hometowns, some decided to treat the plague like a joke and continue going out and drinking at bars. Other people decided that they needed to self-isolate in order to stay alive and safe, and only came out when absolutely necessary. Yet, no matter what approach people decided to face the plague with, it seemed that there was no escaping the disease.

There were several chroniclers at the time who pursued literary interest in the plague, two of them being Giovanni Boccaccio and Samuel Pepys. Boccaccio wrote *Decameron* to examine the narratives of different people trying to navigate the plague, whether that be by running away from their homes or staying put. He often found that no matter what one does, they are almost sure of dying from the disease. In the introduction to his piece, Boccaccio addresses the state of

social interactions, noting that trust disseminated within communities, as more were social distancing in order to not catch the disease (Findlen). Samuel Pepys' diary, on the other hand, focused more on day-to-day activities. Plague was mentioned, but as an afterthought.

When thinking about the past, it is common to view it as one-dimensional, in this case to assume that the plague was the central part of life at the time. However, this is not the case, as there were various political tensions throughout Europe: the mongolian expansion, problems within the ottoman and byzantine empire, and the 100-year war (which dealt with France's rightful successor to the throne). The plague simply interrupted them. Some say that the plague was the catalyst for social change, but considering the historical setting of the time, this would be an overstatement. While there were strong feelings about the plague, the political disputes were the forces driving social change in medieval Europe; the plague may have helped these sentiments along, but they certainly did not cause them.

The fact that no one at the time really understood the idea of a contagion and how disease works and spreads greatly impacted the responses to the plague. While the Bubonic Plague was fairly short-lived, it still devastated numerous lives, both physically and mentally.

### **Spanish Flu (Katelyn Chin)**

The Spanish Flu, also known as the 1918 Influenza Pandemic and the H1N1 virus with an avian origin, was a pandemic that spread worldwide from 1918 through 1919. There was no consensus on where this virus originated, although there were theories that it originated from either France, China, Britain, or the USA, and it eventually infected over 500 million people after World War 1. Communities began to experience symptoms such as tiredness, loss of appetite, stomach problems, excessive sweating, dry hacking, and pneumonia. As more and more

got infected, there was a high amount of mortality rates in those that were aged 20-40 years old, specifically those that were healthy, which was unusual. Since there was no antibiotic or vaccine at the time, non-pharmaceutical interventions were used, such as encouraging isolation, quarantine, and good personal hygiene. Public social gatherings were also limited and reduced in size, with nonessential meetings being cancelled by officials. However, these interventions were applied unevenly, causing the methods to become less effective in areas that did not encourage them. People also suggested that nervous and physical exhaustion should be avoided, including exposure to the cold. Good nourishment of food and drink was also desirable.

The idea of contagion caused people to quarantine and isolate from others, increasing fear in communities. Schools were shut down, with ill people being allowed to skip classes; restaurants and shops' opening times were staggered in order to prevent large crowds from gathering. During an interview with Annie Laurie Williams, a survivor of the pandemic who lost many loved ones to it, described that "some of [the stores] had to close up because it didn't have the personnel to operate and people were afraid to go to town" (Williams). The overwhelming amounts of paranoia in society caused certain aspects of society to shut down, including the stores and restaurants. Some areas would be indifferent to the virus, while others would completely shut down due to the fear and paranoia that was present in communities and its workers.

Previously, citizens trusted public health agencies as their work was effective and efficient, with officials being able to help their patients. When the Spanish Flu struck, past medical techniques stopped showing effectiveness like before, creating uprising fear in society. Officials would only be able to "nurse [patients] and try to feed them and bathe them and keep

them clean and let them rest”, with little to no success (Williams). Health officials became the primary target of blame due to the lack of them creating effective vaccines and remedies for the Spanish Flu, which caused violence and discrimination in society. Although the use of disinfectants and isolation were encouraged by these health officials, this temporary remedy was not sufficient enough to protect citizens from catching the virus. Society’s reaction to the pandemic reveals how under times of environmental stress, such as a pandemic, people would put the blame on certain communities out of fear and paranoia.

### **Cholera (William Shin)**

Cholera or specifically, vibrio cholerae is a bacteria that is responsible for several pandemics throughout time. Cholera is contracted from contaminated water and undercooked shellfish which are heavily present in areas of poor sanitation (CDC). Once an individual has the bacteria within their body, the water in their intestines are drawn out. The dehydrating of the intestine causes diarrhea, vomiting, and rarely seizures. Individuals with cholera are often described to have “rice water” vomit and stool with a drop in body temperature(Mclaughlin). Those who pass away from cholera are often seen with dry skin and black tarry blood(Mclaughlin). Modern medicine is able to diagnose cholera through a stool sample. In addition, modern medicine can also treat cholera by using rehydration therapy to balance the loss of water or intravenous fluid rehydration in severe cases (CDC).

