

Gene Cittadino
Gallatin School
Fall 2009

715 Broadway, Room 601
MW 12:30-1:45

K20.1059
DISEASE AND CIVILIZATION

This course explores the cultural, social, scientific, and political dimensions of epidemic disease through an examination of selected episodes from plagues in antiquity to AIDS, Ebola, and swine flu in our time. We will approach the problem of understanding the role of disease in human history from two different, but interrelated, perspectives: an ecological perspective, making use of a combination of environmental, biological, and cultural factors to help explain the origin and spread of epidemics, and a cultural/social history perspective, emphasizing the interaction of cultural values, religious beliefs, scientific knowledge, medical practice, economics, and politics in shaping perceptions of the nature, causes, cures, and significance of various diseases. Much of the emphasis in the course will be on the various ways in which personal experiences, scientific knowledge, and social/cultural factors have interacted in the past and interact today to produce changing explanations for epidemic disease and changing perceptions of the role of disease in human history.

This is not a course on the history of medicine as such, although we will certainly review many episodes dealing with changes in medical theory and practice, and it is not a course on epidemiology, although we will read about and discuss both contemporary and historical examples of epidemiological theory and practice. Rather it is a course that explores the role that disease has played, and still plays, in human civilization. To get at this rather complex set of issues we will need to understand how scientific knowledge and medical practice interact with cultural and environmental factors in terms of both shaping perceptions of the nature and causes of disease and determining preventive measures, and we will also need to know how various means of disease prevention--quarantines, travel restrictions, sanitation practices, hygiene, vaccination, etc.--have themselves become major factors in shaping historical change. For practical reasons, our emphasis will be on infectious disease, and not on cancer, heart disease, mental disorders, etc., although I realize that recent research sometimes blurs distinctions between these categories of disease. The format will be discussions based on assigned readings supplemented by brief, informal lectures and occasional films and videotapes.

Course requirements and basis for evaluation. (1) regular attendance and participation (10%), (2) weekly response papers (15%), (3) two short essays of 3-5 pages (15% each), due September 30 and October 26, (4) a longer paper involving some outside sources, 8-10 pages (25%), due December 4, (5) a final essay (4-6 pages), in the form of a take-home final exam, due December 18 (20%). See Page 2 for more information.

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Required Texts (all are available at the NYU Bookstore and on reserve in the Bobst Library)

The Hippocratic Writings (Penguin)--this edition only, please

J. N. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease* (Rutgers Univ. Press)

Christopher Wills, *Yellow Fever, Black Goddess* (Perseus)

John Aberth, *The First Horseman* (Pearson/Prentice Hall)

Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Oxford Univ. Press)--this edition only, please

Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (Univ. of Chicago Press)

Richard Preston, *The Cobra Event* (Random House)

There are additional supplementary readings listed on the schedule. Please note that you should use only the Penguin edition of *The Hippocratic Writings* and only the Oxford edition of *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Otherwise, we won't all be on the same page, literally.

A note on the reading. We will use a combination of original sources, historical works, scientific works, and fiction. There is a fair amount of reading, but it is manageable. I'll try to help by pointing out chapters and passages to emphasize for class discussion. Because of time constraints, we will read only excerpts from *The Hippocratic Writings* and Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*. We'll read the rest of the texts more or less in their entirety, supplemented by occasional articles, either handed out or placed on Blackboard. The books by Hays and Wills provide most of the background material. Hays is a scientifically informed historian; Wills, a socially aware scientist, so the two books complement one another nicely. The main value of the Aberth book is its use of original sources. Supplementary readings will fill in the gaps.

Response papers. You will be expected to write one response paper on the readings each week. With few exceptions, you will have a choice of bringing in a response paper on Monday or Wednesday. Each should be one typed page (single-spacing is fine), due at the beginning of the class corresponding to the reading. These should be thoughtful reflections on the readings. Feel free to speculate, question, challenge, and probe. Your prose can be looser than for a formal essay, but something more disciplined than free association or an internet blog.

Shorter essays. I will give you suggestions for topics in each case, but these essays can be expansions of ideas from your response papers. Each essay should have a title and follow formal rules of style, grammar, and documentation.

Longer paper. The paper due Friday, December 4, could be on any topic related to the course. You could focus on a particular disease, a comparison of perceptions and treatments of different diseases, a concept (some aspect of germ theory, the idea of "tropical" medicine, blaming the victim, disease and social control, etc.). You may use course texts but you must supplement these with outside sources, which can include documentary films. I will offer suggestions and more details later in the term.

