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THE MUNICIPALITY OF PARIS CONFRONTS THE PLAGUE OF 1668

In the 1660s the bubonic plague, quiescent for a decade, once more returned in force to western Europe. Along with the great epidemic of 1665 in London, there was pestilence in the United Provinces and in Normandy and Picardy. In 1668 Paris heard reports of plague at Soissons and Amiens; by July the port of Rouen, downstream from the capital along the Seine, was stricken. As the epidemic threatened commercial routes to Paris, the authorities there put into motion traditional measures designed to restrict communication with afflicted communities. The safety of Paris—a capital numbering nearly one-half million and potentially a point of convergence for persons or merchandise carrying plague—was at stake.¹

A variety of officials enforced regulations against pestilence, among them the minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the Parlement of Paris, and the municipality. The outbreak of an epidemic in the spring of 1668 prompted the Parlement (fundamentally a high court of law that occasionally legislated) to restrict commerce entering or leaving Soissons and Amiens. Guided by Colbert and the Six Merchant Guilds² of Paris, the Parlement agreed to restrict trade between Paris and Rouen, too. Its decree of 27 August forbade transport of goods by land between the two cities. As for river traffic, all boats were to sail upstream to Mantes to be unloaded so that goods 'susceptible to bad air' be ventilated and remain in quarantine at least forty days.³ Merchandise considered safe was to proceed, apparently with less delay, to Paris in other boats manned by persons other than those that had set out from Rouen. Soon the Parlement defined relatively harmless products to include cattle, tin, lead, and cheese.⁴

The 27 August decree forbade passengers en route to Paris to proceed to the city till after quarantine in places chosen by *conseils de santé*, health councils, along the Rouen-Paris route. To supervise enforcement of its order and choose a spot for airing merchandise bound for Paris, the Parlement relied on the municipality of Paris. The court sent as its delegate to Mantes, roughly fifty miles downstream, the Parisian *échevin* Jacques Belin and entrusted to the magistrate substantial powers.

The municipality—lodged at the Hôtel de Ville and led by a *prévôt* of merchants and four *échevins*, or aldermen—did not lack qualifications for this mission. It was familiar with sanitary conditions within the city and knew the river system leading to Paris. In fact, the municipality exercised authority over navigation on the Seine and several tributaries, as well as jurisdiction over river commerce bound for Paris.

In the meantime, the municipality had already become deeply concerned with what seemed to be a local crisis. A visitor from Amiens, a stricken town, had become fatally ill in Paris. Fearing an outbreak of plague, the *prévôt* of merchants located a residence

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in the Faubourg Saint-Germain suitable to quarantine persons who had visited the deceased. The municipality also directed *quartiniers*, subalterns assigned to the several *quartiers* of Paris, to find out where guests of inns had come from; owners were to house no one from Amiens or any other afflicted area.

Fortunately no pestilence appeared during the quarantine period. But the municipality's action did prompt another in a series of traditional quarrels between the Hôtel de Ville and the Châtelet, the royal magistracy in the capital headed by Nicolas de La Reynie, lieutenant of police. On the day that confined persons were scheduled to be released, an *échevin* arrived at the quarantine residence for that purpose, only to find that La Reynie had effected the release five hours earlier. The municipal registers did not fail to note that the Châtelet's action was base ingratitude: the magistrates who had contributed their time and 'the goods and revenues of the city' to combat pestilence had been humiliated by a rival.⁵ A preoccupation with preserving or augmenting one's jurisdiction, rather than fundamental differences of policy, is the more likely explanation for such quarrels. As events will show, only a few months later the *prévôt* of merchants outflanked the Châtelet in an almost equally petty dispute taken on appeal to the Parlement.

Once the Parlement had issued the 27 August decree, the Hôtel de Ville was determined to enforce it. The city magistrates ordered a thorough investigation to discover what goods had come from Rouen to Paris during the previous week. On 1 September the *échevin* Belin went to Mantes as instructed by the high court. His task was to visit areas within the Parlement's jurisdiction to establish health councils and assemble royal officials, mayors, and local *échevins* for deliberation on means of preventing communication with Rouen. Belin was also empowered to issue orders to local authorities. The Parisian magistrate spent several busy weeks at Mantes and other towns in the vicinity.