The origins of the first cholera pandemic is assumed to be from the Ganges Delta in 1817, spreading from India to the rest of Asia ending in 1817. The second pandemic originated from immigrants in Mecca during 1817, halting it’s spread to the rest of the world by 1826. Following the second pandemic, the third one originated from India during 1817 and ended

1862. Fourth pandemic started in 1863 in Egypt and ended in 1866. The fifth pandemic grew from Persia in 1883 to 1894, with a heavy death toll of 800,000 people in Russia in a span of just two years. The sixth pandemic is still ongoing to modern times and started from 1902 (McLaughlin). Cholera spread through the common behaviors of a pandemic: through trade routes which then grow intensely in densely populated cities.

Reactions to Cholera varied from violence to education. Some reactions were intense like those of Astrakhan in 1892, 10,000 rioters attempted to liberate those who were affected with cholera from hospitals and burned down the governor's home. Another riot in Tashkent also in 1892, displayed 5,000 armed people robbing citizens and killing the governor in a brutal fashion over the belief that Russian doctors were poisoning them (Cohn). Previous riots regarding pandemics had people marginalize Jews or gays but cholera riots targeted higher authority and doctors. Cholera riots were a series of rage amongst classes as those in Russia set up checkpoints that restricted lower classes from entering, but cholera still caused the deaths of upper class dukes, duchesses, the tsar's brother and 100,000 low class citizens (Bosin). Other responses show proper education on how to prevent cholera and tactics to stop causes of it. After the 2010 Haiti earthquake, there was an outbreak of cholera caused from the poor practices of water sanitation. Haiti's national department of drinking water and sanitation worked to provide chlorination to major water pipes (Tapper, Tauxe). But, there was still a struggle on providing water purifying tablets to those who were in secluded locations. The president of Haiti also worked on educating citizens about tactics to prevent cholera with a four hour television public conference. These tactics were to thoroughly wash one's hands, drink treated water, cook food all the way through, and give an oral rehydration solution to those who had diarrhea (Tapper,



Tauxe). There was a noticed statistic of every one dollar spent on cholera prevention returned eight dollars due to time and healthcare saved (Tapper, Tauxe).

Reactions shifted over time but during times of cholera riots, an excerpt from New York Times highlighted the response from Astrakhan in 1892. The “ignorant masses refused to believe in cholera, and regarded the compulsory removal of the sick to the hospital and sanitary regulations generally as a kind of conspiracy on the part of the doctors and officials” (New York Times). The controversies that stemmed from cholera caused people worldwide to be instilled with fear and paranoia. The fear and paranoia against classes, creating sparks of uproar that lead to the deaths of civilians within several communities.

### **AIDS** (Ananya Sundararajan)

AIDS, or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, has been found to have originated from the HIV-1 retrovirus, or the human immunodeficiency virus of chimpanzee origin. HIV-1 essentially targets the human immune system, specifically lymphocytes (CD4 cells), or a type of white blood cells, making it eventually impossible for a person to fend off fatal diseases. However, this disease was only well known and prevalent from June 5, 1981. On this day, America's center for disease control (CDC) recorded a rare lung infection found in five young, previously healthy gay men in Los Angeles, California. Immunologist Dr. Michael Gottlieb and his colleagues had discovered that all of these men had unusual infections, indicating immune system failure. This became known as the first official recording of the acquired immunodeficiency virus pandemic ([hiv.gov](http://hiv.gov)). Throughout this year, there had been many more men with unusual and fatal diseases due to this pandemic, and the majority of the men diagnosed and seen with symptoms of AIDS had been part of the LGBTQ community. Later on, this had

spread to heterosexual people as well. This disease is still prevalent today. There had not been proper government support and response to this growing pandemic until approximately thirty years later. President George W. Bush announced the creation of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the largest commitment by any nation to address a single disease in history. This plan is still taking action today worldwide and has helped countless numbers of people receive proper treatments before it had become too late for their immune system (hiv.gov). During 1981, there was general disapproval and disdain towards the LGBTQ community, which paid a huge part in shaping societal responses towards the AIDS pandemic.

