

# Editorial Introduction: Living Under the Shadow of Epidemic Diseases

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*We didn't know the pleasures of union,  
when we didn't suffer the pain of separation,  
When not sick, man does not know the value of health*  
Lady Fitnat (Çeçen, 1996: 347)

Epidemics like plague, cholera, smallpox, and malaria had an intense effect on history for centuries and human adventure has proceeded under their course. Thousands, even millions of people died during epidemics. In the course of history at least "three plagues, seven cholera and more than 10 flu pandemics plus the epidemic we are experiencing today" (Kılıç, 2020: 15) have emerged.

Arguably it is obvious that the impact of diseases and especially epidemic diseases cannot be considered only from a medical perspective. These actually affect all areas of our life and our entire world. For this reason, these effects cover all fields of human life; from painting to literature, from philosophy to sociology, from psychology to education, from economy to architecture, life, art, culture, politics, and the world of work. Therefore, it can be said that effects of diseases and especially epidemics are felt in the most visible areas and also in the most remote corners of our world of thoughts and actions. These diseases determine not only the past and the moment, but also the future. One can say that epidemics often constitute a "breaking point" in the shaping of history.

For centuries, humans have sought cures for these diseases, as they do today, and sometimes developed medical methods for this; sometimes they turned to plants, folk medicine and even ores as a remedy. Humans sought help even from magic, enchantment and superstitions. One of the first remedies that comes to mind when it comes to epidemic disease is the quarantine, as a first response and praxis that has been used in almost every age. The history of religions show that:

In the Old Testament it is said that due to the outbreak of plague in the army after a war, soldiers were ordered to stay outside the camp for seven days, clean their bodies, clothes and other belongings, clean up all fireproof metal goods with fire. Only after that they were allowed to enter the camp on the seventh day before washing their clothes again. (Sarıyıldız, 2001: 463)

This practice, which is also mentioned in religious traditions, has a wide place in Islamic history. It has been stated that people who suffered from epidemic diseases during the period of Muhammad and the caliphs should be separated from others, that is, isolated (Sarıyıldız, 2001: 463). Historical sources say, "that the Prophet ordered those who heard that there was a plague in a place not to enter it and not to leave if it occurs where they are" (Sarıyıldız, 2001: 463).

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The greatest epidemics during the Ottoman period, were the plague and cholera epidemics. On the other hand, periods when the plague is seen in the world are generally divided into three phases: 6th to 8th centuries (Justinian Plague); 14th to 19th century (Black Death); 19th and 20th centuries (Bombay Plague) (Varlık, 2011: 176). Cholera, on the other hand, is a more recent disease than the plague, and it began to be seen in the 19th century (Kılıç, 2020: 26), and it continued to be effective in Ottoman cities especially in Erzurum, Kars, Muş, Trabzon and Istanbul (Yılmaz, 2017: 36-50). We see the effect of epidemic diseases on architectural design mostly in the construction of hospitals. For example, sources report that even detached hospitals were built in Istanbul during the cholera epidemic (Sarı, 2012: 104). In addition, the Maiden's Tower, which we use for touristic purposes today, was also used as a hospital (Sarı, 2012: 104).

We can follow closely from the literature how outbreaks affected communities and masses. For this reason, it is seen that elements related to diseases are used a lot, and even individual treatises and works have been written on cholera and the plague, especially when we look at the topics covered during or after epidemic diseases. Indeed, a cursory observation of texts is enough in order to see how epidemics have changed people and cultures both in the past and today. They reflect like a mirror the sorrow, grief and pain we suffer, the pain experienced and the patience shown. For example, in the following verse, Gelibolulu Mustafa (d. 1600) expresses the situation caused by the plague and states that this disease caused thousands of deaths:

Since the hot wind was the guiding light of the plague fever,  
The torrent of adversity and suffering has brought thousands to the ground.  
(Öztürk, 2020: 138)

