

Epidemic Worlds

Samuel Weber: *Preexisting Conditions: Recounting the Plague*

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We will introduce a few words about the plague, starting further afield. Then, with the help of medical humanities literature, we will narrow the context and take a closer look at Samuel Weber's excellent book *Preexisting Conditions: Recounting the Plague*. (As will be seen, the context-building partly predetermines the very criteria of the work to be reviewed.) There are tens of thousands of diseases, many of which are caused by viruses. Millions of virus variants threaten our health, and precisely 220 known strains cause human disease. Examples of diseases caused by viruses include the common cold, measles, smallpox, yellow fever, mumps, rabies, Ebola, West Nile fever, AIDS, SARS and Covid. Another significant proportion of diseases are caused by bacteria, in addition to those transmitted by protozoa, fungi or worms and other parasites, and those of genetic origin. Ancient pathogens, representing the earliest life forms, swarm in our bodies and cause disease when our immune systems are weakened. Bacterial diseases include diphtheria, syphilis, dysentery, anthrax, typhus, leprosy, tuberculosis, salmonellosis, scarlet fever, cholera, and plague.

The latter, the plague or plague epidemic, especially its outbreak in the 14th century, is probably the favourite of cultural epidemiology or epidemic history, as it is better anchored in the public consciousness than other epidemics. There are obvious cultural reasons for this, as the Black Death of 1348 has been embedded in cultural memory in many ways, from literature to the visual arts to urban histories. The statement "a third of the world has become extinct" (which may be factual but is obviously only an approximation) has a long career in the history of culture. It is quoted in textbooks, literature, and later films. Thus, it is a bombastic figure in the discourse on epidemics, maintained and kept ready by the media apparatus. (The story of discovering the deadly flea-borne bacterium is recurring in science popularisation publications. For centuries, the appearance of the disease has been linked to rats or interpreted as the scourge of god, but it has been impossible to fight.) (cf. H. Nagy 2021, 28–30).

Regarding the plague, the climatic disruption of the 1330s affected the entire northern hemisphere, which provided a favourable breeding ground for the plague from China in Europe. On the other hand, the onset of the unusual cold made harvesting oats impossible, delayed blossoming, froze the vines, and so on. A few years earlier, the famine also prepared the devastation, increasing susceptibility to the disease. If we leap in time, the situation is similarly complex: the epidemic, which flared up twenty-six times, was also linked to people's physical condition and

was accompanied by other diseases (typhus, smallpox, dysentery, scarlet fever, influenza). It was all part of the Little Ice Age mortality crisis. Therefore, the development of pandemics deeply correlates with the climatic conditions of a given period, and thus, the climate issue cannot be avoided by the disciplines dealing with pandemics (cf. H. Nagy 2021, 30–31).

The plague is also said to have significantly impacted larger-scale changes that are very important in human history. One is related to the mortality or demographic consequences of the epidemic, as by the mid-14th century, there was an unprecedented labour shortage in Europe. This development changed the relationship with the workforce and started a process that pointed towards mechanisation. The situation after the epidemic forced those who maintained a feudal economy to develop technology more vigorously while paying higher wages to the labour force. Thus, the first civilisation was created, whose energy source was no longer human musculature but a system of mechanical connections. This technological leap began with the development of waterwheels and windmills, continued with the spread of book printing, and culminated in Leonardo's mechanical devices. The new situation also paved the way for Renaissance scientific thinking, which soon redrew the intellectual map of Europe. The plague thus contributed significantly to the transformation and disappearance of the medieval intellectuals, who were replaced by engineers and inventors who transformed the society and culture of late medieval Europe (cf. H. Nagy 2021, 31–33).

Narrowing the context, we should first point out that the plague epidemic was the first worldwide biopolitical event with globalising effects in the history of Western culture. Eszter Ureczky's book *Kultúra és kontamináció* [Culture and Contamination] brilliantly illuminates this, in which *A fekete halál álarcai* [The Masks of the Black Death] is about the plague and the birth of the modern biopolitical body. The author explains that the plague is considered the most fertile metaphor for the plague because, in addition to the collapse of the individual's body, it is also a symbol of urban chaos. Therefore, it holds a threshold position in the emergence of the modern Western subject; it functions as an identity-forming trauma of Western culture and a metaphor for the biopolitical crisis to this day. Although the symptoms of crisis and medical treatments vary from one time to another, it produced anthropological constants that are still a feature of epidemics today: scapegoating (pogroms), isolation (quarantine), victim blaming, moralising (divine punishment), deliberate contamination of others, the proliferation of pseudo or counter-scientific theories (flagellants), and the nightmare of the mass grave. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the plague has been the subject of many articles and is a recurrent theme in cultural studies (cf. medical humanities).

