

Human Response to Plague: a Literary and Sociologic Perspective

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SUMMARY

As COVID-19 pandemic, other plagues struck people in the past, provoking potentially dangerous social reactions in mankind. Luckily, these reactions are quite constant, even in different eras and cultures, and famous novelists accurately reported them in their books. Starting from the meticulous description of people reactions reported in Manzoni's novel "The Betrothed", this article analyzes what we could learn about human response to plagues reading the great classical books, to plan a correct disaster response to infectious diseases.

KEY WORDS

COVID-19; human response to plague; disaster psychiatry; disaster preparedness; psychosocial reaction; humanities.

INTRODUCTION

The Italian outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic started on February 21st 2020 with the first case of ascertained local transmission in northern Italy (1). Up to April 2023, there have been more than 762,000,000 total confirmed cases worldwide, with approximately 6,900,000 deaths attributable to COVID-19 (2). Every "wave end" opens the way to a new disaster preparedness phase, to prevent further waves (3). To this end, a study of human reactions to pandemics could be useful. Luckily, some famous novelists from all over Europe, during the past centuries, gave an unexpected contribution to disaster preparedness through their descriptions of human responses to plagues. This perspective aims to identify possible constant reactions, analyzing

their descriptions from Italian and classical literature and comparing them with recent events reported on newspapers during COVID-19 emergency.

THE "DENIAL" PHASE

Alessandro Manzoni, a XIX century Italian writer, described in detail the reactions, both of crowd and governors, to the arrival of the plague into the Duchy of Milan in 1630, in his novel, *The Betrothed* (4). An interesting analysis, especially considering that the first Italian focus of SARS-CoV-2 occurred in the same Italian region (Lombardy) where "*The Betrothed*" is set. Up to March 20th 2020, Lombardy reported 10% of worldwide cases of COVID-

19 (5, 6). People who read also the first chronicles about COVID-19 pandemic, could find a lot of similar recurrent behaviors of people towards a potentially lethal contagion. We read in the 31st chapter of this novel: «*Ludovico Settala, a famous physician [...], announced to the Tribunal of Health, on October the 20th, that the contagion had undoubtedly appeared at Lecco; but no measures were taken after this report. Further similar news induced them to send a commissioner [...] who [...], based on the report of an old barber of Bellano, announced that the emerging disease just arose from the autumnal marsh exhalation, worsened by the sufferings caused by the passage of the German soldiers [...]. The governor [...] replied [...] the famine of the previous year, the army exactions, and the anxiety of mind which had suffered so much, were enough to explain the mortality of the surrounding country [...]. The same incredulity, blindness, stubbornness, prevailed in the senate [...].*» (4). These few lines report the first common reactions, that we may rename the “denial” or “refusal” phase. Even on February 2020 lots of people, including some researchers and governors, attributed COVID-19 symptoms to “common flu”, contributing to a general underestimation of the problem and to a delayed disaster response phase, notwithstanding others had advised to prepare containing measures since the beginning of January 2020. The lack of unity by the scientific community has probably contributed to the initial general underestimation. Noteworthy, the “refusal phase” tends to recur, as soon as the fear of the disease decreases. During 2021, worldwide newspapers reported more and more frequently the opinions of people believing that COVID-19 was only a politically-exploited invention, underestimating the risk of contagion and refusing to get vaccinated or to wear face masks.

The unpreparedness and contagion spreading due to the refusal phase, unluckily have their fatal consequences on first-line people assisting the infirms, as we can read still in Chapter 31: «*In the lazaretto there was confusion, disorganization, and anarchy. In this difficult situation, the Tribunal had recourse to the capuchins [...]. As the crowd in the lazaretto increased, other capuchins joined them [...]. Most of these brethren joyfully sacrificed their lives [...].*» (4). In 2020, first-line physicians from every medical specialty and healthcare workers, who, as the Manzonian Capuchines, were deputed to patients’ assistance and could not refuse their fundamental role in the national emergency, even in absence of correct Personal Protective Equipment, got sick and died with tremendously increasing numbers (~12% of first-wave COVID-19 cases in Italy) (7). With regards to the Lazaret of Milan, it was built during a previous plague in the XV century; similarly, in 2020, new hospitals were built specifically for the COVID-19 patients in Italy (8).

