

PLAGUE AND SOCIETY

PLAGUE AND SOCIETY:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS  
OF  
THE BLACK DEATH

By

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the sociological significance of the plague. My sense of the need for this inquiry developed as I realized that most accounts of the plague -- which described the hysterical, bizarre, and irresponsible behaviours of its victims and survivors --- failed to analyse how they were possible. This oversight implied that those who responded to the plague were hysterical and eccentric. This work refutes that view. It demonstrates how those who responded to the plague were oriented social actors whose behaviours were understandable in certain contexts.

The crisis which the plague vested upon the members of the medieval society becomes apparent as we recall Socrates' approach to death in the *Phaedo*. He contended that philosophy was a preparation for death. He taught that a good death was the achievement of a lifetime's work. Death from the plague, on the other hand, was too sudden, violent, and pervasive for its victims and survivors to respond to it reflectively. Instead, they used simple and practical methods to resist the threat of obliteration which the plague posed to their social order. An example of this can be found in the plague chronicle; its writers

depicted their experience with the disease for their own benefit and that of their successors.

In the Middle Ages, the city facilitated the spread and transmission of the plague in the same way that it does today. Its denizens' responses to it were interesting insofar as the plague was an undesirable condition with which they were forced to deal. Their admission or negation of its presence within a community --- and their ensuing responses to it --- constituted various constructions of the plague. These were generated according to the members' regular and sustained usage of awareness contexts and boundary maintaining devices to produce their social order.

The plague influenced the production of anti-Semitism. It precipitated genocidal campaigns initiated by medieval actors against the Jews of Western Europe. This reflected the medieval actors' need to account for the plague in a realistic way: it enabled them to orient to the source of the plague by facilitating their identification and location of some worldly agents who were allegedly responsible for it. In the Middle Ages, the Jews became metaphors for the affliction of plague in a way that is analogous to the modern practitioner's usage of germs. Although this destructive orientation to others is understandable as an attempt to eliminate the threat which anomaly poses to the social order, it is not

recommended: genocide constitutes an asocial treatment of others. Philosophy, which comprises a positive relation to disorder, is invoked as an alternative to genocide.

The macabre art of the Middle Ages which illustrated and described disease, decomposition, and the triumph of death reflected the repulsive, degenerative, and collectively fatal aspects of the plague. It is usually thought of as morbid, devitalized, and excessively sensual. However, in light of the commitment which it showed to the body, it can be viewed as medieval society's attempt to conquer death and regenerate life.

This thesis demonstrates the social character of the behaviours of those who faced the plague. It makes sense of their efforts to preserve their social order against its impending destruction. It contributes to our understanding of a struggle for survival that opposed the silence of death with the reachievement of purpose and thereby differentiated its constituents from the thoughtless oblivion of a plague.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PLAGUE

#### Facts About the Plague

Plague is primarily a disease of rodents and other small animals which sometimes afflicts humans (Gregg, 1974: 4). The plague bacillus first infects the flea, which, in turn, infects its animal host. This usually results in the deaths of both insect and animal (Gregg, 1978:49). If the infected animal comes into contact with humans before it dies, then the disease may spread among them. Gregg (1978:51) notes, "The rat's role in plague rests solely on its efficiency as a vehicle for transporting fleas into closer proximity with man." On the other hand, neither rat nor flea is needed to spread pneumonic plague, the most lethal form of the disease, among humans (Bahmanyar and Cavanaugh, 1976:4).

The Plague Manual of the World Health Organization warns that the plague has "a high potential for spread into susceptible areas" (Bahmanyar and Cavanaugh, 1976:1). Gregg (1978:25) elaborates upon this point, "Clearly, a plague outbreak anywhere in the world is a potential menace to everyone, everywhere." McNeill (1976:11-2) states that the plague has stayed "violently destructive to human life"

because its "adaptation toward a stable biological balance" has primarily been focused on adjustments to its nonhuman host.

The plague bacillus is "invasive": it not only breaks down its victim's defenses, but it also reproduces within the body of its victim and alters the metabolism of its host (Gregg, 1978:64). A plague victim has really been poisoned to death by the organism, yersinia pestis.

Plague is cyclical in nature: it strikes humanity on a massive scale periodically, and then returns to its endemic place among rodents, and virtual invisibility, until it flares up again among humans (Link, 1955:1). When plague spreads in epidemic fashion throughout the world, it becomes pandemic, "involving all people" (Gregg, 1978:5). Three major plague pandemics are recorded in history (Hirst, 1953:10). The Plague of Justinian began in Pelusium, Egypt in 542 A.D. (Simpson, 1905:5) and lasted until 600 A.D. (Link, 1955:1). The second pandemic, the Black Death, began in the middle of the fourteenth century. It took about three years to sweep through Europe (Hirst, 1953:13) and the Mideast (Dols, 1977)<sup>1</sup>. Gregg (1978:8) states that outbreaks of plague which were part of the second pandemic caused "intense local epidemics" for another four hundred

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1. A brief historical sketch of the Black Death's progression through the medieval world is given in Chapter 2.

years. The plagues that struck London in 1563, 1593, 1603, 1625, 1636 and 1665 (Hirst, 1953:53) can probably be considered part of the second pandemic.