Following Samuel Weber's *The Legend of Freud and Singularity: Politics and Poetics*, his book *Preexisting Conditions* is one of the large-scale and stimulating undertakings that is (also) associated with Covid-19. In the foreword, the author refers to this situation, mentioning a specific seminar discourse, which for him was manifested in a re-reading of Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*. The exposure to the novel and, a few weeks later, to the epidemic experience started (or completed) a process of rethinking the intertwining of epidemics, epidemic fiction and human

history. This then took shape as a particular and considered concept, which Weber describes as follows: „However, unlike catastrophes such as tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and astral collisions, the emergence and evolution of plagues respond not just to natural causes but to preexisting social conditions. If their occurrence has traditionally been described as a »visitation,« the relation of plagues to preexisting conditions reveals them to be invited visitors, even if the invitation is anything but deliberate, voluntary, or explicit. Plagues are invited by the specific and even singular »preexisting conditions« of the places they visit. As the notion of »visitation« suggests, plagues are always on the move. The responses they produce must take this mobility into account.” (Weber 2022, 11).

The book focuses on the preexisting conditions and responses (e.g., isolation and its consequences) that made epidemics possible. At the same time, analysing selected literary works opens up epidemics’ linguistic and cultural context, outlining an interpretive network that can be read as a medical humanities literary history. In the pattern, testamentality presupposes complementary conceptual systems in which the physical world and the linguistic code, the particular and the general, the individual and the communal, the isolated and the public are linked or exchanged in the light of current epidemic dynamics. „Here, the author writes, we consider different manifestations of the »plague« within their trajectories of human and environmental conditions, as documented by writers in the Western tradition who explored a population’s confrontation with their shared mortality, which proves also to be a testament to their shared lives.” (Weber 2022, 13). Accordingly, Weber’s concept - which is not a paradox - metonymically embraces the spectrum of epidemic histories in Western culture.

Preexisting Conditions begins with The Local and the General chapter, a first-rate starting point and foundation. The starting point is Covid-19 and the difference between bacterial and viral infection. Since Covid-19 is the best-documented epidemic of all time, several retrospective conclusions can be drawn from the public data, which can serve as a model for studying future epidemics. One of the most obvious of these is that different groups are affected differently by exposure to infection, just as the odds of dying are not quite the same. „Here, as elsewhere, Covid-19, like the plagues that preceded it, has a revelatory function: it reveals precisely the existence of »preexisting conditions« that differentiate susceptibility and vulnerability to illness. Everyone is mortal, but not everyone is equally mortal. Or, rather, not everyone is mortal in the same way. Thus, it is not just an accident that the advent of Covid-19 has catalysed to stimulate protest movements against preexisting conditions of social and economic inequality.” (Weber 2022, 19) All this paves the way for pandemics from the Black Death, the Spanish flu and HIV to Covid-19.

Weber’s precise observations on repetition, resonance and expectation are already complemented in the preface by a literary parallel (where the author again refers to Camus’ novel). Then, Walter Benjamin’s famous essay on post-traumatic stress syndrome (*The Storyteller*) is discussed, answering why people tell stories about epidemics. Weber then discusses and analyses the carefully selected focal points of the epidemic literature in nine chapters. After the Bible, the pattern high-

lights the writings of Thucydides, Boccaccio, Luther, Defoe, Kleist, Artaud, Camus and Hölderlin, which respond to the epidemiological concomitants, its anthropological and cultural factors, and cardinal determinants of preexisting conditions in different eras. Individually, the chapters shed light on the (alternative) political practices inspired by epidemic situations, and together, they tell a very coherent story of the pandemic breaking points in Western culture. Weber's book is a benchmark achievement and a fundamental contribution to our understanding of epidemic discourses. At the same time, its conceptual framework makes it suitable for grounding and invigorating the study of the most recent chapter of epidemic literature, especially those works (such as Orhan Pamuk's novel *Nights of Plague*) written during the Covid-19, which relate in a complex way to the temporal, but partly familiar, dynamics of a current epidemic. Finally, *Preexisting Conditions* also shows how our identities can be understood, with the interposition of writing, as the intermediate product of biopolitics and biopoetics.

Literature

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