



Ideology and epidemics

Epidemics and history: disease, power and imperialism

Sheldon Watts

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A colleague of mine once drew a comparison between public policy and sausages, remarking that it's better not to watch the production process if you're obliged to consume the end product. In *Epidemics and history: disease, power and imperialism*, Sheldon Watts shows us what has, over the centuries, gone into the sausages when it comes to societal responses to epidemic disease. His thesis is complex but transparent: when government policy is shaped by specific disease constructs based on religious and political ideology rather than on science, the trajectory of global epidemics is inexorably altered, usually to the detriment of society in general and the nonruling classes in particular. In other words, if policy is the catalyst that converts ideas into action, then, depending on the knowledge base on which those ideas are founded, the resultant action can be either helpful or harmful to the public good.

In making this argument Watts uses seven examples of infectious disease: plague, leprosy, smallpox, syphilis, cholera, yellow fever and malaria. He explains how empirical evidence is frequently ignored while abstract notions extracted from ancient classical and religious sources, most of which arise from mythopoeic or pseudo-scientific origins, are applied through ignorance or the callous and calculating mechanisms of social control. In the case of the plague, for example, a Christianized version of the neoplatonic idea of the Great Chain of Being led influential civic leaders to ignore the observation that the plague was highly prevalent where there was an increase in the local rat population. Humankind was at the top of the chain, just below angels, archangels and the rest of

the heavenly host; lowly rats (and fleas) were closer to the bottom, far away from mankind. How could rats — let alone the fleas on the rats — be responsible for a human affliction?

A further example is the historical societal response to leprosy. For centuries, a literal interpretation of a highly metaphoric Old Testament description of the disease remained entrenched — even after the causative organism was isolated, and despite evidence of the effectiveness of less stringent responses implemented by some non-Judeo-Christian cultures.

Perhaps the most devastating example was the havoc wreaked by smallpox on native inhabitants of the Americas after their first contact with Europeans in 1492. In this instance, a blend of biblical narrative and platonic ideology combined with social Darwinism to reinforce notions of the supremacy and "manifest destiny" of the white race. What followed was an abstract justification for the mass extermination of genetically "inferior" beings to make room for a new "superior" master race of Europeans. One of the great ironies highlighted by Watts is the impact of syphilis on modern imperial culture. In this instance, a disease that was relatively benign and non-venereal among Native Americans rapidly transformed into a lethal venereal variety among the European invaders once it was transported back across the Atlantic Ocean. Furthermore, the propensity of the European elite to ignore science and to embrace

moral precepts founded on orthodox interpretations of Christian values helped to exacerbate and prolong the great syphilis epidemic in the modern imperial nations.

With the aid of illustrations and copious endnotes, Watts concentrates primarily on a detailed description of the impact of these epidemics on common folk, taking a very sympathetic and humanistic approach to those victimized by pestilence exacerbated by the brutal policies of their rulers. What is missing, perhaps, is a more detailed analysis of the conceptual origins of oppressive policies. Other scholars have documented the historical evolution of knowledge from its mythopoeic origins to modern objective science. However, science has not necessarily replaced mythology. The two continue to coexist and even to complement one another. Sometimes the net result is the formation of bizarre hybrids, including distorted disease constructs. Those who wish to retain power often champion

these aberrations, while those most affected by flawed decision-making are forced to endure its consequences. This book sheds some light on how society might learn to reject confused ideas in favour of a more humane interpretation

of reality grounded in observation and empirical verification. I would recommend it to anyone interested in shaping public policy for the public good as opposed to the maintenance of social control. Sausages, anyone?

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Fred Sebastian

Room for a view

Under Cézanne's shadow

When I jogged the hills outside Aix-en-Provence I was chased by dogs. They were fierce and determined, and even when the side roads appeared empty I was on the lookout for them. In Provence, dogs were skilled at hiding in grass, behind thick stone walls and in dips at the roadside.

They waited for me to come over the hills.

I saw their bared teeth and their flattened ears and felt the sharp chill of fear. Many seemed truly vicious and snapped at me as I passed. They lunged at my heels, jumped at my hands and seized my jogging pants in their teeth. Untethered, they ran at full speed for some distance.

That year in Provence, I became a fast runner.



I graduated from medical school in 1970 and left a few months later for Provence. There was something mystical about the hills, the scent of the land, the still clarity of light and colour that entered the senses.

The dogs smelled a stranger and did not welcome me. Provençal dogs were trained to hunt, to warn, to attack.

Country homes had barred windows and locked gates, and broken glass was set into the tops of their garden walls. The old villas were picturesque, situated

on hilltops, overlooking valleys and vineyards. Curious, I jogged the dirt roads to see everything close up.

I began to wear thick gloves and run with a big stick.

I filled my backpack with a drawing pad, pencils, pocket knife, oil pastels, an art eraser and charcoal, and sprinted by walking trails, valleys, over small bridges and across meadows. I found old stone fences and abandoned farm-

houses. Later, as my sweat cooled, I drew hills, ruins, aqueducts, fig trees. Each quiet reverie of drawing was pierced by a

snarl. Posted on villa walls was the warning:

Attention: chien méchant.