At Mantes Belin ordered establishment of a health council, to include the mayor and *échevins* and some persons chosen by a local assembly. He instructed the *maître des ponts* at Mantes, a river official serving the Paris municipality, to let no boat laden with merchandise pass without approval. Merchants sailing from the Rouen area were to unload their craft and air the contents. Belin told the health council to oversee commerce with Rouen and issue necessary orders. As Belin needed a location on the Seine below Mantes for unloading goods from Rouen and for stationing guards to halt river traffic, officials found a suitable quarantine island close to town. The plan was to require carriers from Rouen to unload and remain there with their wares during the quarantine period. On the other hand, merchants contending that their shipments were safe could present their case to Belin or his delegate for a decision.⁶

Belin continued his inspection trip, issuing orders to supplement the Parlement's. In one town he directed some persons to stand guard on the banks of the quarantine island in order to let no one pass. Returning to Mantes, he informed the health council that it needed a guard under the bridge to prevent boatmen from passing without showing health certificates for their passengers and proper documents for merchandise on board. It was necessary, too, to watch for 'pigeons, chickens . . . and other animals' deemed unsanitary.⁷ At Magny, Meulan, and Poissy, also, the *échevin* ordered the formation of health councils.

Belin's report shows that the authorities were much preoccupied with forbidding indiscriminate traffic and requiring travellers to enter towns only by main roads. To this effect they devised roadblock systems. At Poissy it was necessary to close all gates but two and repair the town walls. The courier from Rouen to Paris was entering Magny, where he left mail for another courier to dispatch to the capital. Belin forbade that, ordering the first courier to avoid Magny, drop the packets elsewhere and pass them through fire before the Paris-bound messenger intercepted them. And on a return trip to Poissy the *échevin*, discovering that a baker had refused to remove hogs from his house, fined the miscreant ten livres.⁸

The jurisdiction of the municipality over plague prevention was hardly exclusive. On 31 October, a month after Belin's mission terminated, the royal Council of State forbade trade between Dieppe and Paris on account of an outbreak of pestilence at Dieppe, but it directed the Châtelet to enforce the prohibition. Early in December a Châtelet official bound for Rouen was instructed to oversee the airing of goods destined for Paris by land or water. (The general rule was that the Châtelet regulated only commerce coming to Paris by land.) The new site rendered unnecessary the quarantine established at Mantes several months earlier. In February 1669 the Council again intervened—this time to reinstate commerce with Amiens, now that pestilence had evidently subsided there; but it ordered merchandise aired and commissioned a Châtelet official to supervise the process.⁹

As the Parlement's delegate, Belin had diligently taken charge of everything from supervision of boat traffic to sanitation in the home. The municipality had certain qualifications for such a mission—a knowledge of major waterways to Paris, the commerce they carried, and the mariners travelling those routes. In theory the rule was that river traffic along the Seine and tributaries fell under the Hôtel de Ville's jurisdiction. But when the Council of State ordered the Châtelet to supervise both land and water traffic at Rouen, it demonstrated that lines of demarcation between the authority of one Parisian magistracy and that of another were hazy. These incidents may well reflect the monarchy's great confidence in the Châtelet and, in particular, Colbert's confidence in an institution headed by La Reynie.¹⁰ But if the Châtelet got support from the Council in this instance, the municipality soon won a favourable reception in the Parlement when the *prévôt* of merchants defended his prerogatives against alleged obstruction on the part of the Châtelet and the Six Merchant Guilds.

The Parlement customarily called upon the municipality for advice. In December 1668 the court wanted to know whether, in view of the plague, the Saint-Germain trade fair ought to be held. There was still some contagion in neighbouring towns that shipped merchandise to the fair in the Paris metropolitan area. The *prévôt* of merchants ordered the Six Merchant Guilds to assemble and send delegates from each guild to the Hôtel de Ville on the following Saturday to advise the magistrates what to tell the Parlement. Saturday came but the guildsmen did not. Then the municipality directed them to come Monday. Again the guilds refused—on the ground that La Reynie had forbidden them to appear at the Hôtel de Ville.¹¹ No doubt the obstreperous guilds were delighted to obey the Châtelet in this instance; it provided them an opportunity to embarrass the city magistrates.

The *prévôt* of merchants and *échevins* were indignant, of course. They cited the

municipal registers and a list of precedents to justify themselves and prove that the merchant guilds had always come to the Hôtel de Ville to advise on commercial questions. They contended that the guilds 'hold their rank, their coats-of-arms and their livery only under authorization from the municipality.' By every sort of documentary evidence the guilds were 'compelled to obey us', the city magistrates said.¹² They pointed out that in 1567, for example, the king had ordered the magistrates to assemble one of the Six Guilds to seek its advice on a certain tax. After compiling a historical essay on the guilds' duties, the city ordered them to appear the following Friday.

