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Book Forum

Of Pustules and Peripheries

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It is no secret that metaphors of illness and disease saturate all manners of political discourse. Epidemiological metaphors are metaphors of social relations, and therefore lend themselves to a range of representational effects. What is somewhat more of a secret is the centrality of disease in the story of modernity, and more specifically, in the culture and politics of empire. This is the story Raza Kolb tells us in *Epidemic Empire.* At the center of the book is a two-fold process: the depoliticization of insurgency through a metaphorics of illness and the simultaneous realization of modern technologies of imperialism. *Epidemic Empire*'s central insight is that "the imperial disease poetics that casts insurgent violence as epidemic is grounded in narrative and scientific practices central to the management of empire and neoimperial formations."[1] Edward Said's *Orientalism* noted how although the Orient had long been the exotic and barbaric other to the West, Orientalism emerged as "style of thought" and "style of dominating" in the age of empire.[2] A subset of Said's analytical tradition, *Epidemic Empire* tracks the long, braided history of disease poetics and the biopolitics of empire, constellating representations of illness and contagion with the institutions and technologies of imperial rule. Contagion, we learn, is a "style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[3]

Something truly admirable (and rare) is *Epidemic Empire*'s commitment to ideology critique. This is not a book interested in redeeming a particular genre or practice ("the novel," for example, is not the hero of this study), nor in the redemptive nature of "form," but in tracking a particular logic of imperial rule across two centuries and three empires. As the conclusion puts it, "This book is not against colonial science any more than it is against literature" (288). What is it against? "The scientific packaging of counterinsurgency," meaning the use of ill health as an alibi for imperial rule. The theoretical backbone of *Epidemic Empire* is a lesson from Ranajit Guha's "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," which notes how in the historiography of colonial India, naturalistic metaphors had the effect of assimilating, defanging, and foreclosing the politics, historicity, and the consciousness of peasant insurgencies. Though *Epidemic Empire*

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1 Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror 1817–2020* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 4. Subsequence citations appear parenthetically in the text.

2 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 2, 3.

3 Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

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focuses on Guha's essay, it does not discuss his elaboration of contagion as one of many "transmission" tropes of colonial discourse in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India.* Here, the irrationality that forms the basis of tropes of transmission, Guha argues, turns out to not be about peasant consciousness at all but "has its source in the psychosis of dominant social groups confronted suddenly by a revolt of those whose loyalty had been taken for granted."[4] The omission of *Elementary Aspects* was somewhat surprising given the centrality of Guha's insight to Raza Kolb's argument about the metaphor of contagion and its importance for a range of cultural and medical discursive practices in bourgeois culture. To echo another foundational text of postcolonial studies, *Epidemic Empire* teaches us that it should not be possible to read the literature of empire without remembering that contagion was a crucial part of the cultural representation of the British, French, and American empires to Britain, France, and the United States.[5] My references to Said, Guha, and Spivak are clichéd in a journal such as the present one, but they underscore an important facet of *Epidemic Empire*: its manner of engaging in a critique of ideology reminds one of an earlier moment of postcolonial criticism. *Epidemic Empire* feels like it belongs in the 1980s, and I mean that as a good thing!

Given the ubiquity of illness as a field of intelligibility for the social in all manners of domains—literary, filmic, and political—it is also hard to read *Epidemic Empire* and not refer back to texts from one's own archive and research interests. In this vein, I was struck by how disease poetics has a similar neutralizing effect in discourse surrounding civil war and internal strife. In *The Divided City*, for example, the classicist Nicole Loraux notes how in order for the Greek *polis* to naturalize internal peace, *stasis*, the Greek term for civil war, was always understood as an apolitical aberration. In order to "erase its *political* origin," *stasis* was understood as "an illness malevolently fallen from the sky," as a "plague that gnaws at the heart."[6] By rendering *stasis* as a tragic illness, the Greek city repressed the fact that there were real divisions between its members. Illness therefore played a central role in the *polis*-as-ideology.

In the entirely different context of the industrial revolution, but to a similar end, illness becomes a lens into the problem of class and the occasion for national consolidation. With Raza Kolb's insights, one begins to see how the problem of political disunity is solved through a metaphorics of disease and colonialism. Take, for example, Thomas Carlyle's characterization of Chartism as a pustule: "'Glasgow Thuggery,' 'Glasgow Thugs'; it is a witty nickname… . What will execration; nay at bottom, what will condemnation and banishment to Botany Bay do for it? Glasgow Thuggery, Chartist torch-meetings, Birmingham riots, Swing conflagrations, are so many symptoms on the surface; you abolish the symptom to no purpose, if the disease is left untouched. Boils on the surface are curable or incurable,—small matter which, while the virulent humour festers deep within; poisoning the sources of life; and certain enough to find for itself ever new boils and sore issues; ways of announcing that it continues there, that it would fain

4 Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 225.

5 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 243.

6 Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens*, trans. Corinne Pache and Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 25, 40.