THE “UNWISE PHASE”

As soon as the “containment” laws are approved, the “unwise phase” starts, accompanied by a kind of skepticism towards institutional measures, and characterized by a general escape from the disease and from quarantine measures as well. Not only Manzoni, but also Giovanni Boccaccio, in his collection of novellas, entitled “The Decameron”, referring to the XIV century “Black Death”, anticipated our newspaper accounts about the “flights” from Milan and Paris just before the approval of quarantine laws: «*Some [...] claimed that there was no medicine for the disease more or equally effective than flight; following which prescription, a multitude of men and women [...] abandoned their city, their houses, their estates, their relatives, their goods, and went into voluntary exile, or migrated to the countryside [...].*» (9). The fear of the disease may lapse into foolish behaviors, as verbal assaults towards healthcare workers or people underlying the severity of the spreading contagion: «*Even the eminent Settala [...] was forced to seek refuge into a friend’s house from the popular fury, because he had constantly urged the need of precautionary measures*» (4).

At the same time, looting and robberies and antisocial behaviours were unfortunately recurrent too (10). News about robbed couriers and supermarkets were reported not only during the first lockdown, but also in Manzoni’s novel: «*In seasons of public calamity [...] we often observe[...] an increase of vice and crime. [...] Spared by the plague, found in the common confusion, and in the slackening of the restraints of law, new occasions for mischief, and new assurances of impunity [...]. [The monatti] entered houses as masters and enemies; and, not to mention their robberies [...].*» (4). Similarly reported Thucydides in his “History of the Peloponnesian War”, reporting that: «*With the plague, several law infringements occurred*» (11). Other people were reported to abandon their own relatives, suspecting they could be ill, as Boccaccio told: «*This sore affliction entered so deeply into the minds of men and women, that [...] brother was forsaken by brother, nephew by uncle, brother by sister, and frequently husband by wife[...]*» (9).

THE “SCAPEGOATING” PHASE

When plague denial is not possible anymore, the “accuse” or “scapegoating” phase arrives. As Manzoni wrote: «*Human mind [...] prefers attributing evil to human perversity, towards which revenge is possible, than accepting it could take origin from what men may only resign to [...].*» (4).

Human beings in fact seem to have a profound need to find the guilty party of each tragedy, the “scapegoat” whom terrible illnesses, famines, economic crises should be attributed to, even without any clear logical link. The scapegoats of

Manzonian plague were the so-called “anointers”: «*Three young Frenchmen [...] had approached the cathedral, and were contemplating it very accurately. Some persons passing by stopped; a circle formed around them; they were not lost sight of for a second, having been recognized as strangers, and, above all, Frenchmen [...]. In a moment they were surrounded, and, with curses and blows, arrested [...]. Frenzy propagated together with the contagion. The traveller met off the high road, the stranger with singular habits or appearance, were judged to be poisoners [...]. The physicians agreed with the popular belief, and attributed to poison and diabolical conjurations the classical symptoms of the disease* (4)».

In the “History of the Peloponnesian War”, also Thucydides referred some conspiracy theories about the Plague of Athens during the V century B.C.: “*The plague suddenly struck Athens, firstly infecting the citizens living around the harbour, so that the Athenians accused the Spartans to have polluted their wells.*» (11). Nowadays, after Thucydides and the Manzonian “anointers”, conspiracy theories about the spread of a man-made recombinant Coronavirus, diffused by China, US or other countries, according to different theories spread all over the world. Noteworthy, the role of crowd rumors, as amplifiers and modifiers of the “anointers’ conspiracy”, has nowadays been substituted by common fake news on social networks.

CONCLUSIONS

In 1963, Dr. Morgan Martin analyzed Daniel Defoe’s “A Journal of the Plague Year”, reporting Londoners’ reactions to the 1665 Great Plague and summarizing them in “similarities” and “possible differences” compared to reactions to modern disasters (12). A similar analysis has been recently published by Wigand *et al.*, referring to Thucydides’, Boccaccio’s and Camus’ plague descriptions (13).

Detractors to this “unproper” medical use of literature may object that human reactions could change across centu-

ries, basing upon the higher cultural level of contemporary people. Nevertheless, after our combined analysis, we found many points in common with both Martin’s and Wigand’s analyses. Many centuries have passed, but the human behavioral response to plagues seems quite recurrent, maybe because the fear of massive deathly events is as constant in modern times as in the past. Especially the initial denial, the “unwise” reactions, scapegoating and antisocial behaviors are maybe the most recurrent across cultures and centuries, because they are based on instinct rather than reason or logic.

A correct disaster preparedness phase to infectious diseases should face and prevent all these harmful reactions. We may only hope that our descendants will treasure the COVID-19 chronicles and take prompter measures than we made with our ancestors’ advice, wishing not to forget the take-home message: “Don’t refuse, don’t get unwise, don’t accuse, prepare measures and put them into use”.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The data are contained into the article.

CONTRIBUTIONS

IM, NM, GMP: conceptualization. IM: writing - original draft. IM, NM, GMP: writing - review & editing, final approval.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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