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## The dramaturgy of epidemics\*

Engulfed in our present pandemic, reflections on Charles Rosenberg's classic essay "What is an epidemic?" are apposite. He admirably solves his question in the first paragraph of the essay. In contrast to the what Rosenberg calls the "clichéd usages" of the term—"epidemics" of alcoholism, drug addiction, and automobile accidents" (p. 1)—he defines "a true epidemic" as "an event, not a trend." Characteristic of this event was a particular "dramaturgy", that elicited an "immediate and widespread response" (p. 1). He argues that epidemics "historically" have shown a distinctive chronological progression. Here lies the principal subject of Rosenberg's essay and its originality: epidemics across time and disease unfolded into three distinct acts. He then justifies this ideal type by mining examples across time from the seventeenth century to his then present pandemic, HIV/AIDS of the 1980s, which was the focus of the *Daedalus* issue of 1989.

Rosenberg's short and provocative essay was the first to examine the sequence of epidemic events and emotions across time and various diseases—plague, poliomyelitis, cholera, yellow fever, diphtheria, and typhus--even if earlier treatments of epidemics, especially in imaginative literature, had already structured similar plots.<sup>1</sup> The moments of this epidemic drama were "Act I. Progressive Revelation", "Act II. Managing Randomness", and "Act III. Negotiating Public

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\* I wish to thank Mona O'Brien, Genevieve Warwick, and Russell Maulitz for reading an earlier draft of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Albert Camus, *La peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), which serves as Rosenberg's Cicerone through this article.

Response". The first was denial or indifference to the presence of an epidemic and was especially strong among merchant elites and municipal authorities (p. 4). The second pointed to "other-worldly" explanations of the disease as with God's punishment for our sins (p. 5) but also secular explanations to solve the enigma of why some succumbed to the disease while others did not. According to Rosenberg, these led elites to blame the victims of the disease for spreading epidemics because of their habits--living in squalid conditions, drunkenness, or sexual promiscuity (p. 6). In addition, "the poor and inarticulate" were prone to blame others: Jews for poisoning wells or, as during the first pan-European cholera wave in the 1830s, assaulting physicians in the British Isles for "seeking anatomical subjects" (p. 7). Act III overlaps with Act II. These were collective responses and rituals, which could include prayers and processions but also turn Catholics to blame Protestants and vice-versa or to blame immigrants as in late-nineteenth-century America with typhus or with the Polio epidemic in New York in 1916, when elites attacked the poor as the cause, ironically because of their filth (pp. 7-8).

The last third of his essay turned to HIV/AIDS to tackle what was new about this disease's medical and emotional histories. Here, he introduced another characteristic theme of his medical historiography--a nuanced blend of the "social constructionist" view of diseases with the "more conventional biologically based model" (pp. 9 and 14). Since 1989, much more attention has been paid to this minor part of Rosenberg's seminal article, not only to understand HIV/AIDS but to frame diseases more generally from the nineteenth century to the present.<sup>2</sup> As for the

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<sup>2</sup> *The social construction of illness: illness and medical knowledge in past and present*, ed. Jens Lachmund and Gunnar Stollberg, in *Medizin, Gesellschaft und*

“dramaturgy” of the “AIDS experience”, Rosenberg pictured it as a “very traditional phenomenon indeed”: AIDS “re-enacted the traditional dramaturgic structure of earlier epidemics” (p. 9). In Act I: only “grudging had AIDS been accepted as reality” (p. 9). In Acts II and III, blame was “expressed toward bringers of bad tidings, the physicians and activists” (p. 9) and, “equally traditional”, against the victims of the disease with its “peculiar mixture of biological mechanism invested with moral meaning” (p.10).

I wish to elaborate on Rosenberg’s dramaturgy by turning briefly to the long history of disease and emotions from the fifth-century BCE Plague of Athens to our present pandemic, COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Space permits only several new themes and historical examples. Other than Sophocles’ oblique references to plague in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (429 BCE), Thucydides is our only surviving contemporary source for the Plague of Athens. However, commentaries on it mounted through antiquity and continued in the Middle Ages, especially after Black Death. Scholars have asserted that his description served as the *Urtext* for Giovanni Boccaccio’s portrayal of the

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*Geschichte*,<sup>1</sup> (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992). *Framing disease: Studies in Cultural History*, ed. Charles S. Rosenberg and Janet Golden (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992); *Framing and imagining disease in cultural history*, ed. George S. Rousseau, Miranda Gill and David B. Haycock (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). The influence of Rosenberg’s 1989 article is attested in the articles of the anthologies above, even when authors ignored the biological frame.