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not continue there."[7] I have read this passage countless times. I teach it regularly. And I have written on it. But it is only after reading *Epidemic Empire* that I fully grasp the central place of disease poetics (which, one must remember, is also an imperial discourse) in Carlyle's formulation of the national question. The term *thugs*, most obviously, appropriates Indian criminality for Glasgow strikers, and in the process forecloses the political significance of both. The Glasgow Spinners Union strike (to which I believe Carlyle refers) is for Carlyle not about wages or the franchise, but an irrational episode of roguish behavior, akin to criminal gangs in the subcontinent—it is thoroughly unpolitical. Carlyle's metaphors thus frame the condition of England question by differentiating it from the imperial milieu in which it is set and implicated.

But Carlyle's "witty nickname" (metaphor) does further work: Glasgow thugs, like Birmingham rioters, are merely "boils," symptoms of a deeper malady. Similarly, his reference to Botany Bay casts the penal colony as a superficial ointment unable to attack the root cause of class conflict in the metropole. Though the techniques of empire—the squashing of "thugs" or exile to penal colonies—brings the problem of class conflict into national focus, these practices are not long-lasting cures. Unattended, the disease of class discontent risks worsening, "poisoning the sources of life" within the body politic. What I have missed in the past when reading this passage is how the intertwining of illness and India, boils and Botany Bay is central to Carlyle's representation of Chartism. His epidemiological metaphor reduces class struggle to a superficial symptom, not the cause for social unrest and national dissolution. Elsewhere, of course, Carlyle blames the loss of a natural aristocracy for the demise of English society and *not* the simple fact of exploitation. In doing so, Carlyle's disease poetics disarms the social relation of class conflict, supplanting it with a social body that, though sick and covered in boils, can be cured *without* attending to the problem of class struggle. Illiberal though he might be, his is a liberal account of class. What the metaphor ultimately achieves is to render bourgeois modernity (in the background always is Carlyle's perpetual fear of a repeat of the French Revolution) as an *invisible* public health crisis.

It is worth noting that although my reading of Carlyle's passage is illuminated by Raza Kolb's study, my analysis lacks the admirable archival synthesis undertaken in *Epidemic Empire.* Rather than offer a prehistory or afterlife of a certain discourse, Raza Kolb continually makes surprising connections between cultural objects (obscure and canonized) and the history they are implicated in. One example is the opening chapter's revelatory account of the attack on Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad. We learn later in the book that this was not the first time Abbottabad found itself as the stage for imperial domination (41). Raza Kolb offers a reading of J. W. Kaye's "The Romance of Indian Warfare," a text that not only looks forward to the Indian Mutiny, but looks back at the imperial exploits of James Abbott, the man after whom Abbottabad is named. In other words, "the [War on Terror's] most extravagantly theatrical operation" is shown to itself have a prehistory in earlier conjunctures of epidemiology and imperial domination (36). The chapter does not stop there. For what is developed in Kaye's writings is seen through to its canonization in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim.* This is just one example of many in the book, but I mention it to highlight how in *Epidemic Empire* close

7 Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism: Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), 4.

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readings are integrated with incredibly careful and attentive archival synthesis, bringing the lesser known into conversation with "famous books" (47).

Another unexpected constellation looks like the imagery of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* being traced to the Irish famine as well as the Ottoman Empire in eastern Europe. A classic reading of Stoker's text, Franco Moretti's "The Dialectic of Fear," sees the novel as allegorizing the class struggles of Europe's nineteenth century with the ideological effect of bourgeois conservatism. In contrast, Raza Kolb's intervention relocates *Dracula* to Ireland as well as the contact zone of the Orient and Europe, the "Sweet Waters of Europe," the Bosporus amid the declining Ottoman Empire. Yet another archival revelation comes when we find out that Steven Soderbergh's Sinophobic blockbuster *Contagion* not only drew inspiration from Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, but also that the latter had a revival within the US imperial machine during the war on terror as an ethnography of Iraqi insurgency. These two examples (taken from two chapters from a seven-chapter book) highlight the rich, knotted archive of *Epidemic Empire* and the agility with which its analysis moves through and across the Ottoman and British Empires, as well as the French and US imperial imagination in novels, films, psychoanalysis, memoirs, and the nonliterary.

To conclude, I want to return to Carlyle's evocation of the scandal of capitalist modernity as a public health crisis. One can trace similar themes in an admirer of the Victorian sage, Charles Dickens. Although much ink has been spilled on Dickens's *Bleak House*'s status as a condition of England novel, considerably less ink has been devoted to understanding the relation Dickens's novel has to the British imperial project. *Epidemic Empire* helps illuminate the centrality of illness to the plot of *Bleak House* and actually makes it impossible to distinguish it from a novel about domestic reform and imperialism. In what is perhaps the most memorable sentence of the novel, the omniscient narrator contemplates a nationalized society: "What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabout of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept up the churchyard-step?"[8] A textbook example of the Auerbachian "meanwhile," the passage notes that in spite of the chasms of class difference between the aristocratic Dedlocks in Lincolnshire and the London street sweeper Jo, they are temporally (and therefore horizontally) "connected." And yet, Jo's world is very small: he sweeps streets, he is irreligious, and, as he says over and over again, "I don't know nothink!" The Dickensian irony in Jo's proclamation is that while he lives in near-perfect ignorance of the world around him, the little knowledge he does have proves to be absolutely central to the plot of *Bleak House.* He knows of the connection between Lady Dedlock and Captain Nemo, but cannot comprehend its scandalous significance: their illegitimate child is Esther Summerson, the novel's heroine and part-time narrator.