As another example, a letter from Cenab Şahabeddin (d. 1934), one of the prominent figures of *Servet-i Fünun* literature, can be given. In the mentioned letter of the poet, the following sentences bear witness to how he contracted the Spanish flu and how he writhed in fever:

Dear Colleague, Sir, I am writing this letter to you with thirty-nine degrees of fever. For a long time my eyes were like closed, due to conjunctivitis. That is why I could not attend the last three executive meetings of the Conservatory and Theatre. I was going to accept the invitation last week, but to that I also could not attend. I have been spending this week since Sunday with forty degrees of high fever: It is the *grippe*, but not some freshwater flu. I couldn't examine the report well, but I think it is the Spanish flu! In any case, it is a awful thing. It should not have penetrated my lungs... (Demirel, 2019: 133)

We are experiencing a new epidemic in the 21st century. The Covid-19 Pandemic, which emerges widely and affects not only a single country or a continent, but the whole world, has affected our life, education, psychology, working life, our use of public spaces, in short, everything without exception. For this reason, it would not be a mistake to state that the whole world is struggling to survive under its grip.

Epidemic means sickness; it means treatment, death, pain, suffering, it means psychological breakdown, inability to come close to loved ones, being unable to leave the house. However, no matter how long it lasts and how strong its effect is, it will not last forever. All that needs to be done is to act decisively, consciously, to protect ourselves and the people around us, and to adapt our life to a new order – at least for a while. The difficulties will become easier and less effective if we act together. Because *if there is life, there is always hope*.

In this context, the issue of hope and despair becomes even more pronounced, especially in times of epidemic, disaster and war, in short, when the distinction between life and death is tied by a thin thread. The issue becomes a matter of existential crisis. As Kierkegaard puts it: "The despaired wants to be himself in his despair." (Kierkegaard, 2010: 28) Especially in such times of crisis (but not only then), hope and despair confront individuals with themselves, bringing them face to face with the issue of being and not being. At this point, Kierkegaard's striking analysis is extremely helpful:



This is the disease of despair, the "deadly disease" of the I. The hopeless person is a terminally ill one. More than any other disease, this disease attacks the most respected essence of being; but man does not die because of this. Here, death is not the end of the illness, it is an endless end. Even death cannot cure us from this disease, because the sickness and ... death that comes with its pain here is being not able to die. This is the state of despair. (Kierkegaard, 2010: 29)

In this respect, existence becomes inability to die. Kierkegaard wants to bring the necessary abstraction of thinking back to the concrete self-experience of the subject. What is essential here is to see the human as a relationship: a relationship that relates itself to itself. Thus, one can be free in determining herself. She is a synthesis: She is a synthesis of ideality and reality, finitude and infinity, necessity and possibility. She is the ability to exist, the possibility to exist. Therefore, she is it who decides the realization of her possibilities. The subject's awareness of her own uniqueness and one-timeness is achieved through existentially expressive self-experiences such as hopelessness, anxiety and guilt.

On the other hand, the philosophy of existence has become an existentialism, but it is not limited to philosophy and has shown itself especially in literature and art. Written in France, Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 2011) has great importance as a phenomenological ontology in this context. According to Sartre, the existence of a human being contains a negation within itself: She is such a being that she is what she is not herself, she is not what she is. In other words, she designs himself beyond the given, oriented towards the future. She makes the future present. That is, she is essentially determined by her own possibilities. The human being is the one that has not happened yet but can be due to its future projection (Sartre, 2011: 197). But it is also what it is in fact, because it is determined by what happened to it. In other words, human being's constitution is freedom. Because of this, human beings can construct whatever will happen, based on their own possibilities. For Sartre, a human being has no given essence. Therefore, a human being determines her own essence thanks to her own existence. That is, she first exists, encounters herself, manifests herself in the world and then defines herself.

In this context, periods of epidemic, disease and war confront people with the fragility and temporality of their own future. And this current year has been precisely such a period, due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

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