<sup>3</sup> Research for many of the examples that follow comes from my *Epidemics: Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Black Death in his introduction to the *Decameron*, even though Boccaccio could not read Greek and Thucydides' *Persian Wars* was not translated into Latin until 1452, 78 years after Boccaccio had died. Yet, despite the importance of this work, no Act I of the Plague of Athens points to initial indifference or denial. Instead, the pandemic is heralded before it even reaches Upper Athens, when mortality spirals upward, and where Thucydides begins his detailed descriptions of the disease and its consequences. That herald appears at Piraeus, where Thucydides mentions in passing that inhabitants "even said that the Peloponnesians had put poison in their cisterns".<sup>4</sup> The rumour has long been taken as evidence of blame and thus would fulfil Rosenberg's Act II. However, not only is the report only a rumour and not Thucydides' accusation or belief; by the time the plague reached Athens, killing a third of the city, no more is heard of any blame. Instead, Thucydides' Act I was one of fear and ruthless efforts for self-preservation with morality, law and order, and traditional beliefs swept aside: Athenians refused "to visit one another" and "the sick perished uncared for".<sup>5</sup> This Act, however, was short-lived and was followed abruptly by its opposite. In its Act III, those who had recovered from the disease, quickly became confident of their immunity: they "pitied the dying and sick" and began caring for them.<sup>6</sup>

Acts of compassion and community sacrifice were certainly not unique to the Plague of Athens. Instead, for numerous plagues retold by Livy from the fifth century

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<sup>4</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I: Books I and II, trans. C. Forster Smith, LCL 108 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 2.48.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 2.47.

to the first century BCE, the Antonine plague, 165 to 180 BCE, or perhaps presently the best-known pandemic of antiquity—the Justinianic plague that reached Constantinople in 542 CE--governmental charity and personal abnegation were at the centre of these narrations. In fact, for these, Rosenberg's Acts I and II are missing. There was no denial of the disease and no ruthless neglect, no "resentment expressed toward bringers of bad tidings," assaults on physicians, blame of rival religions, or attacks on the poor. These epidemics and pandemics began with Rosenberg's Act III—community and governmental response—but, unlike nineteenth- or early twentieth-century cholera, did not impose public health measures that persecuted the poor (p. 8). For instance, Livy recounts a particularly vicious and mysterious disease that spread through the Roman Empire in 399 BCE, for which neither physicians nor priests could find a cure. As a result, the Roman government responded by inventing a new ritual of hospitality, the "lectisternium":

throughout the City. . . houses were thrown open and all sorts of things placed for general use in the open courts, all comers, whether acquaintances or strangers, being brought in to share the hospitality. Men who had been enemies held friendly and sociable conversations with each other and abstained from all litigation, the manacles even were removed from prisoners during this period. . .<sup>7</sup>

The best known and meticulous of the sources on the Justinianic plague, Procopius' *History of the Wars*, plots a similar trajectory. With plague death counts soaring in Constantinople, the emperor Justinian, aided by his chief administrator

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<sup>7</sup> Livy, *History of Rome*, I: Books 1–2, trans. B. O. Foster, LCL 114 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 7.27.

