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The Great London Plague of 1665 and the US COVID-19 Pandemic Experience Compared

by Frank O'Hara

At first glance, there is little to compare between plague experiences in 17th century Europe and 21st century America. Most of those infected by the Great Plague in London in the first 18 months died, while around 98 percent of people infected by the coronavirus in the United States survived. A quarter of the population in London died, compared to less than 1 percent in the United States.

But when you get beyond the differences in medical understanding, drug research and distribution systems, and public health infrastructure, there is also the human element. How is the plague experienced, how do people react, what happens to social cohesion? These questions get at basic human reactions to crisis, and the similarities and differences between the 17th and 21st centuries are instructive.

We know about the human response to the London Plague from a five-year-old survivor. That boy, Daniel Defoe, went on to write *Robinson Crusoe* and other popular books. When he was in his 50s, Defoe returned to his experiences of childhood trauma, and with the help of city records and an uncle's diary, wrote a novel called *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Dafoe 2021).

Here, I examine key points in the plague's development over time. Each topic begins with a quote from Defoe's book. The quotes often represent successive excerpts from a longer narrative; elision dots are not included here so that the narrative reads more smoothly.

Following the quote, a comparison of the modern experience follows.¹

THE EARLY RUMORS

It was about the beginning of September, 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbors, heard, in ordinary discourse, that the plague was returned again in Holland. We had no such things as printed newspapers in those days to spread rumours and reports of things. But such things as those were gathered from the letters of merchants and others who corresponded abroad, and from them was handed about by word of mouth only.

(Dafoe, *Journal*, 3)

In America we have not only newspapers, but also television and the internet. In an early press mention in January 2020, *New York Times* reported that a new coronavirus with “pneumonia-like” symptoms had infected 59 people in Wuhan, China. The paper reported that “there is no evidence that the new virus is readily spread by humans, which would make it particularly dangerous, and it has not been tied to any deaths” (Wee and McNeil 2020). Within two weeks, it was confirmed that the coronavirus could be transmitted by humans, that people had died in China, and that the first case in an American was found in Washington State. Governments around the world established quarantines. By the end of January, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency.² By February, 96 percent of Americans had heard of the

virus (Muñana et al. 2020), but only about 40 percent were concerned that it would affect their own family, and only one in eight had changed their travel plans.

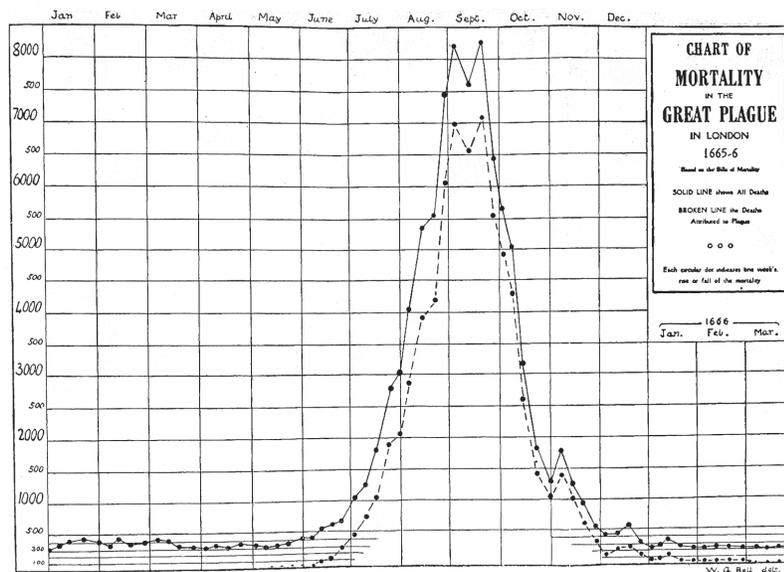
FEARS AND COMPLACENCY

A comet appeared for several months before the plague — heavy, solemn, and slow. Accordingly, one foretold a heavy judgment, slow but severe, terrible, and frightful. Some heard voices, others saw apparitions in the air. They who were poring continually at the clouds saw shapes and figures. Here they told us they saw a flaming sword held in a hand coming out of a cloud, with a point hanging directly over the city; there they saw hearses and coffins in the air carrying to be buried. Ministers, whose discourses were full of terror, who spoke nothing but dismal things; and as they brought the people together with a kind of horror, sent them away in tears, terrifying the people with the apprehensions of being utterly destroyed.

