

# Plague & Prejudice



**HOW PLAGUES EXPOSE AND REINFORCE  
EXISTING PREJUDICES IN SOCIETIES**

# Societies need Order, Continuity, Stability



- Civilizations are built on a semblance of order, stability and continuity. People cannot plan the hunt, their seasonal planting, or building structures if there is too much turmoil and disruption. But turmoil happens.
- It may come as natural disasters like unexpected floods, earthquakes, or erupting volcanoes. It may come as prolonged drought, leading to famine. In modern times, it may come as an economic depression, leading to poverty, homelessness and hunger.
- Or it may come as a plague, whose victims die, or become disabled.

# Medieval Plague



# The Cause of Turmoil are the 'Others'



- If we are accustomed to stability, our minds search for the causes of this turmoil. We cannot accept that events occur for no apparent reason.
- In a religious society, their god(s) may be blamed. Is there something our people did to displease the divinity?
- In a hierarchical society, the upper or lower status groups may be blamed. In a society with migrants, the “others” may be blamed.

# Bubonic Plague Victims



# Jews and Others Blamed for Black Death



- Europe's most deadly and devastating disease, the Black Death of 1347–51, unleashed mass violence: the murder of Catalans in Sicily, and clerics and beggars in Narbonne and other regions;
- Especially the pogroms against Jews, with over a thousand communities down the Rhineland, into Spain and France, and eastward across large swathes of Europe eradicated, their members locked in synagogues or rounded up on river islands and burnt to death – men, women and children.
- Far more than any earlier pogrom against Jews in the Middle Ages or during the early modern period, this craze fundamentally reshaped Jewish civilization. Coolly and cruelly, courts of justice convicted Jews collectively of poisoning wells and food supplies. And these images overwhelmingly have shaped our memory of the socio-psychological consequences of medieval plague.

# Persecution of Jews during the Black Death



Representation of a massacre of the Jews in 1349 Antiquitates Flandriae (Royal Library of Belgium manuscript)



February 1349 Pogrom of Strasbourg by Emile Schweitzer

# Disposing of Bodies: Bubonic Plague





# Roma and Women Targeted



- The Roma of Europe faced similar persecution. It has been documented that 121 laws, framed in Italy between 1493 and 1785, restricted the movement of Zingaris (a pejorative term for Roma). Such laws were driven partly by the prejudiced view that the Roma people caused and spread epidemics.
- In medieval Europe, outbreaks of plague were blamed on people who practiced traditional medicine. They were branded 'witches' and persecuted. It is estimated that 90,000 people were punished for witchcraft in Europe, mostly women.

# Plague, 14<sup>th</sup> Century



# The Plague in Rome



# Riots Ruthlessly Suppressed



- When the cholera epidemic struck Tashkent, the capital of the Russian province of Turkestan, riots ensued against the anti-cholera restrictions.
- These measures violated principles of local culture, based on Islam. The riots were ruthlessly suppressed by Tsarist official and Russian settlers. Russian and Tsarist elites saw in the behavior of Central Asians and Russian peasants proof of their inherent backwardness.

# Pandemics Expose Existing Hate



- Pandemics don't create hate, but they do expose and actualize it.
- Science was supposed to liberate people from irrational beliefs by proving that pathogens don't look for a particular race or place — all they need is a human body, warm, moist and nutrient-rich.
- Unfortunately, even the scientific understanding of hosts, vectors and carriers has been appropriated to reinforce social prejudices.



# The Condition of Being Human



Surely we have learned that if a virus such as COVID-19 threatens one of us, it threatens all of us.

Our vulnerability and our strength is inherent in the condition of being human, connected to a global community, not in the superficiality that goes no deeper than our skin.