(“referendarius”) Theodorus, provided public assistance for the poor and afflicted and rallied community support to bury the mounds of plague corpses that threatened Constantinople’s survival.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the plots of epidemics in antiquity often began before the disease ever arrived. This first Act (or perhaps the prologue) was a frame, either of war or of civil unrest as with the fifth-century BCE conflicts between Rome and the tribes of the Velitrae or the Volscians or strife from within between the senatorial classes and plebeians. By the recounting of Livy, Plutarch, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and others, the invasion of epidemics—Act II--ended these conflicts and social divisions and brought charitable support even to Rome’s enemies.<sup>9</sup> This reversal of events is structured most vividly in Procopius’s portrayal of Constantinople in 542. Before the arrival of plague, Procopius depicted Justinian’s greed, corruption, and cruelty that had divided the city through factional strife. Justinian had sponsored the faction (the sporting club or “circus”) of the Blues and promoted the murdering of their principal

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<sup>8</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 2.22; and *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre: Chronicle, Part III*, transl. Witold Witakowsk, *Translated Texts for Historians*, 22 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> Livy, *History of Rome*, II: Books 3–4, trans. B. O. Foster, LCL 133 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), 4.21; Plutarch, *Lives*, IV: *Alcibiades and Coriolanus*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, LCL 80 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), *Coriolanus*, 9.12 and 12; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, trans. Earnest Carey, LCL 319, 347, 357, 364, 372, 378, 388, 7 vols (Cambridge, 1937–50), 2.54.

rivals, the circus of the greens.<sup>10</sup> When plague arrived (Act II), Justinian suddenly gained praise from chroniclers of these events (Procopius, Evagrius Scholasticus, and Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre), because of Justinian's leadership, administration, and charity.<sup>11</sup> And the change of heart came not only from the top of society. The perennial violence and divisions between the circuses temporarily ended. Those who before the plague despised one another now united to honour the dead.<sup>12</sup>

The Middle Ages present further deviations from Rosenberg's epidemic Acts, especially with the Black Death of 1347-52 and its recurrent waves across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East into the nineteenth century. For these reactions, historians have a wealth of administrative and quantifiable sources and need not rely solely on literary or historical narratives.<sup>13</sup> First, for the Black Death, I know of no

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<sup>10</sup> Procopius, *The Secret History of the Court of Justinian* (Project Gutenberg EBook, 2004). On circus factions, see Alan Cameron, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), esp. ch. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 2.23; Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.30; and 4.32; *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre: Chronicle, Part III*, transl. Witold Witakowski, *Translated Texts for Historians*, 22 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 2.23.

<sup>13</sup> On the importance of this distinction for analysing the Justinianic plague in comparison with plagues of the late Middle Ages and early modern period, see Lee Mordechai, and Merle Eisenberg, "Rejecting catastrophe: the case of the Justinianic plague," *Past and Present*, no. 244 (2019): 3-50.

denials of its presence; instead, as with the Plague of Athens, collective dread and fear spread in advance of the disease itself. This was manifest most horrifically in German-speaking regions where burning entire communities of Jews preceded the contagion's arrival in many places.<sup>14</sup> However, attacks on Jews or other minorities such as the Catalans in Sicily were not universal across Europe during the Black Death. More widespread was the cruel abandonment of the afflicted: "mothers and fathers abandoned their children, and children, their fathers..." that fractured societies to their core—the family. Chronicles and other commentators across Europe decried these "inhumane habits of the barbarian"<sup>15</sup> as worse than any practices of the infidel.<sup>16</sup> Yet, even during the short four-to-six-month spell of this plague for any place in 1348, a change in sentiment occurred that paralleled the changes of heart reported by Thucydides and Procopius. Contemporary chroniclers, Matteo Villani<sup>17</sup> and Marchionne di Coppo Stefani<sup>18</sup> of Florence and Ranieri Sardo of Pisa,<sup>19</sup> argued that towards the end of the plague in 1348 individuals started to

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<sup>14</sup> See among other places, Samuel Cohn, Jr., "The Black Death and the burning of Jews," *Past & Present*, no. 196 (2007): 3-36.

<sup>15</sup> Matteo Villani, *Cronica con la continuazione di Filippo Villani*, ed. Giuseppe Porta, 2 vols (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo, 1995), I, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Antonio Pucci, 'Come in questo quadro delle crudeltà della pestilenza', in *Storia Letteraria d'Italia*, ed. Natalino Sapegno (Milan: Garzanti, 1948) p. 413.