(Dafoe, *Journal*, 21)

People in London knew what a plague meant. From 1603 to 1665, there were only four years in which no one died of the plague in London. The last major outbreak was in 1625, within living memory, in which 41,000 died. People were terrified. They looked to clouds, comets, ghosts, and the Bible for guidance. In the United States, the last widespread plague-like event was the flu epidemic of 1918, which most only know about from stories handed down by grandparents. So there was less concern here—only 43 percent were worried that someone in their family would get the disease (Muñana et al. 2020). It was different in one subpopulation, however. Many gay Americans lost friends in the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, and 74 percent of gay Americans feared getting COVID-19 as of early March (Dawson et al. 2021).

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Credit: Chart of Mortality, Great Plague in London. Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) (<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/zez8bnpg>)

FLEEING TO THE COUNTRY

The richer sort of people, especially the nobility and gentry, thronged out of town with their families and servants in an unusual manner. Nothing was to be seen but wagons and carts, with goods, women, servants, children, &c; coaches filled with people of the better sort, and horsemen attending them all hurrying away. In all it was computed that 200,000 people were fled and gone.

(Dafoe, *Journal*, 9 and 74)

In this instance, rich people behaved the same in both centuries. New York City had a net outflow of 100,000 households in 2020 (Bowman 2021). Many were people who relocated to their summer houses or young people who moved back with parents in smaller towns. Maine experienced a real estate boom in 2021 from the continued movement of city dwellers to the countryside. Surveys show many more Americans would like to move from large cities to small towns, so the trend is likely to continue postpandemic.

QUACKERY

They were as mad upon their running after quacks and mountebanks, and every practicing old woman, for medicine and remedies; storing themselves with such multitudes of pills, potions, and preservatives, as they were called, that they not only spent their money, but even poisoned themselves beforehand. It is scarce to be imagined, how the posts of houses and corners of streets were plastered over with doctors' bills and papers of ignorant fellows, quacking and tampering in physic, and inviting the people to come to them with remedies, which was generally set off with such flourishes as these, viz.: 'Infallible preventive pills against the plague.' 'Never-failing preservatives against the infection.' 'Sovereign cordials against the corruption of the air.' 'Anti-pestilential pills.' 'Incomparable drink against the plague.' 'An universal remedy for the plague.' 'The only true plague water.' 'The royal antidote against all kinds of infection.' And such a number more that I cannot reckon.

(Dafoe, *Journal*, 31)

In the early days of the pandemic, Americans tried many homespun remedies. A Centers for Disease Control Survey showed that as of early May, 2020, significant numbers of Americans had drunk or gargled chorine products (4 percent), other cleaning products (4 percent), or soap and water (Gharpure et al. 2020). In March 2020, President Trump began to hype the potential usefulness of an anti-malaria drug called hydroxychloroquine. He himself received a two-week treatment in early June 2020 (Estes 2020). Shortly afterward the FDA issued an emergency authorization for the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat patients with COVID-19—an authorization that was quickly rescinded. By the end of June, there were over 6,000 cases of serious illness and 100 deaths caused by the use of the drug (Gander 2020).

The quackery continues. In summer 2021, an antiparasite drug called ivermectin became a popular home cure. It is used to treat intestinal parasites in cows and horses. The National Poison Data System reported 1,143 cases of ivermectin overdoses in the first eight months of 2021 (Romo 2021). This is a human tendency that no amount of modern medicine seems to change.