There had been many cases of disgust and indifference given to this pandemic, as seen even through delayed government response, mainly because the prominent people subjected to this pandemic were part of the LGBTQ community. People regarded gay people with anger, believing that the origin and spread of this disease was their sexuality. Many of those who were part of the LGBTQ community were subjected to physical, mental, and emotional abuse. It became law for doctors to question a person's sexuality during visits, especially with those harboring infections (hiv.gov). Examples of the segregation and marginalization emphasized by the AIDS pandemic from newspaper articles labeling the pandemic as the "Gay Virus Pandemic," and those swearing they'd "shoot [their] son if he has AIDS" (*The Sun*, 1985). The violence and seriousness of that statement, the grotesque and appalling image of a father swearing to shoot his son since having AIDS essentially implied that one was gay, emphasizes the extent of cruelty and paranoia that people of society had during this time. The response and reaction of distancing from those with the disease and disregarding relationships on the sole basis of the assumption of a person's sexuality highlight the pressures of the hysteria and the tension

directed towards the LGBTQ community, creating more stigma around the pandemic even though by 1985, the accurate transmission of HIV and AIDS had been discovered. There were also cases of children, women, and men being violently killed due to the overwhelming mob mentality against the LGBTQ community, regardless of whether they genuinely identified as LGBTQ. This violence and anger have persisted in some people's mindsets, especially regarding AIDS, despite the drastically reduced stigma around it today.

Additionally, as the pandemic spread further, statistics had shown the trend of ethnicity also causing susceptibility to the virus (Congress, March 16, 1987). Keeping in mind the time, where segregation and inferior treatment of African Americans was common, this statistic added and fueled African Americans' hatred and marginalization from American society. Although the African American community were not specifically targeted for the AIDS pandemic like the LGBTQ community, the statistics and trends of their susceptibility had also caused many to further segregate from them without truly understanding the possible fallacies with this survey statistic and other causes that could show this trend, such as the dirtiness of neighborhood gas stations and needles.

On the other hand, the AIDS pandemic and societal responses also led the LGBTQ community to band together and formed a stronger unity for the LGBTQ rights movement. Many protested for their rights, using science and facts to argue the AIDS pandemic's misconceptions and the desperate need for an efficient and proper government response (Baker 2020).

Overall, the societal response towards the AIDS pandemic was general anger and violence towards those of the LGBTQ community and resulted in stronger sentiments in protests

for rights. This portrays how paranoia and mob mentality during such crises lead to society's people causing unnecessary and misplaced harm to specific communities.

### **Coronavirus** (Tim Chang)

COVID-19, was first seen on November 17, 2019 in China. COVID-19 is a coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2 that most likely originated from bats and then transferred to humans through a pangolin intermediary. Scientists found that the virus was most prominent in food handlers in early stages of the pandemic which led most people to believe COVID-19 was spread from an intermediate host. Initially, health officials believed it to originate from a seafood market in Wuhan China. Wuhan was known to be the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak until scientists discovered that four out of five of the original coronavirus cases were not related to Wuhan. Eventually, the virus escaped Wuhan, which was on lockdown, to other areas in China. COVID-19 was labeled pandemic when cases skyrocketed in other countries around the world such as India and the United States. It's fast spread is due to close person to person contact. COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets from humans such as coughs, sneezes, and talking. As the virus travels to other people, it multiplies inside the human body, infects airways, and over activates the immune system. Some symptoms of the coronavirus are fever, coughs, and difficulty breathing. COVID-19 spread from its origin in China earlier this year and today there are over twenty million cases of the coronavirus across the globe.

An initial reaction of the coronavirus was putting everyone in quarantine. Government agencies set limits to social gatherings, banned travel across domestic and international borders, and mandated the wearing of face masks in public. Although many government agencies had taken action to stop the spread of the virus, many countries' responses were not sufficient enough

to protect people from the infection of COVID-19. During the initial spread of the virus, many people targeted the Asian population and discriminated against them. This is largely due to the fact that the virus had originated from China and people believed Asians were unsafe and should not be outside. However, the virus eventually skyrocketed in countries like the United States due to the fact that many people responded to the virus with indifference and some did not believe the virus was real. Due to their indifference, people disobeyed regulations set by the government and did not isolate themselves during the pandemic, furthering the spread of COVID-19. The people who responded to the virus with indifference are labeled as the resisting group. The resisting group consists of a mean age of twenty-nine years old and about nine percent of the U.S. population belongs in this group. More than half of the people in this group have said that they do not follow lockdown rules and still head outside to meet and interact with other people. The two other categories of people include the accepting and the suffering. The accepting group encompasses over forty-eight percent of the U.S. population which is the largest group of the three. The mean age of the group is around fifty years old and the majority of the people in the accepting group follow coronavirus guidelines. The remaining forty-four percent of the population remain in the suffering group. The mean age of this group is forty-four years old and many have reported that they are more anxious than before and have lost sleep during quarantine. In order to cope, people have found different ways to live their lives at home but many still wish to return to normal. The suffering group live in fear and worry the virus will never end. Health officials have been attempting to find different treatment methods for the newfound virus but there are currently no known treatments that completely cure someone of COVID-19. Currently, health officials have been testing antiviral drugs, immunomodulators, neutralizing antibody

