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## PANDEMICA

Sometime in 1779 Captain James Cook looked out over the deck of his ship, the HMS *Resolution*, and thought he saw green shoots. These were not those associated with the start of modern economic recovery. Rather, they were an integral part of what turned out to be the third and last voyage he was to take in search of the fabled Northwest Passage.

Indigenous peoples, unknown to the western world before his visit, appeared to form a weaving, moving circle around one another. They then engaged in a series of complex dances, and went on to march in a vibrant and colorful procession during what was later identified as a seasonal celebration and harvest festival. Cook had accidentally encountered the largest of the Hawaiian Islands, and social scientists still debate whether the captain and his men were mistaken for deities in this first of a sequence of contacts. What is more certain is that if he and his crew were initially welcome, a return to the same spot some weeks after the festival in order to repair the ship's masts brought only harsh antagonisms and misunderstandings that resulted in his violent death, and that of four members of his crew as well. .

Equally certain is that Cook was himself an expert cartographer and much given to the collection of facts about both land and sea. In this he appears to have applied a contemporary need to characterize the experience of exploration and discovery through quantification. Rather than offer a waiting Western world copious accounts based on impressions or imaginary tales, he relied on the exact charts, figures, and units, that were a necessary part of his skilled occupation. It is primarily for this reason that Cook's description of the native Hawaiians as a "healthy lot" referred not only to their physical stature or anthropomorphy, but also to the amount of 100,000, at least at first numerical estimate.

Cook was, in fact, a person closely tied to an era of emergent science, caught somewhere between the past's use of accurate description to record events surrounding contacts among previously isolated peoples, and our modern era's ability to combine the description and quantification of these contacts with the prevention of their often damaging effects.

Cook had been born in the countryside, but moved at an early age to a port city where he developed a rising fascination with the ocean and an ability to translate that fascination into a life as a distinguished mariner and explorer. He was probably aware of ancient sea voyages that accompanied migrations and devastating wars in the Classical World --though not necessarily of what had actually occurred as a result of critical encounters. One of these consequences was a drastic shift in population that accompanied migrations from war-torn cities, followed by a return to urban areas as an increasing number sought refuge. A decline in population then ensued as the incidence of diseases unknown before in both cities and rural regions arose and quickly spread. Plague, a general term for what is now believed to be a series of

separate illnesses, was noted to have begun with "violent heats" and a desperate search for safe, cool water baths. Shortly thereafter a deep hoarseness set in, then a rasping cough, and finally, a gross inflammation of the tongue, blisters on the skin, and after 7-9 days, despondency and death.

Confusion was everywhere. As during the later European Plague year of 1349-1350, those who survived inexplicably appeared to have survived again during a reoccurrence of the disease several years later. Those who aimed at helping the sick fell ill in spite of their benevolent acts. Those who had seemed the most sociable of people in their communities were subject to scorn and to isolation, and those who were widely known to have been corrupt emerged unscathed while the innocent sought out a hiding place but found little escape. The existence of micro-organisms and disease vectors were unrecognized, so that beliefs about the cause of illness took a diversified trajectory, from a vengeful God's wrath to a popular reliance on well water that had been somehow altered, or poisoned, either by witches or invading armies. Lawlessness prevailed; rigidified social hierarchies were quickly leveled, and distinctions between wealthy and poor fell apart.

On the one hand, there was a remaining population that now seemed to live for the moment. Free of sanctions it engaged in the pleasures of a day to day existence. On the other hand, as the extent of the ill declined and life resumed some of its normative outlines, there was the beginning of more conservative beliefs and behaviors, a return to fundamentalist religion and to faith in the clergy, along with a hope that the citizenry would follow God's ways a great deal better in the future. The ancient science of medicine and medical history was, however, not really directed at social analysis or disease prediction. Nor was it designed to find definitive causes or develop preventative measures. Its major purpose was to describe in as much detail as was possible the course of the illness in both its clinical and social aspects so as to be better able to recognize its reemergence.

Captain Cook never lived to see the ancient patterns reactivated in the previously isolated islands he came upon on his way to another part of the world. It was the missionaries who came after, equally imbued with quantitative energy, who eventually recorded a draconian population decline of from what was determined to be an original number of 242,000 to just under 57,000 a century later. The Hawaiian depopulation only increased as religious figures were supplemented by additional outsiders, including sailors, adventurers, traders, and a host of entrepreneurial offshoots of the California Gold Rush that had crossed the Pacific from the West.

Plague, as it was then conceived, recalled a vivid but appalling past usage, being a vague, inexact, and inclusive term, a mixture of unlinked, devastating illnesses. First, on the outer edge of the Archipelago, there appeared what was later deemed a strenuous gastrointestinal disease. Then, in rapid succession, came venereal symptoms, whooping cough, measles, and the much feared smallpox, for which a vaccination was available in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but to which only a very few had access. The Hawaiians rushed to appease the Gods with appeals and sacrifices. Some, at least for a short time, sought a plausible explanation for their decline in the arrival of diverse groups of outsiders and demanded that all be kept on board the newly moored ships. .

Missionaries and others from the West were not so sure as to a general cause and succeeded in reaching the Archipelago in ever greater numbers. They held that

decline, despair, and disease was rooted in the native people's own social practices—a rank lack of celibacy, long trips on the sea away from home, failure to develop a prudent work ethic and a frugal way of life, all these, more consequence than causation, were offered as explanatory devices. Even the most devout admitted they were growing increasingly incapable of dealing with the staggering bundle of burning "fevers" and intractable "asthmas" that appeared to have become embedded in the shrinking population they had once sought to uplift.

Contemporary approaches to epidemics include public health service delivery systems, vaccinations, along with the promise of newer and more effective ones just over the horizon, and an arsenal of understandings about immune responses, patterns of contagion, and the cross-species transference of mutated viruses. Debates today are not only centered around the pace and potential geographic spread of a specific strain, but also around questions about whether and when a disease event should be considered a true pandemic, a definition based largely on the exact number of individuals global data collection agencies ascertain have been affected. Recent predictions of a pandemic derived from the spread of the H1N1 swine flu virus have also been clarified by critiques of overestimation and anxiety-provoking statements that predicted millions of sufferers across the international landscape, though the accuracy of record-keeping swiftly reduced the actual number to below 5,000. (2)

The sky may not be falling just yet. Now and then, however, darkening clouds manage to move a bit closer nonetheless. Insulating strategies are immediately announced. Those who suspect or fear an onset of deadly infection wear masks, a form of self-isolation that both hides individual identity and acts to avoid public suspicion. There is a heightened awareness to the human and natural environment, and a lingering sense of dread. With all of its ability to reduce the presentation of epidemic disease to a series of numbers and letters, science has not completely extricated itself from our, and everybody else's, history.

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(1) See Longrigg, James. "Epidemic, Ideas, and Classical Athenian Society." (Pp. 21-44). and Crosby, A.W. "Hawaiian Depopulation As A Model For The Amerindian Experience." (Pp.175-202. In.Ranger, Terence and Paul Slack (eds.) Epidemics and Ideas:Essays on The Historical Perception of Pestilence. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. (1995) (2) Zakaria, Fareed. "The Sky Isn't Falling." Newsweek, May 16,2009.