The most beautiful views were at sunset or dawn. Life was not a straight line, as the Provençal novelist Jean Giono wrote, but a gyre. Beginnings. Endings. Fields glowed ruby, amethyst; the rolling hills, vineyards, dark cypress and pine became paintings. At the crest of a hill eastward rose Mont Ste. Victoire, majestic with its massive ivory shoulders. To the west, workers in blue overalls bent over the fields, reaping hay, as if van Gogh's time was now. Everywhere was rust earth, silver-green olive trees, the scent of rosemary, and azure skies.

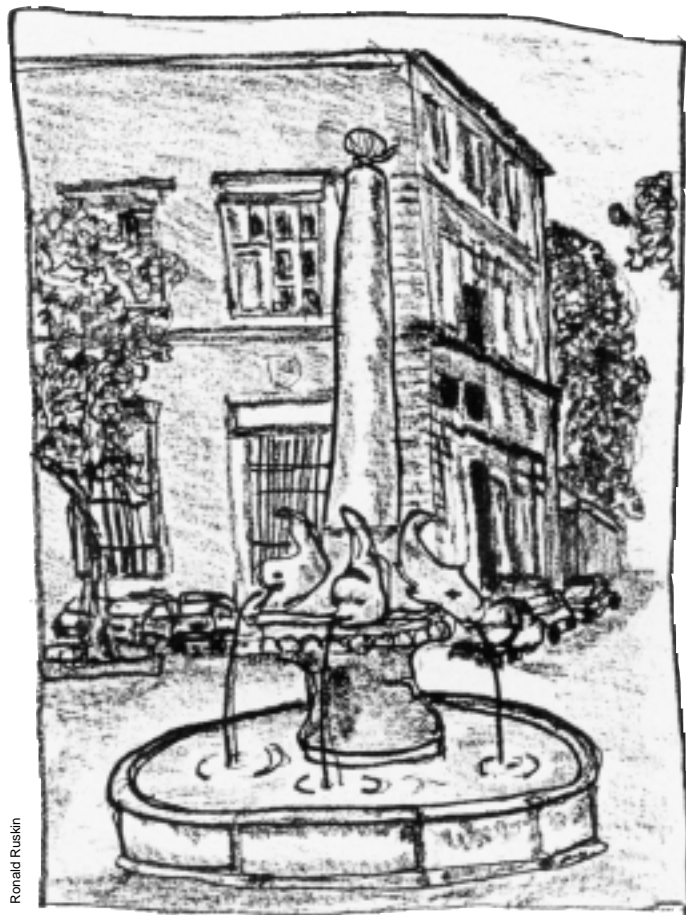
I wrote home about my tiny flat in Luynes, not far from the old Marseilles road. I wrote of the vineyards outside my window and *les rossignols* singing at night and enclosed sketches of the country. Three times a week I jogged the hills. Slowly, I sensed a change. Imperceptibly at first, an unknown side of myself stirred, for which I had no words.

My landlord found out I was a doctor. His wife asked about migraines during the mistral. Students came to me with their aches. I listened; I tried to help. Once I sent a young woman back home to Canada for treatment.

But I did not want to be a doctor in Provence.



I studied philosophy at Aix University and art at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. After class I had a demi in the cafés along the Cours Mirabeau, an elegant tree-lined boulevard with central fountains. Cafés were arranged politically, left to right, along the Cours: Maoist-Leninist cafés were on the left, fascist cafés were on the right. The fed-



Fountain of Quatre Dauphins
Aix-en-Provence

Ronald Rustin

eral police, the dreaded CRS, parked their blue vans between the two, waiting for riots. In that year after de Gaulle's death all was in flux.

In those days the Canadian dollar was worth something and cash-poor youths like myself, who otherwise could not live abroad, studied in Aix. Canadians — French and English — sat in cafés and argued about separation.

Separation kept us together. We debated passionately in French into the night — strangers, then opponents, and later friends.

The next month, in October, the FLQ murdered Pierre Laporte.



That fall at the university I noticed a sign: *Equipe canadienne de hockey cherche joueurs*.

A group of hockey-sick Canucks went to Marseilles, where there was an ice rink and equipment on loan from a local team. The coach, Réjean, from the Marseilles consular office, spoke no English. There were three criteria for making the team. You had to be Canadian. You had to play hockey well. You had to hit the body.

We practised three hours every Sunday. Skating. Rushing. Shooting. Checking. Scrimmaging. I worked hard to understand French; I wanted to make the team.

To keep in shape, I jogged.

Hockey made my French fluent. I no longer had to work hard to understand others. I noticed that the dogs, too, had turned a touch less vicious. They still intrepidly chased me, forcing me to sprint past their masters' villas, but under their distrustful gaze I entered another universe.

I grew to fathom the soul of Provençal dogs. We were not exactly enemies. We simply had different roles.

Theirs was to protect their territory. Mine was to run.



I wrote home to say that I might stay another year.