therapies, cell therapy, gene therapy, and vaccines. In order to protect oneself from the virus, the best method is to prevent being infected from the virus in the first place.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, it is seen throughout history that humankind tends to behave irrationally and unjustly in the face of environmental pressure. This is proven specifically through the reactions to the five pandemics discussed, as the differences in each virus and plague entailed society placing blame on different communities based on historical context. The violence shown towards Jews and the poor during the Bubonic Plague has repeated over time during the Spanish Flu, Cholera, AIDS, and Coronavirus pandemics, the only difference being the community targeted.

Society during the Black Death was based on religious principles, and as such the response focused on attributing the plague to an outside group, like the Jewish community, in order to cope with the devastation. While doing so did not improve conditions, the already strained human relationships from social distancing (or lack thereof) became a catalyst for widespread paranoia, and led to this scapegoating. Furthermore, as class is detrimental to success and how society views a person, it was easy to blame the poor for the disease. The sheer numbers made it plausible in the minds of the upper class that the poor was the root of the filth. In general, it was easier for them to point to a physical enemy than deal with the seemingly abstract disease.

Throughout the Spanish Flu, public health officials became the primary target of blame due to the lack of an effective vaccine. Although health agencies were previously successful, the arrival of the Spanish Flu revealed the ineffectiveness of the remedies at the time, causing large amounts of fear and paranoia to stem in communities. As a result of this fear, people decided to pinpoint a group of victims to take out their frustration on, with this community being the public

health officials. The course of cholera had communities struggling all around. For example, Russia had a tough time dealing with cholera as it had killed the tsar's brother and countless low class citizens.

Cholera had affected everyone yet the majority blamed those in power and those working in the medical field. In Astrakhan, rioters who referred to themselves as liberators freed those sick with cholera then proceeded to burn down the governor's home. In Tashkent, those in paranoia targeted and killed the governor in a brutal fashion. These citizens turned their suspicions into paranoia which turned into madness, with enraged killings of those who were not even responsible.

During the AIDS pandemic, people had dubbed it as the "gay virus plague," the already present hatred amplifying with the blame forced on the LGBTQ community. The appalling thought of shooting one's own son was becoming more of a common train of thought in order to distance oneself from the LGBTQ community and the AIDS pandemic. This reaction has emphasized the need for people to satiate paranoia and difficulty with pointing hands at certain people, sometimes with violence and emotional abuse. Additionally, statistics showing the trend of more African Americans having HIV and AIDS generally gave the public another opportunity to shift blame onto another community, especially during this time of civil rights movements. If an opportunity presents itself to react with anger and violence towards an already segregated group due to one's internal fear and paranoia, society tends to take the route of blame more often than the route of unity.

The global pandemic of the 21st century has affected the lives of many people all around the world. Countries around the world forced their people to go into quarantine and many have

been living at home for nearly a year. People initially attacked the asian community for the spread of the virus from China. However, many began to disregard coronavirus guidelines and became indifferent to the virus because they could not stand being stuck at home for an extended period of time.

As seen through the parallel responses within each pandemic, society tends to act irrationally and unjustly in the face of pressure and paranoia. It is clear that initial response generally tends to be deflection and placing blame at certain communities, depending on the context and prevalent tensions during those times. The fact that this trend has occurred over the past centuries repeatedly shows the refusal or inability for human nature to grow and learn from past mistakes, and respond rationally and fairly with reason and factual evidence. Additionally, succumbing to the paranoia and marginalizing rather than unifying communities tends to slow down efficient and proper responses to the situation at hand, whether it be medical treatment development, or government initiative. The marginalizations of said groups create lasting imprints on societies, ones that are proving to take centuries to recover from. In order for a society to progress, people must be able to separate paranoia from their ability to rationalize and empathize with others, preserving unity across communities rather than further placing blame and creating divides.



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