

An epidemic in times of globalisation

Once more the imminence of an impending catastrophe has been broadcast by the mass media and terrified the whole world. Once more social fears have been exacerbated by people being made aware of an appalling menace. Once more viruses have been presented as being a ferocious enemy, in spite of their insignificant size, managing to put mankind's achievements on tenterhooks.

The protagonist of the moment is a virus called H1N1; before this, however, it was H5N1 and a little further back it was Ébola, Marburg and HIV. Together with viral particles floating in the atmosphere, there has also been the sensation for some years now of a latent, ambiguous and disperse fear easily interwoven with the existential fear common to the world of late modernity.

The society at risk thus assumes its terrible countenance, thereby tensioning the dynamics of current society which has centred its focus on the obsessive reinforcement of individuality. However, an epidemic appears to be a situation going beyond individual control, transcending it and involving it, making one suffer next to one's neighbour, demanding that special attention be paid to social life, whether from the standpoint of threats or means of protection.

Understanding an epidemic's particularities today, leads to unraveling the intricate networks of human subjects' relationships, these being inserts in complex dynamics involving economic, political, cultural and scientific-technical aspects. For several years now expert virologist have pointed out that southern China's intensive agri-cultural system has been the main factor favoring mutation of the flu virus, at the same time as warning that the impressive industrialization of livestock production has broken China's natural monopoly in such disease's evolution. The whole world recognises that current means of transport have radically changed the form of an epidemic's dissemination.

Regarding the current flu, some analysts have pointed out that this has been due to transnational companies failing to comply with sanitary laws, as well as an erroneous WHO policy, whilst others have seen in it a political recourse for covering up the generalised economic crisis or a fanatical laboratory experiment. However, in general, it is recognized that the pig is an organism which can combine avian and human viruses with its own, thereby giving rise to new, highly-lethal strains of the virus which has (supposedly) kept global epidemiological surveillance systems on alert.

The flu epidemic is presented as an event bearing witness to the reality of an interconnected world and, therefore, may well be assumed to be a symbol of a globalized world where flows of exchange (be they financial or pathological) spread beyond national frontiers without difficulty. However, this condition makes the epidemic participate in the drama of a world which sees threats coming (becoming globalized), without suitably reinforcing means of worldwide, collective action for confronting them.

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