

“Infectious diseases aren’t just something from the past”



Interview with Mark Honigsbaum by Lubna Shaheen Abdul Parveen and edited by Júlia Massó

Mark Honigsbaum is a writer and journalist specialising in the history and science of infectious disease and a regular contributor to *The Observer* and *The Lancet*. Alongside writing for popular audiences, he is a medical historian whose articles have been published in *Medical History*, the *Social History of Medicine* and the *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*. Prior to becoming an academic researcher, he enjoyed a long career as an investigative reporter and feature writer at newspapers such as the *Evening Standard*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *The Observer* and *The Guardian*. He currently podcasts at *Going Viral* and produces animations for museums and web-based educational platforms, such as the TED-ED.

During the 11th edition of the Spring School on History of Science and Popularisation organised by SCHCT and IME, the SCHCT interviewed him about his work and science communication.

The goal of the 11th edition of the Spring school was to tackle the challenges of epidemics and infectious disease under the title “Pandemic pasts, pandemic futures. Sources, histories, imaginations”. Mark, can you briefly summarise the oral presentation you gave?

First, the theme of this conference is Pandemic Pasts, Pandemics Future. Historians, by definition, study the past; we are not often asked to discuss the future. Indeed, most medical historians don’t like being asked “what lessons should we learn from this pandemic?”. We resist giving lessons, though, as medical historians, we do sometimes write prescriptions! One interesting thing about this pandemic is the way it has challenged medical historians to interrogate their research questions and methodologies. What we have seen during this pandemic is a confirmation of a lot of things we have seen in other pandemics. So, pandemics

act as natural experiments that reveal underlying social pathologies and disparities of health. They make evident the social and political crises that are always there beneath the surface.

Also, during your presentation you mentioned your new book *The Pandemic Century: One Hundred Years of Panic, Hysteria, and Hubris*. Can you tell us about it?

The presentation I gave besides following this theme focuses on a book I wrote, *The Pandemic Century*, which examined nine pandemics of the modern period - ten if you include the chapter on Covid I added in the paperback edition. One thing I have learned living through Covid is that pandemics are not just transient moments in history but events whose impacts can span epochs. What's extraordinary about Covid-19 is it has affected the whole world at the same time and it has been followed on social and other media in real time. Other pandemics, such as the 1918-1919 Spanish Influenza, were also universal global events but the difference is that in 1918 many people didn't realise that they were in the midst of the pandemic because it wasn't widely reported and there was very little medical messaging.

How is a new emerging disease recognised?

A pandemic is both an epidemiological concept and a political construct. We saw that clearly at the start of Covid-19 when a lot of epidemiologists, but more particularly virologists, were saying this is a new pathogen that has never been seen before, and nobody has immunity to it. So, in those circumstances we know that this disease could spread very widely and become pandemic. But it took a long time for the World Health Organisation to formally recognize that Covid-19 was a pandemic disease.

Since there is a gap between science and science communication, how can it be improved? Given the fact that people even consider scientific facts as an "opinion", what can we do to communicate better with them about such important topics such as diseases and pandemics, while avoiding all these conflicts we are facing?

Well, you must distinguish between people who believe in conspiracy theories and people who do not. The first ones cannot be convinced. There's a film called *The Matrix* that everyone thinks that they are living in a real world because they haven't taken the pill that reveals that they are actually living in a simulation. Conspiracy theorists think that we are the crazy ones, that science is a lie, so.... you can't reach those people. But you can reach people who are open to information. For example, they are not sure about vaccines, they are a little hesitant, but they want to understand science and make an informed judgement.

So, I think the issue is translating complicated scientific knowledge into a language that ordinary people can understand and are familiar with. Also, you need to address the concerns about inequalities because a lot of the mistrust of science is a result of their own personal experiences of accessing health care. So, the best thing scientists can do is to be transparent. They need to be sure about the studies that prove certain theories, but at the same time be transparent about what they don't know. So, for instance, we don't know when we give you a vaccine for Covid if it will stop you transmitting the disease or not and hence whether it will be possible to achieve herd immunity.

Finally, what do you think about the Lazaretto of Mahon?

I'm thrilled to be here! This is one of the most wonderful conferences I have ever been to because it's in this historical building, a very special and unusual space. In fact, I am ashamed to say that until I was invited to this conference, I didn't know about this Lazaretto. I did know about the famous Lazaretto in Venice.

What is the first thing that catches your eye?

If we focus on the infrastructure of the Lazaretto of Mahon, it tells us that it had an organised and rational system of quarantine. But at the same time this is clearly a sort of prison. There are large walls, there's not much to do, it must be very cold and difficult in the winter when the wind is howling. So, I think that these walls have so many stories and these stories have been very quickly lost and forgotten. I am very interested to find out more about the stories of people who lived here and how they spend their time... What this really tells me is that there is so much we are ignorant of about how people in previous periods or history dealt with infectious diseases. We all just had a massive wake up call that those infectious diseases aren't just something of the past.