THE ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

All master-workmen in manufactures stopped their work, dismissed their journeymen and workmen, and all their dependents. As merchandising was at a full stop, for very few ships ventured to come up the river, and none at all went out; the watermen, carmen, porters, and all the poor, whose labour depended upon the merchants, were at once dismissed, and put out of business. All the tradesmen usually employed in building or repairing of houses were at a full stop; so that this one article turned all of the ordinary workmen of that kind out of business, such

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as bricklayers, masons, carpenters, joiners, plasterers, painters, glaziers, smiths, plumbers and all the labourers depending on such. The seamen were all out of employment, and all the several tradesmen and workmen belonging to and depending upon the building and fitting out of ships, such as ship-carpenters, caulkers, ropemakers, dry coopers, sailmakers, anchor-smiths, and other smiths; blockmakers, carvers, gunsmiths, ship-chandlers, ship-carvers, and the like; all or most part of the water-men, lightermen, boat-builders, and lighter-builders in like manner idle and laid by. All families retrenched their living as much as possible, so that innumerable multitude of footmen, serving-men, shop-keepers, journeymen, merchants' bookkeepers, and such sort to people, and especially poor maid-servants, were turned out, and left friendless and helpless, without employment and without habitation.

(Dafoe, *Journal*, 94–95)

Here in the United States, the country lost 20 million jobs in April 2020, the largest single-month decline on record. The hardest hit sectors were leisure and hospitality, retail, professional services, and manufacturing (BLS 2020). By August, 40 percent of American adults reported that someone in their household had lost a job or taken a cut in pay (Parker et al. 2020). Unlike 17th century London, however, the United States had unemployment insurance to cushion the blow. But the London authorities had their own strategies.

GOVERNMENT RELIEF STRATEGIES

Certain it is, that the greatest part of the poor or families who formerly lived by the labour, or by retail trade, lived now on charity; and had there not been prodigious sums of money given for the support of such, the city could never have subsisted. The Lord Mayor and such magistrates as

could be had relieved the most desperate with money, and put others into business, and particularly that employment of watching houses that were infected and shut up. And as the number of these houses were very great, for it was said there was at one time 10,000 houses shut up, and every house had two watchmen to guard it, viz., one by night and the other by day, this gave opportunity to employ a very good number of poor men at a time. The women and servants there turned off from their places were likewise employed as nurses to tend the sick in all places. (Dafoe, *Journal*, 97)

The Lord Mayor or one or both of the sheriffs were in every market-day on horseback to see that the country people had all possible encouragement and freedom in their coming to the markets and going back again. All the bakers were obliged to keep their ovens going constantly. By this means bread was always to be had in plenty, and as cheap as usual, and provisions were never wanting in the markets.

(Dafoe, *Journal*, 183)

Although London was totally unprepared for the plague and had no food in storage or money in reserves, the magistrates pieced together a relief program consisting of public employment, food market regulation, and charity from contributions from all over England. This was effective in that no one starved, and prices were kept stable. The disadvantage was that the public employment jobs all involved interacting with people with the plague and consequently induced a high mortality rate among the workers, who were mostly poor.

The American response was also swift. The federal government handed out tax refunds and unemployment insurance payments to keep people, businesses, and local governments afloat. There was also an eviction moratorium. As of the fall of 2021, these provisions

have prevented large-scale evictions and bankruptcies, but the risk of dislocation remains as the programs phase out.

In both places and centuries, there was no real disagreement about the need for rapid and substantial help, and by and large, that help was provided. But in both times and places, frontline workers were at the greatest risk of infection, and many of them were from poorer backgrounds.

GOVERNMENT PUBLIC HEALTH STRATEGIES

Orders Conceived and Published by the Lord Mayor and Alderman of the City of London concerning the Infection of the Plague, July 1, 1665:

First, in every parish there be one or more persons of good sort chosen and appointed by the name of **examiners**, to inquire and learn what house in every parish be visited, and what persons be sick, and of what diseases. If they find any person sick of the infection, to give order that the house be shut up.

That every house visited to be marked with a red cross of a foot long in the middle of the door, evident to be seen, and with these usual printed words, that is to say, 'Lord have mercy upon us.'

That to every infected house there be appointed two **watchmen**, one for every day, and the other for the night; and that these watchmen have a special care that no person go in or out of such infected houses, and to do such further offices as the sick house shall need and require.

That there be a special care to appoint **women searchers** to make due search and true report whether the persons whose bodies they are appointed to search do die of the infection, or what other diseases, as near they can.