Ground rules. Since this is a seminar, regular attendance and participation is crucial to the success of the class. I fully realize that modes of participation vary from individual to individual, but you must be physically present to participate. Attend all classes, be on time (!), turn off cell phones and other electronic devices *before* entering the classroom, express your opinions but respect your classmates. I take attendance regularly and assume that any absence is due to illness or emergency. All written work must be your own. If you aren't sure of the rules for proper documentation, ask me or consult one of the many guidebooks available. Any clear instance of plagiarism will result in automatic failure of this course and possible further disciplinary action.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

- Sept. 9 Introductions
- Sept. 14 Disease in contemporary society: why do plagues happen?
Wills, *Yellow Fever, Black Goddess*, Part I (pp. 3-49)
- Sept. 16 Virus Ground Zero--containing the Ebola epidemic
VIDEOTAPE: "The Plague Fighters"
Hays, *Burdens of Disease*, Introduction; Aberth, *First Horseman*, Introduction
- Sept. 21 Body and mind in ancient Greece
Hays, chap. 1; *Hippocratic Writings*, "The Oath," "The Canon," "Tradition in Medicine," and "The Nature of Man," pp. 67-86, 260-76
- Sept. 23 *Hippocratic Writings*, "Airs, Waters, Places," pp. 148-69; "Aphorisms," pp. 148-69, 206-16 (also look over a few of the physician's case notes in the section on Epidemics, pp. 87-138)
- Sept. 28 The plague of Athens; cities and disease in the ancient world
*Thucydides, "The Plague," from *History of the Peloponnesian War*; *Jennifer Kosak, "Polis Nosousa: Greek Ideas About the City and Disease in the Fifth Century BC," and James Longrigg, "Death and Epidemic Disease in Classical Athens"
- Sept. 30 The classical legacy: disease, therapy, and medicine in the Middle Ages
Hays, chap. 2 **First essay due**
- Oct. 5 The origins of the Black Death
Wills, chap. 4; Hays, pp. 38-49; Video: "Epidemics: Products of Progress," excerpt
- Oct. 7 Contemporary perceptions: Boccaccio, Conrad of Megenberg, Ibn al-Wardi, and Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib: Aberth, chap. 1
- Oct. 12 Aftermath of the plague: public health and the state
Hays, pp. 49-61; Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year*, pp. 1-46
- Oct. 14 The plague of London, 1665-66
Defoe, pp. 46-67, 173-82
- Oct. 19 Transatlantic exchanges: migrations of people and microbes
*Crosby, "Conquistador y Pestilencia;" Aberth, chap. 2
- Oct. 21 Germs, conquest, and slavery
Video: "Invisible Armies"
Hays, chap. 4; *Gould, "Syphilis and the Shepherd of Atlantis"
- Oct. 26 The ambiguous transformation of science and medicine: smallpox & yellow fever
Hays, chaps. 5 & 6; *Jenner, "An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccinae" **Second essay due**

- Oct. 28 Blaming the victim: poverty, morality, and the cholera epidemics
Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*, Intro. & Part I
- Nov. 2 Sanitation and disease: new insights
Rosenberg, Part II; *Dickens, “New York”
- Nov. 4 The Metropolitan Board of Health and the rise of the public health movement
Rosenberg, Part III; Hays, chap. 7
- Nov. 9 The culture of tuberculosis: sanatoria, hygiene, and the “gospel of germs”
Hays, chap. 8: * Koch, “The Aetiology of Tuberculosis”
- Nov. 11 Inventing “tropical medicine”
Wills, chap. 8; Hays, chap. 9; Aberth, chap. 3
- Nov. 16 Influenza, 1918--origins, effects, consequences
*Crosby, “United States Begins to Take Note” & “Spanish Influenza Sweeps the Country;” *Oldstone, “Influenza Virus, the Plague that May Return”
- Nov. 18 Influenza 2009?
*Gina Kolata, *Flu*, excerpts; TBA
- Nov. 23 Premature triumph? Infectious disease and medicine in the 20th century
Hays, chap. 11; Wills, chap. 9; *Orwell, “How the Poor Die”
- Nov. 25 AIDS: A return to the past?
*AIDS retrospective, 2001 (Sepkowitz, et al.); Wills, chap. 10
- Nov. 30 AIDS: politics, injustice, and ecology
Hays, chap. 12; Wills, chap. 12
- Dec. 2 AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa
Aberth, chap. 4 & Epilogue

Third essay due, Friday, December 4

- Dec. 7 Biological warfare
Preston, *The Cobra Event*; *Ed Regis, *The Biology of Doom*, excerpts
Video: “Bioterror,” excerpts
- Dec. 9 Hopefully not the future: bioterrorism in New York
Preston, continue
- Dec. 14 Last class: Brainpox! the future of epidemics
Preston, finish
- Dec. 18 **Final essay due** (no exceptions!)