<sup>17</sup> Matteo Villani, *Cronica*, I, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Stefani, *Cronica fiorentina*, pp. 231-2

<sup>19</sup> *Cronaca di Pisa di Ranieri Sardo*, ed. Ottavio Banti, *Fonti per la Storia d'Italia* 99 (Rome: Nella sede dell'Istituto, 1963), pp. 96-7.

understand that this plague offered no place to hide; people began reasoning that mutual aid was more efficacious for survival than flight, abandonment, or cruel self-interest. Villani went further, arguing that the change in attitude explained why this plague finally ended.<sup>20</sup>

The Black Death's dramaturgy was not, however, repeated monotonously in hundreds of plague recurrences over the next four centuries. Instead, new performances of it did not begin with massacres of Jews or widespread abandonment of loved ones. As with the 542 plague at Constantinople, the first stage of these plagues was Rosenberg's Act III, public response. But, unlike Rosenberg's emphasis, this late-medieval Act could be of charity and unity against pre-plague settings of war, civil strife, and division. Such was the case with the plague of 1399-1400 that spread through central and northern Italy and into France, when mortalities shot upwards after four post-1348 waves of declining casualties.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the Justinianic response of 542, the response was not state led but sprung from the bottom up. Processions of families, called the Bianchi from their humble dress of white sacks of linen, cut across age, gender, social classes, and city and countryside. They processed, pleading for individuals and municipalities to end

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<sup>20</sup> Matteo Villani, *Cronica*, I, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> These statistics were compiled contemporaneously, see *Cronache di Ser Luca Dominici*, I: *Cronaca della venuta dei Bianchi e della Moria 1399–1400*, ed. Giovan Carlo Gigliotti (Pistoia: Cav. Alberto Pacinotti & C., 1933), pp. 233 and 238.

grievances and bloodshed that ranged from neighbourhood litigation to factional strife among noble clans and warfare between regional states.<sup>22</sup>

Not until the 1530s did plague arouse individuals and governments again to hunt for supposed iniquitous plague-spreaders, now called *untori* or *engraisseurs*. Yet these prosecutions, uses of torture, and executions never mounted in the thousands as had the Black-Death atrocities of 1348-9.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, in Italy, they rarely tried women, religious outsiders, or the marginal poor.<sup>24</sup> Rather, as in the most infamous of these, the Milanese plague of 1630-32, highlighted by the *philosophe* Pietro Verri (1728–97) and then his relative, Alessandro Manzoni, in the following century,<sup>25</sup> the victims of street rumour and state terror were insiders, ranging from well-heeled, native-born Milanese artisans, who owned their own shops and

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<sup>22</sup> *Cronache di Ser Luca Dominici*, I, 233; and Daniel E. Bornstein, *The Bianchi of 1399: Popular Devotion in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 46.

<sup>23</sup> For a survey across Italy from the sixteenth to eighteenth century, see Paolo Preto, *Epidemia, paura e politica nell'Italia moderna* (Bari: La Terza, 1987); and for Italy, France, and Switzerland, Cohn, Jr., *Epidemics*, pp.127-60.

<sup>24</sup> Cohn, Jr., *Epidemics*, pp. 136-50.

<sup>25</sup> Pietro Verri, *Osservazioni sulla tortura ... scritte nel 1777* (Milan: s.n., 1808); Alessandro Manzoni, *I promessi sposi storia della colonna infame*, intro. Silvano Nigro (Turin: Einaudi, 2012).

employed apprentices, to bankers and the aristocratic son of one of the most powerful military leaders in the Duchy of Milan.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, early modern plagues increasingly created a fourth Act. Epidemics did not end “with a whimper” (p. 8) but from the sixteenth century on, literally with “a bang” (p. 8), that is with celebrations that included fireworks. To mark the end of the plague of 1575-8, I have found fifteen published pamphlets that described these events of liberation and thanksgiving and ten for Venice alone.<sup>27</sup> These begin with poems, prayers, and songs thanking God for their survival. They then detailed the planning, processions, production of new paintings, decorations of churches, the expenses incurred, and the exhilaration of crowds, which suddenly formed in squares and along canals. A Venetian one, pinned by a little-known author, described in detail the new constructions built for the celebrations across the city: the “fine and very expensive cloth” that covered long passageways, “with innumerable banners, standards, tapestries, shields, and new paintings”, which were

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<sup>26</sup> See the surviving trial transcripts of the Tribunal of Milan’s Health Board (Sanità) and the execution list of the confraternity of San Giovanni Decollato: *Processo agli untori: Milano 1630: Cronaca e atti giuriziani in edizione integrale*, ed. Giuseppe Farinelli and Ermanno Paccagnini (Milan: Garzanti, 1988); Biblioteca Ambrosiana Milano, ms G 127 Sussidio, Elenco cronologico delle persone state giustitiate nella Città e Stato di Milano dall’anno 1471 al 1783; and Cohn, Jr., *Epidemics*, pp. 146-50.

