

Francesco Dandolo, Idamaria Fusco, Gaetano Sabatini (eds.), *Le epidemie nella storia di Napoli*, Editoriale Scientifica, Napoli, 2024, pp. XXXVI-458.

The volume, edited by Francesco Dandolo, Idamaria Fusco, and Gaetano Sabatini, is the result of a research work debated during the conference on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1973 cholera epidemic in Naples. The studies published in the book keep track of the impact of epidemics in Naples in modern and contemporary periods. The book, however, transcends its predefined temporal and geographical boundaries, broadening its reflection to other contexts, offering a useful comparison for better understanding the significance of epidemics across much of Italy, and placing the entire narrative within an historical perspective. The greatest merit of the studies contained in the book lies in their ability to analyse the topic adopting a multidisciplinary methodology, which has made the volume accessible to a wide range of readers thanks to its highly informative nature.

The intention of the editors, in addition to highlighting the anniversary of the cholera epidemic in Naples, was to look at the past with the aim of creating an opportunity for scientific discussion regarding the various epidemic phenomena of the city. This approach fostered a deeper understanding of “the aspects related to the evolution of urban contexts in light of the progressive globalisation of markets and the increased interdependence between areas of the world brought into contact by improved transportation of goods and people”, highlighting the fundamental role assumed by the Neapolitan metropolis at European level (p. XI).

Among the various methodological approaches, one of the most important was that derived from urban history. In its attempt to analyse the 1973 epidemic the book tends to forcefully emphasise and contextualise the origins of the problem “within the context of the convulsive, disorganised, and still largely unexplored processes of urbanisation of Naples dating back to the decades following the Second World War” (p. XII). The essays thus succeed in highlighting “the chronic lack of infrastructure and civil services that characterised the Neapolitan metropolis”: for these reasons, Naples was consistently identified, both nationally and internationally, “as an area with a high and recurring number of contagious diseases” (p. XII).

The essays clearly and strongly criticise how urban development was managed in Naples, particularly in the post-World War II period. Thus, in the 1970s, Naples underwent extensive reconstruction; however, this process fuelled cor-

ruption and real-estate speculation (pp. 321-22). These analyses highlight the numerous complaints from the political class, which acted feebly, producing extraordinary interventions that were insufficient for Southern Italy. The investments promoted by the state, therefore, were the subject of heated accusations, which exposed the failure of government policies and forced further re-development of the urban context of Naples.

Another key theme, reminiscent of the Covid-19 pandemic, concerns the actions to be taken and the behaviours to adopt during a health emergency: hygiene rules; the need for vaccines; the imposition of preventive measures; the relationship between political institutions and the scientific community. The essays making up the volume contain clear references to these themes that have been analysed resorting to unpublished archival sources, periodicals, and secondary literature.

The volume consists of five parts, organised historically and identifying the plague epidemic of 1656 as the starting point for the reflections of the authors. This event is the first example of how a plague epidemic can impact the many facets of a city like Naples, which in the modern age was a “large and populous” capital (p. XVI). The second part, which focuses chronologically on the period between the eighteenth century and the unification of Italy, shifts the attention to smallpox and cholera, which marked the history of Naples as much as the plague. Cholera is also the central disease in the third part of the book. In the first two essays, the authors examine the impact of the 1884 epidemic, while the third shifts the focus to the Spanish flu, opening new interpretative possibilities for understanding epidemic phenomena more broadly. In the final essay, the spread of the disease is read in conjunction with the conduct of one of the most tragic wars in human history, with the result that public discussion of the Spanish flu was relegated to the background in favour of hopes for a rapid end to the Great War. Four essays, included in the fourth part, focus on the key topic of the volume. Although the Naples 1973 cholera epidemic was quite short, it clearly affected the population of the city and the surrounding area. The “great fear”, as the editors of the volume call it, “was undoubtedly [...] the defining characteristic of those few weeks, which marked a clear break [...] with the previous history of the city” (p. XXVI). The essays in this section “highlight that it was precisely with the appearance of cholera that the definitive awareness of Naples’s backward economic and civil development matured” (p. XXVIII). This awareness fostered the production of investigations and studies that proliferated, drawing international attention to the conse-

quences of the failures incurred by the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*. The last section of the volume, as previously mentioned, expands the analysis to include three comparative studies covering other geographical areas of Italy seen during different historical periods. In particular, it highlights studies on tuberculosis in the Papal States between 1865 and 1867 and in Rome between 1928 and 1935. Finally, it analyses two tragic events, aiming to highlight similarities between the management of catastrophes of quite different nature, such as the cholera epidemic in Naples in 1973 and the earthquake in Friuli in 1976.

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