

Roberto Censolo* and Massimo Morelli

COVID-19 and the Potential Consequences for Social Stability

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Abstract: Epidemics create risks of social unrest. The great plagues of the past show that social tensions, accumulated over the epidemic and before, often erupted in serious uprisings in the years after the epidemic. Based on historical evidence, we predict that the protests inherited from the pre-COVID-19 period should be crowded out by epidemic-related unrest as long as the epidemic lasts, whereas in the aftermath of the epidemic we should expect the unresolved pre-epidemic grievances to resume even stronger, boosted also by the incremental social grievances related to the epidemic period. While the epidemic lasts, the status quo and incumbent governments tend to consolidate, but a sharp increase in social instability in the aftermath of the epidemic should be expected.

Keywords: epidemics, protests, conflict incubator, repressions

JEL codes: D74, N90

With the COVID-19 crisis, protest movements seem to have lost their voice all over the world. “Liberate Hong-Kong”, the environmental activism of Greta Thunberg, the “Gilets Jaunes” in France or the “Sardine” movement in Italy appear greatly weakened since the outburst of the epidemic. According to a Freedom House annual report (Repucci 2020), out of the 20 protest movements active world-wide in December 2019 only two or three are still active. At the same time, the disarraying impact of the epidemic on the network of social and economic relations combined with the restrictions imposed by governments to prevent mass infection are causing a latent sentiment of public discontent. The “virus conspiracy” argument and the denial of the seriousness of the epidemic, which spread in public opinion and are disconcertedly supported by several political leaders, are the symptom of potentially dangerous frictions inside society. Moreover, it has been stressed how the epidemic impacts on collective psychology (Torales et al. 2020). Anxiety,

*Corresponding author: **Roberto Censolo**, University of Ferrara, Ferrara, Italy,
E-mail: cnsrtr@unife.it

Massimo Morelli, Bocconi University, IGIER, Dondena and CEPR, Milan, Italy,
E-mail: massimo.morelli@unibocconi.it

depression, and stressful social relationships tend to trap individuals within the private sphere, so that the social ties of protest movements necessarily loosen. However, this psychological effect may direct social moods towards a higher degree of aggressiveness, such that the level of social conflict in the post-epidemic period might be expected to increase. In this perspective, we may say that the social and psychological unrest arising from the epidemic tends to crowd-out the conflicts of the pre-epidemic period, but, at the same time it constitutes the fertile ground on which global protest may resurrect more aggressively once the epidemic will be over.

We argue that we can form an informed opinion about the possible effects of COVID-19 on protest initiatives and future social unrest by looking at the great plagues of the past. As discussed in Snowden (2020a), the change in the types of unrest that America is experiencing has some similarities to the 14-th century uprising in England, which followed the Black Death (1346–1353). He argues that the bubonic plague acted as a *social incubator*, which silently nurtured the class tensions that had been smoldering for more than 30 years and finally erupted in the aftermath of the plague. Similarly, Hays (2005) points out that the apparent social calmness during the same bubonic plague concealed a growing popular discontent that erupted in the following decades. Popular revolts shook authorities not only in England but also in France and in the Italian city-state of Florence. As highlighted by Hays (2005), the revolts that occurred after the Black Death were caused by the exacerbating inequality arisen as a consequence of the plague, with particular reference to those government measures undertaken to protect the interest of landowners and large employers.

The above considerations suggest that a deeper comprehension of the medium term impact of Covid-19 on social cohesion and institutional stability could be gained by an accurate historical research aimed at investigating epidemics as a source of radical social change. While detailed lists of epidemics are easily available, an accurate data set recording revolts, rebellions, uprising movements, and protests in historical perspective does not exist. As a first inspection of historical evidence we relied on the “Conflict Catalog” by Brecke (1999), and on the information extracted from Hays (2005). Over the period between the Black Death and the Spanish Flu (1919–1920) we selected the most significant 57 epidemic episodes. Overall, this evidence shows only four cases in which revolts not evidently connected with the disease took place within the epidemic period. This result backs the crowding-out hypothesis. Hays (2005) also points out that during epidemics other grievances not directly related to the epidemic may silently accumulate, but without an immediate explosion. This supports the view of epidemics as incubators of more serious social disorders.

Turning to the government reaction effects, the 14-th century Black Death prompted massive public intervention to limit its spread. Quarantine, confinement of the sick, confiscation of property, ban of public (especially religious) demonstrations were all compulsory and often enforced like military operations. The second cholera epidemic (1827–1835) is emblematic. The restrictions imposed by governments were in sharp conflict with the liberalism of the late 18-th and early 19-th centuries, and, according to Hays (2005), the epidemic contributed and, in some cases, shaped the political tensions of the 1830s.

