

EDITOR'S NOTE

The coronavirus and the História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos blog

The Covid-19 pandemic that has unleashed human tragedies and political crises in various countries is reminiscent of past health crises and raises questions about the “lessons” they bequeathed us (Cueto, 27 mar. 2020). Now more than ever, history seems wise and fascinating. The current health crisis reminds us that possessing an image of the past, however incomplete and contradictory, is a fundamental necessity for individuals, governments and countries. One or more historical images filter through the social fabric and our personalities to soothe insecurities and uncertainties, create community bonds within a group, differentiate us from other groups, explain or justify the nuances of social inequalities and, often, to justify the privileges and attributes of power.

Historians have been called on to respond to the anxiety generated in this crisis. And many have done so. Other are waiting for the wisdom that comes with distance and the appearance of new documents and testimonies. Thus, both are fulfilling their duties as professionals and as citizens. Various historians have established a dialogue with audiences beyond their captive ones, generally university students and other colleagues, and are following, consciously or unconsciously, the recommendations of a perspective that saturates almost the entire discipline: public history (Carvalho, 2015). This is the continual interaction of scholars of the past with the public beyond the academic world, through museum exhibits, documentaries, radio and TV interviews, lectures and public debates – which are now happening via Internet – and even participating in artistic projects. It has not been an easy dialogue. Historians have had to argue for prioritizing contextualization in the face of value judgements, falsehoods hidden in simplistic comparisons, useless anachronisms, or the mania for finding antecedents for the present in the past; they have had to defend the broad scope of research carried out by professionals in contrast with flimsy work by amateur historians and the inertia of those in power, who manipulate the past in order to legitimize the established order and condemn their enemies. Likewise, historians have recommended caution in the face of hasty predictions of catastrophic futures or promising paradises in the post-pandemic world.

To do this, professional historians of health have employed the tools they use in archives, libraries, and university lecture rooms, and in writing texts. These tools include identifying the confluence of dynamic biological and cultural dimensions; analyzing the variability in morbidity and mortality profiles; maintaining order in the chronological narration; understanding the relevance of long-term processes; seeking interactions between

structures, events and personalities; contrasting the discourses and practices of different social actors; noting the importance of the perceptions, achievements and even mistakes of patients, faith healers and housewives; making intelligent use of the various sources of information; and being sceptical and critical of politicians' discourses.

Epidemics do not merely magnify biology's intimate link to society. Under the historian's lens, epidemics have also revealed recurrent human problems such as the connection between disinformation, disorder and panic; short-term attention devoted to health problems; the virtues or failings of political leadership; the destructive role of paranoid personalities in power, and the stigmatization and blaming of epidemic victims. Many scholars of the past have also stressed the importance of solidarity as one of the most important human values that is reaffirmed in times of affliction and social suffering. Another problem analyzed by health historians is the dearth of human health resources. Researchers, health advocates, scientists and public-sector physicians have long dealt with insecurity, the erosion of group identity and overwork, leaving little time for one of the main functions of their jobs: long-term prevention.

Prevention and research are tasks in which our institution, the Fundação Oswaldo Cruz (Fiocruz), has distinguished itself for decades. This issue of *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos* is going to press as Fiocruz celebrates its one hundred and twentieth anniversary, and it contains a Dossier prepared by leading members of the Departamento de Patrimônio Histórico (Department of Historic Heritage) of the Casa de Oswaldo Cruz, scholars and specialists in the invaluable tasks of restoring and preserving the cultural heritage related to science and public health. The authors of the Dossier discuss one of the symbols of Fiocruz: the castle or "Moorish Pavilion," built between 1905 and 1918. Not only is it an unusual and dazzling example of an architectural style, it is also a symbol of scientific research in Brazil. I also wish to point out that this issue features a timely and important article by the Mexican historian América Molina on remedies and medical prescriptions during the influenza epidemic in Mexico in 1918, a topic and perspective highly relevant to the context of the pandemic we are now experiencing.

Furthermore, this issue is important because it announces an online activity. A few weeks ago, the *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos* blog launched an initiative for historians to write on the current pandemic either with reference to their cities, states, countries, or on any aspect of the coronavirus they deem relevant. One of the goals of this project is to record events and ideas in Brazil and other Latin American countries as well as presenting reflections on the relationship of medicine to politics that do not always receive the attention they deserve in social media communications. This initiative complements the project titled "Covid-19 o olhar dos historiadores da Fiocruz" (Covid-19 through the eyes of Fiocruz historians), a valuable endeavor of the Departamento de Pesquisa em História das Ciências da Saúde (Department of Research into the History of Health Sciences) at the Casa de Oswaldo Cruz.

The first texts published on the journal's blog under the title "History and coronavirus" (Borowy, 4 maio 2020; Berlivet, Löwy, 29 abr. 2020; Lossio, 29 abr. 2020; Ramacciotti, 28 abr. 2020; Souza, 22 abr. 2020; Chauca, 20 abr. 2020; Delgado, 18 abr. 2020; Drinot, 16 abr.

2020; Mota, 16 abr. 2020) were compiled thanks to the excellent work of the journalists Marina Lemle and Vivian Mannheimer. As readers of this journal will see, these texts are a valuable contribution to thinking about the complex facets of health crises, both current and past. They are a rich archive of data, ideas and interpretations that will doubtless expand our images of the past, which are necessary in order to understand the present better and to imagine a different future.

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