So far, so good for *Bleak House*'s status as a condition of England novel. But while the passage quoted previously concerns Jo's place in a nationalized society, the sentence that follows considers the same question at a global scale: "What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!"[9]

8 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Penguin, 1996), 256.
9 Dickens, *Bleak House.*

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Dickens shifts from a national (Lincolnshire and London) to an international register ("histories of this world," "great gulfs"). These connections are clearest amid Jo's death, where illness, the colonial question, and public health all constellate in surprising ways. Jo initially falls sick with that appears to be smallpox, and is then nursed to health by Esther, who herself contracts the illness and nearly dies (she is famously scarred by the virus). Jo survives, but not for long, as he develops respiratory problems (he describes breathing like pulling a "heavy cart" that "rattles") and is taken into the care of Allan Woodcourt, future husband of Esther (720). Esther is, of course, sharply contrasted to Mrs. Jellyby, whose "telescopic philanthropy" cares only for distant African subalterns while ignoring those also in need who are proximate to her, such as her own children. Esther suffers from myopic philanthropy, caring only for those immediately in front of her, like Jellyby's children and English subalterns like Jo. Woodcourt is a physician but gains significant experience and expertise when he is shipwrecked in India. His experience caring for the colonized translates perfectly into caring for Londoners.

In and through the character of Jo, Dickens is able to showcase the novel's two moral compasses, producing a Victorian "England first" logic, wherein the fact of having an empire creates the condition of possibility for domestic reform. This boomerang effect comes together in a passage where Dickens is at his imperial best: Jo "is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle's Tockahoopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby's Borrioboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article. Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets, only in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrimes homely rags are on him: native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish. Stand forth, Jo, in uncompromising colours! From the sole of thy foot to the crown of thy head, there is nothing interesting about thee."[10] Movingly cruel, the narrator insists that "home-made savages" must take precedence over those betterment of "foreign-grown savages." Metropolitan public health thus becomes a site at which to enact a certain kind of imperial power, one that differentiates the national question by way of the civilizing mission in the colonies. Using illness as an alibi, Dickens can at once globalize his vision to bring natives of the Americas and Africa into telescopic view, only to change lenses, as it were, into a myopia that is blind beyond the shores of England and has eyes only for homemade savages.

There are indeed many instances in *Epidemic Empire* where we see the weaponization of public health as a form of imperial domination. Raza Kolb's analysis of the Hepatitis B vaccination ruse in the Osama bin Laden assassination, and the long imperial history that undergirded it, teaches us how "public health" is immediately available as a technique of domination. In March 2021, the anniversary of the pandemic, one can extrapolate these examples to include the Sinophobia that energizes Western concerns about exotic wet markets and devious virology labs, or settler colonies like Israel celebrating "America's doctor," Anthony Fauci, while simultaneously withholding vaccinations (and access to health care more generally) from Palestinians. In these cases, "public health" is the alibi for an explicitly violent form of imperial domination and management of the minority question. But I also have in mind the politics of empire

10 Dickens, *Bleak House*, 724.

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that unavoidably also governs "today's most committed epidemiologists, whose work is motivated … by a desire to right the abuses of global capital," those who might indeed play a role not unlike that of Allan Woodcourt (10). Does not the category of "public health" enact, albiet in nonviolent ways, a universal public? Does not this discourse lend itself to a moralizing language of securitization? Recall stories over the last two years of roguish citizens who walked toy dogs to get around lockdown rules, sniffly residents of neighborhoods hiding from public health officials seeking to test and trace, or passengers on flights in the global south popping Panadol before landing to skirt temperature checks. In these cases, the "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" as Foucault put it, are perfectly evident between "parents and children, adults and adolescents, educator and students, doctors and patients," modern-day Woodcourts and bad global citizens (45). But harder still to think through is the global homogeneity that the "public" in "public health" names. For what bourgeois immigrant from the global south has not felt the imperial force of Western benevolence when imploring their families overseas to socially distance when they go about their days? As well intentioned and potentially life saving as such advice might be, it is nevertheless the case that such injunctions come from a vantage point in the uneven terrain of the international division of labor. My concern is not only *that* paternalism closely follows the discourse of public health all over the world; it is that the global north *can*, and routinely does, marshal "public health" as transparently and evenly global. It is this uncomfortable relation between contagion and the long history of imperialism that *Epidemic Empire* forces us to grapple with.

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