<sup>27</sup> Cohn, Jr., *Cultures of Plague: Medical thinking at the end of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 140-2.

accompanied by “the sounds of artillery fire, trumpets, tambourines, and songs of the *popolo*.” He ended by reflecting on the audience:

Lord, having witnessed the plague in Venice, I would have never believed that so many could have survived. Now, it seemed the population suddenly doubled. With such a great throng of people, it was difficult to imagine how they all could be contained even within the spacious square [*campo*] and on the balconies and sunroofs of the palaces.<sup>28</sup>

By this account, Venetians lined the entire length of the Grand Canal: “Such was the crown of this liberation, dated at Venice, 22 July 1577”.<sup>29</sup> The most lasting of these thanksgiving finales were ex-voto church constructions. Best known are Venice’s Redentore, constructed after the plague of 1576-7 and Santa Maria della Salute, after the plague of 1630-31. With makeshift bridges constructed of gondolas, fireworks, and festivals throughout the city, these anniversaries continue to the present.<sup>30</sup> Yet Venice was not alone with such ex-voto plague offerings or festive

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<sup>28</sup> Muzio Lumina, *La Liberazione di Vinegia, insieme con il voto fatto dalli Signori di vna Chiesa dedicata al Sommo Nostro Redentore...* (Bologna: per Alessandro Benacci, 1577), p. 476v-8r. According to the database of sixteenth-century publications in Italy, Edit16, Lumina had only this one publication; neither his date of birth or death are known, and he is not mentioned in any of the local biographical dictionaries (accessed on August 5, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 478v.

<sup>30</sup> For the Redentore and its festivals, see Iain Fenlon, *The Ceremonial City: History, Memory and Myth in Renaissance Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

anniversaries thereafter. For southern Italy, Palermo's festival of Santa Rosalia, celebrating the end of its plague of 1624 is in southern Italy as famous.<sup>31</sup>

Should we then argue that the long pre-modern period had its own epidemic dramaturgies that changed during or after the eighteenth century with diseases such as yellow fever, cholera, and plague of the Third Pandemic? With the glaring exception of the Black Death of 1347-51, one element generally missing from pre-nineteenth-century epidemics was widespread blame, especially with violent reprisals against the victims of the disease or ones imagined to have spread it. An explanation for this difference might centre on beliefs of causation. For earlier plagues, the causes were lodged outside the human arena, beginning with the gods, constellation of planets, climate and airs, while after 1800, the spread of epidemics were increasingly perceived as dependant on trackable human carriers. This mode of transmission opened new avenues for hate to spread in times of pestilence. However, as Vivian Nutton has taught us, the ancients had notions of human contagion<sup>32</sup> and these ideas evolved rapidly with the Black Death and afterwards among physicians and the laity alike. Moreover, notions of miasma had not vanished with modernity. Instead, anticontagionism experienced an Indian summer during the

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2007), ch. 10; for Santa Maria della Salute, Andrew Hopkins, *Baldassare Longhena and Venetian Baroque architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> See Cohn, Jr., *Epidemics*, pp. 88-92.

<sup>32</sup> Nutton, "Seeds of disease: An explanation of contagion and infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance," *Medical History*, 27 (1983): 1-34; and idem, "The reception of Fracastoro's Theory of Contagion: The Seed That Fell among the Thorns?" *OSIRIS*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, 6 (1990): 196-234.

first half of the nineteenth century<sup>33</sup> or longer.<sup>34</sup> Yet this period did not coincide with a diminution in disease-fuelled blame and social violence. Rather, it was the opposite: widespread cholera epidemics across Europe, Asia, and the Americas provoked the most numerous acts of collective violence spurred by epidemics in human history.