I jogged the Aix roads and locals stopped to frown. I was a crazy Canuck. I sprinted across country roads and city streets. The French preferred cycling. Undaunted, I ran by *rue Gaston de Saporta*, where university classes were held, along *avenue Paul Cézanne* and *route de Tholonet*, where Cézanne had a



my flat at Luynes

Ronald Ruskin

studio; I ran to the *Musée Granet* and saw Cézanne's sketches and oils.

On New Year's morning a feathery snow fell over Aix. Cars spun out of control and people hesitated to walk. By noon the hills were white; at dusk the countryside was mauve and pink. The French feared snow and warned of danger.

That day I went for a long jog, feeling the icy touch of a lost friend. I sat and sketched the hills.

By noon the next day the snow had vanished.



After two months of practice, our *Equipe Canada* was ready for some of the best squads. The French were quick, agile, and had trained longer than us.

"Ah, so you worry?" Réjean said. "They look good, but you skate hard; a few stiff checks, yes? We shall see."

We had names like Nadeau, Pitre,

Chouinard, Gray, Marchard, Ruskin. After practices we ate couscous and bickered over politics, but on ice we were like Dumas' musketeers. All for one and one for all.

That year we won our series. After the last match in Marseilles, Réjean held a victory dinner near the old port. As the night air cooled, misty-eyed, already nostalgic, we vowed to keep close. We

talked boldly of next year. Many of us were leaving. I did not want to go home.

"And where will you be?" Réjean asked.

"Perhaps here," I said. "But I have residency back home."

"Alors," Rejean said. "You go home. We all go home."

By April Aix had grown tropical.

The countryside filled with mimosa, sprouting vines, almond blossoms. Our hockey season was gone but, like the flowers, I was grow-

ing. I visited museums and saw Cézanne's country sketches. How had he seized such colour? I jogged into the burning Provence hills, looking at flowers, not only with a passion for discovery but with farewell eyes.

In May a letter came from my residency program. The director had not heard from me. Was I coming?

That afternoon I set out for my longest run. Past Luynes into vineyards, through valleys, up hills, along meadows, to a cliff overlooking Aix. I waited. I sipped the still air.

A last sketch.

This time the dogs did not chase me. Was it the noon heat, or did we understand each other?

I no longer carried a big stick.

Soon I would be home.

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Lifeworks

The existential art of Alex Colville

If my painting is about anything," Alex Colville remarked at the preview of a retrospective of his work recently mounted at the National Gallery in Ottawa, "it is about being and time." "Being and Time" was also the title of the lecture he gave at the gallery's overflowing auditorium a few days later, in studied reference to Martin Heidegger's masterwork, *Sein und Zeit* (1926). Slowly, seriously, yet wryly acknowledging the impenetrability of Heidegger's text, he read from a passage that speaks of "pure nows" and "a mode of temporality already disclosed and ecstatically stretched out." Our sense of time, Colville explains, makes possible our sense of being. These two aspects of consciousness are inseparable.

Certainly, Colville's precise draughtmanship and hyperreal rendering of surfaces contribute to the heightened sense of *presence* in his works. But equally important is his ordering of space, which he achieves by arcane means, using the "golden section" of classical art, Le Corbusier's "Modulor" system of proportion, and a mathemati-

cal sequence called the "Fibonacci series." The details are intimidating, the end result equally so. Not only is each element arranged in a calculated relation to every other, but the viewer is positioned in a way that, as Philip Fry comments, is deeply involving.¹ The use of perspective in *Cyclist and Crow* (1981), for example, places the viewer "a bit forward of the woman, our eyes level with her head and the bird in flight. ... We are riding along parallel ... we share her view." Following her glance, we participate in this coincidence of cyclist and crow — an arbitrary, fleeting, and yet "absolute" moment.¹

Will the cyclist catch up with the crow? Perhaps nowhere are Colville's frozen narratives so suspenseful as in *Woman with Revolver* (1987), a work inspired by an actual event. Made headless by the top of the doorway, is the subject depersonalized? Maybe, but she is also monumentalized. We do not see the anxiety in her face, only the strength of her body. By portraying her nude, Colville leaves no doubt of her potential victimization, her relative innocence; at



Alex Colville, *Cyclist and Crow*, 1981. Acrylic on hardboard, 70.6 cm x 100 cm.



Alex Colville, *Woman with Revolver*, 1987. Acrylic on hardboard, 56.5 cm x 28.2 cm

the same time, he subverts the aesthetic category of the nude by equipping his subject with a gun. The vanishing point, close to her breast, brings the viewer's eye from the complicated angles of the stairwell to the target, her bodily integrity. The only way to cope with the anxiety this painting provokes is to participate in the woman's stillness and have complete confidence in her. This must be one of the most powerful images of women in all of Canadian art.

Alex Colville: Milestones was presented at the National Gallery from June 23 to Sept. 17, to mark the artist's 80th birthday. How time flies. How it stands still.

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Reference

1. Fry P. *Alex Colville: Paintings, prints and processes 1983-1994*. Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; 1994.