The Six Merchant Guilds appealed their case to the Parlement, which decided it with unwonted speed. The merchants recalled that once the Hôtel de Ville had ordered their appearance, their 'natural judge', the Châtelet, had summoned them before its tribunal. To the guilds this was a matter of *police générale* subject to the Châtelet's authority; the municipality's action was simply encroachment. When Claude Le Pelletier, *prévôt* of merchants, replied, the municipality's interests were 'never sustained with more vigour and eloquence', the registers say.¹³ After hearing all parties, the Parlement upheld the Hôtel de Ville and ordered the guilds to send representatives to testify.

At last, on 10 January, the guildsmen came to the Hôtel de Ville and advised prohibition of the fair on the ground that the major portion of goods was bound to come from afflicted areas. In his turn the *prévôt* of merchants advised the Parlement to permit the Saint-Germain fair!¹⁴

During the first week of the fair, the municipality admitted, merchants sold textiles (a source of contagion); but the rest of their sales consisted of merchandise from Parisian shops or safe goods from outside of Paris. The Hôtel de Ville said it opposed reducing to dire necessity artisans who manufactured woollens by forbidding the sale of their products. Better than trying to stamp out illegal commerce, which they expected in any case, the city magistrates much preferred a legal trade subject to precautions against contagion.

In the light of the seriousness of the plague, the quarrel over the guilds' appearance at the Hôtel de Ville had little substance beyond the need to express self-esteem. But when the guilds finally spoke, they stood on the side of caution, while the city magistrates reflected the discontent of tradesmen stemming from plague restrictions. Even the highly influential Colbert was hesitant to impose an embargo for fear of its impact on commerce and the expected hostility of the artisans. But since there was a certain consensus on means of confining pestilence, confirmed by time-honoured regulations, the rivalries among the Parisian authorities apparently did not paralyse official action. In fact, the Parlement and the Hôtel de Ville co-operated—even if the monarchy preferred to rely on the more powerful and increasingly prestigious royal magistracy, the Châtelet. Equally important, the central authorities, particularly Colbert and the Parlement, enforced regulations more effectively than could a multitude of local officials in earlier centuries.¹⁵ As for Belin, he was part of a Parisian magistracy partially responsible for dealing with sanitation and air and water pollution, and at the same time the Parlement's instrument in enforcing blockades and quarantines in communities close to Paris; his particular task was to isolate Paris from the deadly epidemic at Rouen and elsewhere. It is reasonable to suppose that the efforts (however

medically uninformed) of the municipality, the Châtelet, and the central authorities contributed to the end result. Paris was safe from plague.