Instead, elements from antiquity and the Middle Ages continued to play cameo roles in these later dramas and should be added to Rosenberg's drama. With yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793 and Memphis in 1878, during the most deadly and extensive epidemic through the Deep South before the Great Influenza, Rosenberg's first Act—denial—cannot be denied, especially in commercial centres such as New Orleans and Memphis. Moreover, a second Act also conforms with Rosenberg's scenography. At Philadelphia in 1793, stories of cruel abandonment of family members emerges at the outset,<sup>35</sup> and the first narrative of this epidemic by the publisher Mathew Carey blamed "negro" nurses for neglecting their duties treating white yellow-fever patients, stealing their jewellery, and demanding extortionate fees.<sup>36</sup> However, immediately, two ex-slaves of the Free African Society—Richard Allen and Absalom Jones--berated Carey's aspersions, producing

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<sup>33</sup> Erwin H. Ackerknecht, 'Anticontagionism between 1821 and 1867: The Fielding H. Garrison Lecture', *BHM*, 22 (1948): 562-93.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Pelling, Margaret. *Cholera, Fever and English Medicine 1825–1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 1-18.

<sup>35</sup> Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia*, 4th edn (Philadelphia: Printed by the author, 1794), pp. 23-5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

the first black publication in the United States<sup>37</sup> and received support from Philadelphia's most prominent physician, Benjamin Rush, and Philadelphia's mayor, Matthew Clarkson.<sup>38</sup> These actions opened Act III, Rosenberg's "Negotiating Public Response". Yet its storyline, like that of Plague of Athens or the Bianchi in 1400, diverges from Rosenberg's. The drama now welded racial unity and stimulated self-sacrifice, especially among the Black community. Even Carey in his rapidly produced new editions of 1793 softened his initial charges and added: "The services of Jones, Allen, and Gray, and others of their colour, have been very great, and demand public gratitude".<sup>39</sup>

This sequence of scenes from chaos, bitterness, and conflict to praise of charity and abnegation is more marked with the Memphis epidemic of yellow fever in 1878: abandonment of loved ones, panic, and mass migration abruptly transmogrified into heroic community and self-sacrifice. Memphis's principal source for this epidemic was the four-hundred-page compilation of newspaper texts and

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793* (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1794).

<sup>38</sup> J. H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia, 1949); new edn, Kenneth R. Foster, Mary F. Jenkins, and Anna Coxe Toogood (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 95.

<sup>39</sup> Cary A *Short Account*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, p. 63. Also, see Billy G. Smith, *Ship of Death: A Voyage That Change the Atlantic World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 230–2.

commentary by the editor-in-chief of the *Daily Appeal*, M. L. Keating.<sup>40</sup> As with Livy's epidemics and Procopius's Constantinople, Keating's first Act appears before the epidemic debut: already, Memphis was in serious decline with conflicts mounting. Black immigrants, who were "no longer productive, poured into the city, adding to the ranks of the very poor as petty thieves or worthless paupers"; the city was "plagued" by "sectional animosity" and "the bitterness of party politics". The city's sanitary conditions "were disgraceful in the extreme": privies lay stagnant; dead animals decayed in the streets; and conditions worsened "because of the criminal neglect of the city officials".<sup>41</sup> Only with Act II does the epidemic come on stage, sending Memphis into the depths of Hell: eradicating "all human sympathy, all the kindlier emotions of the human heart, all feeling of kinship, all regard for neighbourly claims. Men, women, and children poured out of the city . . . like dogs, neglected and shunned, as if cursed of God."<sup>42</sup>

By the end of August with cases soaring to 3,000 a day, Memphis reached its crisis, and, by Keating's account, a remarkable shift ensued:

Most of the white men who were not in bed . . . were engaged in the work of relief as physicians, nurses, as Howard visitors,<sup>43</sup> or as members of the other

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<sup>40</sup> J. M. Keating, *History of the Yellow Fever: The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878, in Memphis, Tenn.* (Memphis: Printed for the Howard Association, 1879).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 102, and 103.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107-9.

