افغانستان آزاد ــ آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مبـــاد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مــباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages	زبانهای اروپائی

by PATRICK COCKBURN
29.01.2020

China's Coronavirus Outbreak Reminds Me of the Irish Polio Epidemic I Survived

Photograph Source: Gauthier DELECROIX – CC BY 2.0

China is responding to the spread of the coronavirus in Wuhan much as countries have always reacted to life-threatening epidemics. At every level of society and government, fear of death – or, more accurately, fear of being held responsible for death – drives decision-making, which is consequently often ill-judged.

Officials do not want to cause a panic – but then again, nor do they want to be accused of inaction, or of hiding dire truths about the health crisis (many people have become convinced that more people have been infected, have even died, than the authorities are admitting).

I have been struck in the past few days by the similarity between reactions to two epidemics, though they took place 64 years apart in cities that could not be more different. One is currently taking place in Wuhan in central China, with its population of eleven million; the second struck Cork, an Irish city with a population of 114,000, in 1956.

I know a lot about the polio outbreak in Cork because, on 30 September of that year, I was taken to St Finbarr's Hospital in the city, after being diagnosed with the disease. My parents were convinced I was dying, but I survived, though my legs were permanently weakened; I still walk with a pronounced limp.

I was aged six at the time and have a precise memory of the epidemic as it affected me personally, but I knew little about its course outside the hospitals where I was being treated. It was only 50 years later that I got to know the full history, when I went back to Cork to interview doctors, nurses and patients, as well as reading Irish health ministry documents and accounts in contemporary newspapers.

What I discovered was that as in Wuhan today, local people in Cork were convinced that they were being fed false information downplaying the severity of the polio outbreak. "There were rumours everywhere in the city," said Pauline Kent, a physiotherapist who treated victims, "that dead bodies were being carried out the back door of St Finbarr's at night." The medical authorities were, in fact, truthfully announcing the number of new cases and fatalities each morning – but they were simultaneously undermining their own credibility by issuing upbeat statements, dutifully reported in the local newspapers, with headlines such as "Panic Reaction Without Justification" and "Outbreak Not Yet Dangerous Say Doctors".

Unsurprisingly, such forced optimism was counterproductive, entirely failing to reassure a local population terrified that their children would die or be disabled for life (the other name for polio at the time was "infantile paralysis"). Despite the doctors' insistence, the people of Cork did not understand that while polio is highly contagious, meaning that almost everybody became a carrier, only one or two per cent of carriers would suffer long

term health consequences (about 50,000 people in and around Cork probably got the virus, though only 576 of those had passed through St Finbarr's by the time the epidemic ended in 1957).

What comes across most strongly in letters from that period is that a frightened people want somebody to blame, and want visible action. People outside Cork asked why the city had not been sealed off, the railway line to Dublin closed. "Let Cork's own people keep their Polio and not infect our clean city," urged one enraged letter-writer in Dublin.

This need to blame somebody or something seems to be a feature of epidemics everywhere. During a polio outbreak in New York in 1916, a rumour spread that the virus had been brought by Italian immigrants from Naples; another bizarrely had it that the virus was spread by cats (as a result, 72,000 cats were hunted down and killed).

Similarly, people in Cork were convinced that the government and the local medical establishment were being wilfully blind to the threat posed by the disease. They demanded action – their drains cleaned and schools closed – even when doctors said it would do no good.

At first, the authorities tried to strike a correct balance between being open about the epidemic and not causing a panic. This did them little good because Cork's population still believe that even worse news was being kept from them.

When my family and I returned to Cork from London in August 1956, we found the streets empty. When we expressed surprise at this, our taxi driver explained, as my father later recalled, that "people are afraid to come into Cork. Business is going to hell. If the epidemic goes on, in a few weeks half the shops in this street will be bankrupt." Under pressure from advertisers, the local newspaper almost entirely stopped reporting on the epidemic the following month, shortly before I fell ill. The cynics had turned out to be right.

Such censorship was roundly criticised by one official, who wrote to the newspaper: "I for one would be very annoyed if I came to Cork with my family on a holiday and found polio raging and that the business people were prepared to allow me to come and to expose my family to the disease – for the sake of my money as a tourist."

The Chinese government does appear to have been fairly open about the onset of the latest version of the coronavirus, compared to their secretiveness during the Sars epidemic eighteen years ago. But transparency may not do them much good, because

frightened people, Irish or Chinese, naturally look to blame human agency, rather than an unpredictable virus that can only be seen with a powerful microscope. Sealing off the source of infection sounds like an attractive option to those outside the quarantine zone, even when effective quarantine is almost impossible.

For years after the epidemic had ended, fears ran high in Cork. Maureen O'Sullivan, a Red Cross nurse, told me that "at the sight of my ambulance in their street, people would think that the polio was back. They would run into their houses, get down on their knees to pray. They had lost all hope – they were that frightened."

CounterPunch 28.01.2020