For better assistance of the searchers, forasmuch as there hath been heretofore great abuse in misreporting the diseases, to the further spreading of the infection, it is

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therefore ordered that there be chosen and appointed able and discreet **chirurgeons** (note: “surgeons”) to join with the searchers for the view of the body.

That all plays, bear-baitings, games, singing of ballads, buckler play, or such-like causes of assemblies of people be utterly prohibited.

That disorderly tippling in taverns, ale-houses, coffee-houses, and cellars be severely looked upon; and that no company or person be suffered to remain or come into any tavern, ale-house, coffee-house to drink after nine of the clock in the evening.

That no hogs, dogs, or cats, or tame pigeons, or conies, be suffered to be kept within any part of the city, and that the dogs be killed by the dog-killers appointed for that purpose.

(Dafoe, *Journal*, 39–40)

Although germs and bacteria and viruses were not understood in 1665, past experience told the London officials that the disease spread from close contact with afflicted animals and people. So they designed a strategy of quarantine that in some ways is similar to the travel and public assembly bans that we have today, but less effective for several reasons.

There were important flaws in the strategy that contributed to additional deaths. For example, killing all the dogs and cats actually increased the rat population by removing their predators, and the fleas on the rats were major spreaders of the plague. Secondly, the house quarantine law was a virtual death sentence for the remaining family members, and they knew it. As a consequence, families didn’t report to the authorities when members got the plague; or they ran away before reporting; or they ran away later when the watchman wasn’t looking. Often those running away were already infected, and since no one wanted anything to do

with someone from London, they ended up wandering the streets homeless and spreading the disease to new neighborhoods.

Here in the United States, there were occasional modifications in public health recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control over time, as more was learned about the coronavirus and as vaccines became available. But the policies themselves about masking and vaccines and limitations on travel and public assembly were fundamentally sound. The problem in the United States has been that a substantial part of the population does not trust scientists and public health officials, so rules set by local officials do not always follow CDC recommendations, and compliance with the rules is incomplete.

MASKS AND CLEANLINESS

I had a very good friend, a physician, whose name was Heath, whom I frequently visited during this dismal time and to whose advice I was very much obliged for many things which directed me to take, by way of preventing the infection when I went out, as he found I frequently did, and to hold in my mouth when I was in the streets. He earnestly persuaded me to lock myself up and my family, and not so suffer any of us to go out of doors; to keep all our windows fast, shutters and curtains close, and never to open them; but first, to make a very strong smoke in the room where the window or door was to be opened, with rosin and pitch, brimstone or gunpowder, and the like.

When any one bought a joint of meat in the market they would not take off the butcher’s hand, but took it off the hooks themselves. On the other hand, the butcher would not touch the money, but have it put into a pot full of vinegar, which he kept for that purpose.

John Hayward, a gravedigger and bearer

of the dead, never had the distemper at all, but lived about twenty years after it. His wife at the same time was a nurse to infected people, yet she never was infected neither. He never used any preservative against the infection, other than holding garlic and rue in his mouth, and smoking tobacco. And his wife’s remedy was washing her head in vinegar, and sprinkling her head-clothes so as to keep them always moist; and if the smell of any of those she waited upon on was more than ordinary offensive, she snuffed vinegar up her nose and sprinkled vinegar upon her head-clothes, and held a handkerchief wetted with vinegar to her mouth.

(Dafoe, *Journal*, 78, 79)

By August 2021, two-thirds of Americans reported wearing masks, but the other third oppose any government-imposed mask requirements.³ Oddly, it appears that doctors were trusted more in London in 1665—even though their advice was often flawed—than they are today in the United States, when their advice is backed up by systematic research.