<sup>43</sup> The Howard Association was founded in New Orleans during the yellow fever epidemic of 1837.

organizations which did such noble service.<sup>44</sup>

The remainder of his book (over 300 of its 400 pages) spotlights individual and corporative charity and self-sacrifice. Keating begins with numerous mini-biographies of men (but not exclusively), starting with clergymen and others across religious denominations,<sup>45</sup> including the “Hebrews”,<sup>46</sup> and finally turning to the charity and abnegation of a wide variety of secular clubs and businesses, some possessing established national or international networks as with the Howard Association, the Free Masons, and St Andrew’s Society, while others, such as the Memphis Typographical Union, were locally based.<sup>47</sup> In these descriptions, Keating even sheds his residual southern racism: “Let it be recorded to their credit that the negro militia and policemen have discharged their duties zealously and with discretion. We are proud of them. They proved their title to the gratitude of the people of Memphis”.<sup>48</sup> In another story, he highlights the dignity and humanity of black grave diggers. At the Memphis Elmwood Cemetery after its closing hours:

the [white] man in charge came to the spot where the grave was to be dug and informed the negroes that they would not receive any extra pay for the extra work they were doing . . . The negroes, more humane than he, and indignant at such an exhibition of brutality before the [white] husband and children [of the deceased] replied that sometimes they worked for friendship.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 118-44

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 143-4.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 126 and numerous citations afterwards.

<sup>48</sup> Keating, *A History*, 158.

They dug the grave, lowered the casket.<sup>49</sup>

Rosenberg's Act III again differs from that seen across epidemics in antiquity, the Middle Ages, early modern Europe, and into the twenty-first century with our current pandemic: public reactions were grounded in charity and self-sacrifice as much and usually more so than in collective violence or blame. Perhaps, Rosenberg's emphasis on blame is a reason for his forgetting the most disastrous pandemic in world history as measured by the absolute numbers felled—the Great Influenza of 1918-20. Despite its context of the First World War and jingoistic propaganda smeared across newsprint worldwide, this pandemic spurred waves of volunteerism from neighbourhood soup kitchens to international organizations that readily crossed enemy fronts and was of a magnitude never witnessed before or after in the history of epidemic diseases.<sup>50</sup> No doubt, the context of Rosenberg's writing in the 1980s with HIV/AIDS on the rise and publicity stressing its blame of homosexuals more than its international networks of charity coloured his history of epidemics' public responses. In addition, Rosenberg's previous ground-breaking study of cholera may have influenced his general view of epidemics' social effects.<sup>51</sup> As for blame and collective violence, no epidemic disease of the nineteenth century (and for Russia and Italy into the twentieth),<sup>52</sup> was further removed from the Great

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>50</sup> See Cohn, Jr., *Epidemics*, chapters 19-23.

<sup>51</sup> Charles S. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

<sup>52</sup> On the continuation of cholera riots through the pandemic of 1906-11 and in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, see Cohn, Jr., *Epidemics*, pp. 207-22 and 228.

Influenza than cholera.

I wish, however, to end on a positive note: Rosenberg's essay remains a guide for large issues in the history of medicine and not only for refining or extending varieties of epidemic dramaturgies. Another question suggested only in passing in his article concerns what he calls the "epilogue" of epidemics: "How had the community and its members dealt with the epidemic's challenge?" (p. 9). Certainly, historians have searched for lasting consequences of epidemics, often seeing silver linings, as with improved water works and hygiene after waves of cholera or investment in education for nursing and institutes of virology after the Great Influenza.<sup>53</sup> But I know few to have weighed comparatively the consequences for subsequent international prestige or what we might call shifts in cultural capital that stemmed from successes or failures in controlling an epidemic. No pandemic in world history has so blatantly revealed such sharp cleavages in these outcomes as what is now unfolding from our present pandemic and especially on how political leadership and community attitudes, as opposed to sheer wealth or medical knowledge, can determine these outcomes. For this study, future historians will be well advised to return to Rosenberg's 'What is an epidemic?' and take heed of his blend of social science history and biology.

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Bresalier, "Uses of a Pandemic: Forging the Identities of Influenza and Virus Research in Interwar Britain," *Social Hist. of Med.*, 25 (2011): 400–24.