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1. Bubonic plague is carried by rodents and fleas, but once pulmonary complications set in, it is directly transmitted from one person to another. These complications seem to originate in such conditions as undernourishment, uncleanliness, and a cold, damp climate. Commercial routes were particularly vulnerable, since textiles in bolts were a haven for rats, and fleas abounded in junk dealers' shipments. After being infected, commercial or military travellers menaced the towns they approached. Thus the regulations calling for blockades had merit. See Jacques Revel, 'Autour d'une épidémie ancienne: la peste de 1666-1670'. *Rev. Hist. mod. contemp.*, 1970, 17, 956-57, 960. Contemporary opinion stressed the danger of 'bad air' and held that persons or objects exposed to pestilence must be aired and 'perfumed'. Perfumers swept the sick person's residence, placed in each room hay soaked with vinegar, and added perfume. Earth was put on the floor to prevent fire. The perfumers shut the windows and ignited the perfume. Afterwards the house was aired, and perfumers had to go into seclusion for nine days to determine that they had not contracted plague. Such measures were designed to purify a stricken area. But, to segregate a healthy town from a stricken community, the Parlement of Paris usually ruled that *conseils de santé* be established in every town near the plague route, that the councils blockade main roads in stricken localities 'to prevent anyone . . . from entering the unaffected places before being perfumed and quarantined.' When someone travelled, he had to follow main roads and show health certificates, *billets de santé*, to guards at towns he entered in order to certify that he had come from a safe place or had submitted to quarantine. When an infected town lacked food, it was permissible to transport provisions within 300 paces of the community; money received in return was to be cast into vinegar and boiling water. (Nicolas Delamare, *Traité de la Police*, Paris, Michel Brunet, 1719-38, vol. 1, pp. 668-69.)
2. The six were the drapers, grocer-apothecaries, haberdashers, furriers, hatters, and goldsmiths. The most important of their members were powerful businessmen accustomed to advise on Parisian commerce and assist at *entrées* of dignitaries into the capital. As for commercial regulations, Colbert asked for delay in publishing the decree restricting trade with Amiens: the workers there, he thought, would be reduced to penury if trade with Paris and other communities were cut. (Pierre Clément (ed.), *Lettres, Instructions, et Mémoires de Colbert*, Paris, Imprimerie Impériale, 1861-82, vol. 2, p. 442.) City officials at Amiens had misled Colbert, for merchants or local authorities often opposed trade prohibitions. The clash between mercantile and hygienic considerations is evident even in Colbert's policies. The minister was often quick to declare an area safe, thus open to commerce, and hesitant to impose restrictions. Nevertheless, in collaboration with Harlay in the Parlement, Colbert played a central role in gathering information and suggesting measures for the Parlement to enact to restrict the plague. (Revel, *op. cit.*, pp. 966, 971-72.)
3. Delamare, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 673.
4. Archives nationales, H 1821, fols. 58-59; hereafter cited as AN.
5. AN, H 1820, 496-500 (July 1668); H 1821, 9 (August 1668).
6. AN, H 1821, 17-28.
7. *Ibid.*, 29.
8. *Ibid.*, 40, 65-66. When regulations were followed, one carried letters from a stricken town a hundred paces beyond its limits, where a messenger grasped the packet by means of a long pole with an iron hook at the end. Then the letters were aired and passed through cannon-powder smoke. The messenger got a certificate of the *évent*, or airing, and, on arriving at his destination, stopped outside of town to present that

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document to the officer in charge. Then letters were distributed to addressees. (Delamere, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 668–69).

9. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 675–78.
10. La Reynie had considerable authority over health and sanitation and enforced measures against plague in the capital. Since jurisdictional confusion and duplication were normal, it is scarcely surprising that the monarchy chose Châtelet officials for some special missions. If any Paris magistracy had the prestige necessary for dealing with recalcitrant local officials and merchants, it was La Reynie's.
11. AN, H 1821, 299–301, 322–23.
12. *Ibid.*, 323–24.
13. *Ibid.*, 329–30, 334.
14. *Ibid.*, 335–40.
15. Revel, *op. cit.*, p. 965.

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HISTORICAL METHOD AND THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF MEDICINE

The Society for the Social History of Medicine set themselves an ambitious task in fostering a new field of study, the scope and purposes of which are difficult to define. In his Inaugural Lecture to the Society, Professor Thomas McKeown presented a personal definition of this field and gave some examples of subjects that could profitably be studied by attempting to write 'medical history with the public interest put in'.¹ This definition and its implications raise matters of great concern to the social historian. The purpose of this essay is to elaborate these concerns in the hope of stimulating further discussion of the problems involved.

According to Professor McKeown;

the social history of medicine is much more than a blend of social history and medical history, more than medical developments seen in the context of the period; it is essentially an *operational approach which takes its terms of reference from difficulties confronting medicine in the present day*. It is the lack of such insight, derived from contemporary experience, which makes a good deal of medical history so sterile for the uninitiated.²

It is regrettably true that until recently, much medical history was indeed sterile. To a historian, most of it was mere antiquarianism, relieved by hagiographies of outstanding physicians. Happily, this situation has changed considerably in recent years, and there are now several works which can profitably be used by the social historian who wishes to investigate the place of medicine in a given society. Surely the chief task of social historians of medicine is to provide more of the broad interpretive studies presently lacking.

Professor McKeown proposes a strikingly different task. According to him, the only social history worth pursuing—which will be neither sterile nor esoteric—is one which '... takes its terms of reference from difficulties confronting medicine in the present day'.³ Clearly his basic purpose is not to understand the past, but to provide necessary information for reforming present evils. This purpose is unhistorical. It has little to do with the study of history as understood by historians, whether they be interested primarily in diplomatic, constitutional, economic or social history. Most historians would admit to being some combination of artist, chronicler, detective and assessor: none should call himself a social planner.