SOCIAL DIVISION

Here we may observe, and I hope it will not be amiss to take notice of it, that a near view of death would soon reconcile men of good principles one to another, and that is chiefly owing to our easy situation life and our putting these things far from that our breaches are fomented, ill blood continued, prejudices, breach of charity and of Christian union, so much kept and so far carried on among us as it is. Another plague year would reconcile all these differences; a close conversing with death, or with diseases that threaten death, would scum off the gall from our tempers, remove the animosities among, and bring us to see with differing eyes than those which we looked on things with before. As the people who had been used to join with the Church were reconciled at this time with the admitting the Dissenters to

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preach to them, so the Dissenters, with an uncommon prejudice had broken off from the communion of the Church of England, were not content to come to their parish churches, and to conform to the worship which they did not approve before; but as the terror of the infection abated, those things all returned again to their less desirable channel, and to the course they were in before.

(Dafoe, *Journal*, 174)

The 17th century equivalent division to our pro-Trump vs anti-Trump split would be the Church of England vs the Dissenters. Dissenters were Protestants who did not think the established Church of England was sufficiently radical in abolishing rituals and hierarchies of the past. Dissenters were persecuted by the government, and many among them left for America, including the Puritans, Quakers, and Amish. As Defoe points out, the nearness of death reconciled Dissenters and Church of England worshippers. They prayed together, went to each other's churches, listened to each other's pastors preach—whatever was still being offered in the neighborhood. All the scruples about proper theology and dogmas were put aside. But as the plague faded, the Dissenters and Church of England members returned to their competitive corners, and cooperation and joint services ended.

There has been no coming together of the pro-Trump and anti-Trump parties in the United States through the COVID-19 experience. In fact, the divisions have persisted, with only the topics of controversy changing over time. The pro-Trump wing argued at the beginning that the disease was not serious, then that it was serious but the fault of the Chinese, then that there was no need to shut the economy down, then that masks were ineffective, then that vaccines were

dangerous. Americans' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have locked in divisions rather than eased them. Defoe might argue that here in the United States, we did not have enough of a “close conversing with death” to change behaviors and attitudes.

EASING UP TOO SOON

Upon this notion spreading that the distemper was not so catching as formerly, and that if it was caught it was not so mortal, and seeing abundance of people who really fell sick recover again daily, they took to such a precipitant courage, and grew so entirely regardless of themselves, that they made no more the plague than of an ordinary fever, nor indeed so much. They not only went boldly into company with those who had tumours and carbuncles that were running, and consequently contagious, and ate and drank with them, nay, into their houses to visit them, and even, as I was told, into their very chambers where they lay sick. This imprudent, rash conduct cost a great many their lives who had with great care and caution shut themselves up and kept, retired, as it were, from all mankind. A great many that thus cast off their cautions suffered more deeply still, and though many escaped, yet many died.

The people were so tired with being so long from London, and so eager to come back, that they flock to town without fear or forecast, and began to show themselves in the streets, as if all the danger was over. The consequences of this was, that the bills increased again 400 the very first week in November.

(Dafoe, *Journal*, 225)

In the summer of 2021, the United States opened up too soon, which allowed the COVID-19 pandemic to reignite through August and September via the new Delta variant. But even with rising numbers of cases and death, governments did not increase restrictions.

COVID-19 fatigue, and the long-anticipated summer opening of restaurants and entertainment establishments, have, so far, caused governments to keep things open.

CONCLUSION

There were similar behaviors in both centuries with regard to hating quarantines, falling for quack remedies, and easing restrictions before the pandemic was over. There were also differences. The American response to COVID-19 was much more casual than London's response to the plague, our social divisions persisted during the pandemic, and oddly doctors in 17th century London appear to have been listened to with more respect than doctors today.

The year after the Great Plague ended, the Great Fire burned the City of London to the ground. Many records were lost, and the plague was forgotten in the rush to rebuild. Had that five-year-old boy not returned to tell the story 50 years later, we would know very little about the plague that wiped out a quarter of London's population in 1665. Which raises the question—is there a five-year-old child in Maine today who will someday tell of our experiences in 2020 to future generations?

NOTES

- 1 All page numbers refer to the 2021 Folio Society edition of *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Some sentences are elided, but for continuity of reading, the three dot intervals are not given.
- 2 See <https://www.ajmc.com/view/a-timeline-of-covid19-developments-in-2020>.
- 3 See <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-pollsaxios-ipsos-coronavirus-index>.

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