Epidemics can also sow other seeds of conflict. During and after the 1665 plague in London, there were arguments attributing the disease “to the filth of the poor.” Suspicion that the irresponsible behavior of the poor brought cholera was a widespread opinion among British authorities in India during the first cholera epidemic (1817–1824). In the second cholera epidemic many of the people of the higher ranks considered the habits and even the morality of the poor a source of dirt. This had the consequence that public health measures were perceived as discriminatory, oppressing the poor to safeguard the rich. In Paris, during the second epidemic, the poor associated cholera to a government plot, while to the elites it was a vehicle of social disorder — a situation that gave rise to severe episodes of popular violence. A similar example appears in Naples during the fifth cholera epidemic (1891–1896). Cholera struck especially in the poor districts of the city, and people thought that the disease was a government conspiracy to reduce the population of the poor. Analogous to the uprising in Paris, this provoked a violent insurrection which only in the waning of the epidemic could be quelled.¹ Finally, contagiousness instigates suspicion and the fear of “others.” In this respect, several historical examples show that epidemics may instigate social tensions related to racial discriminations. During the second cholera epidemic, in the United States contagiousness was associated to recent immigrations and to African Americans. In the West grew the conviction that cholera was Asian, which proved that Asia was detrimental. In India, the British opinion that cholera stemmed from the barbaric superstitions and traditions especially of Hindu pilgrims induced a vast program of westernization. In sharp contrast to the local customs and practices this policy laid the basis of resentment which two decades later led to the first independence war. One more example comes from the 1771 plague in Moscow. According to Hays (2005), the conviction that the disease came

¹ The fear that class tension may be exacerbated by COVID-19 and by the government policies is evident today in Brazil. www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-53021248. For the US, Jung, Manley, and Shrestha (2020) point out that one can see “...a strong poverty gradient in both infections and deaths.”

from the Ottoman Turkey strengthened xenophobic sentiments that sustained the policy of aggression against Turkey.

Overall, the historical evidence shows that the epidemics display a potential disarranging effect on civil society along three dimensions. First, the policy measures tend to conflict with the interest of people, determining a dangerous attrition between society and institutions. Second, to the extent that an epidemic impacts differently on society in terms of mortality and economic welfare, it may exacerbate inequality. Third, the psychological shock may induce irrational narratives on the causes and the spread of the disease, which may result in social, racial discrimination and even xenophobia. Clearly, various factors may moderate or exacerbate the above phenomena, like the degree of social cohesion and political stability inherited from the past, the duration of the epidemic, its mortality rate and diffusion, and how the social costs of the epidemic is distributed on society.

In any case, to different degrees, most of the great epidemics of the past appear to have been incubators of social unrest. To check if the potential of social tension accumulated over an epidemic leads to significant episodes of rebellion, we inspected the historical collection of rebellions and revolts. We considered the five cholera epidemics. For each epidemic we identify the main geographical areas struck by the disease. Then, we computed the episodes of revolt in the 10 years before an epidemic and in the 10 years after an epidemic. Aggregating across epidemics, we find 39 rebellions before an epidemic and 71 rebellions after an epidemic. Moreover, this pattern characterizes each of the five epidemics. This exploratory evidence is promising for deeper investigation of the relation between epidemics and social conflict in historical perspective. Combined with the arguments raised by historians it outlines a picture consistent with our major conjectures.

A crucial issue which has been left aside deserves few considerations. The necessary restrictions of freedom during an epidemic may be strategically exploited by governments to reinforce power. Orban and Trump are only the most visible recent tips of the iceberg, with clear attempts to bring up the salience of law-and-order vis a vis all other issues. Mattozzi, Morelli, and Nakaguma (2020) show that any global negative shock to the divisible surplus of countries can have dramatic effects on countries that are divided internally along ethnic or political lines: the group in power tends to alter the distribution of the shrinking divisible surplus in a way to exacerbate inequality, and internal conflicts can eventually increase. Thus, a corollary to our main conjectures, which focus mostly on short-term and medium-term consequences of epidemics on social stability, is that repressions tend to become more likely. Protest movements are now gatherings that justify immediate intervention, and are directly discouraged by personal

contagion fears, reduction in belief that others would show up (collective action problem) and greater tolerance of personal tracking and monitoring. This weakening of standard forms of opposition and protest consolidates power and the status quo.

History may again provide some useful hints: Looking at the 19-th century, popular fury arisen in Paris in 1831 during the cholera epidemic was not resolutely suppressed by the weak King Louis Philippe. This may have reinforced the confidence of the revolutionary movements which exploded in 1848. Snowden (2020b) argues that the two most violent examples of class-based repressions, the crushing of 1848, and the destruction of the Paris Commune, occurred in Paris because of the memory of the soft control of the 1831 revolts. This example is in line with our feared corollary. Obviously, more sophisticated historical analysis would be necessary to shed light on the issue.

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