The third pandemic began in the middle of the nineteenth century (Gregg, 1978:12) and lasted about one hundred years (Link, 1955:1). It can be traced to epidemics in China, Hong Kong, and Bombay which caused about two hundred and thirty thousand deaths. At the turn of the century, plague swept through Egypt, Madagascar, Paraguay (Gregg, 1978:25-6), Hawaii (Eskey, 1934:1), San Francisco (Ecke and Johnson, 1952:3), Australia (Cumpston, 1926:1), and South Africa (Mitchell, Pirie, and Ingram, 1927:89). In the early part of the twentieth century, between 1904 and 1905, there were epidemics of plague in Thailand and Burma (Gregg, 1978:25). The plague struck San Francisco --- for the second time --- about four years later (Todd, 1909: 9). It also spread through Argentina, Trinidad, Venezuela, Peru, and Ecuador (Gregg, 1978:26). Bolivia and Brazil were infected later (Gregg, 1978:26). So were various cities in California (Eskey and Haas, 1940:2) and Texas (Miller, Wilcomb, and Irons, 1952:41).

Plague is not foreign to the modern world. Between 1900 and 1951, five hundred and twenty three cases of plague which resulted in three hundred and forty deaths were recorded in the United States (Link, 1955:102). Gregg

(1978:207) notes that plague flared up again in the United States in 1958, and since 1964, the United States has not had a plague free year. He estimates that, if this ascending trend continues, the total number of incidences of plague in 1980 will approach that of the epidemic in Los Angeles in 1924 which infected forty-one people and killed thirty six (Gregg, 1978:207, 118).

However frightening and suggestive the facts about the plague might be, they do not capture the human drama which followed them everywhere and which is the real subject of sociological inquiry. This is developed in the remaining sections of this chapter.

## The Sociologically Interesting Character of the Plague

My interest in the plague was spurred by some general observations of the effect of plague upon society.

Artaud (1958:23-4) conveys this in the following passage:

Once the plague is established in a city, the regular forms collapse. There is no maintenance of roads and sewers, no army, no police, no municipal administration. Pyres are lit at random to burn the dead, with whatever means are available...Then wood, space, and flame itself growing rare, there are family feuds around the pyres, soon followed by a general flight for the corpses are too numerous. The dead already clog the streets in ragged pyramids gnawed at by animals around the edges. The stench rises in the air like a flame. Entire streets are blocked by piles of the dead. Then the houses open and the delirious victims, their minds crowded with hideous visions spread howling through the streets.

The dregs of the population, apparently immunized by their frenzied greed enter the open houses and pillage riches they know will serve no purpose or profit...

The last of the living are in a frenzy: the obedient and virtuous son kills his father; the chaste man performs sodomy upon his neighbours. The lecher becomes pure. The miser throws his gold in handfuls out the window. The warrior hero sets fire to the city he once risked his life to save. The dandy decks himself out in his finest clothes and promenades before the charnel houses...

Although Artaud is concerned with the analogy between the theatre and the plague, his depiction of the

community's response to the plague is accurate. For example, Thucydides (1978:155) wrote that, "...Athens owed to the plague the beginnings of unprecedented lawlessness." Some seventeen hundred years later, Boccaccio (1972:52-3) reiterated this observation in his description of the plague in Florence. Sontag (1977, 1978:41) comments upon these two accounts of the social devastation wrought by the plague,

Even if the disease is not thought to be a judgment on the community, it becomes one --- retroactively as it sets in motion an inexorable collapse of morals and manners.

I was initially intrigued by the disruption of society which the plague seemed to engender wherever it struck. I wondered how it was possible for people who, as far as I imagined, had previously led ordered and contained lives, to suddenly forget everything they knew and to seemingly go crazy when the plague struck their communities. This earmark of the plague recalls Berger and Luckmann's observation (1967:103) that

The legitimation of the institutional order is faced with the ongoing necessity of keeping chaos at bay. All social reality is precarious. All societies are constructions in the face of chaos. The constant possibility of anomic terror is actualized whenever the legitimations that obscure the precariousness are threatened or collapse.

Within this context, the plague is a good topic

for sociological inquiry for, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two, it created conditions in medieval society which intensified the medieval actor's perception of his life as ephemeral and constantly threatened by disasters.

This observation sets the stage for the analyses of various plague phenomena (eg., the keeping of plague chronicles, the communities' definitions of an epidemic and their ensuing courses of action, the persecution of medieval Jews for their alleged role in spreading the plague, and the macabre art of the Middle Ages). These exemplify the general theme of this dissertation, which is, to show how the medieval actors' responses to the plague may be understood as attempts to save their social order from extinction. They created meaning in lieu of the vacuousness with which the experience of plague threatened them. The members of medieval society thus managed to strengthen their social identity by orienting to themselves as beings who were resourceful enough to resist complete appropriation by death from the pestilence.

Considering the actions of those who were beleaguered by the plague, I surmised that there is something extraordinarily dreadful about a plague which has been a feature of its conceptualization and construction through the ages. The decision to orient to plague-related behaviours as "meaningful" actions in Weber's

(1964) sense, precipitated my commitment to demonstrate their social character: that is, to show how they arose in particular contexts and were understandable and rational in a public way from the actor's point of view.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Winch (1958:40-4) demonstrates that this sociological understanding of behaviour also falls within the realm of epistemological interest; sociology is analytically closer to philosophy than one is normally inclined to think.

Phenomenological Sociology  
and the  
Analytic Perspective

Hirst (1953:76) notes:

No name in medicine sounds so ominous  
as plague; none is so charged with  
mass emotion.

Although the plague's unique dreadfulness is hinted at and alluded to in most of the literature (Ziegler, 1969; Tuchman, 1978; Gregg, 1978; Nohl, 1961; McNeill, 1976; Dols, 1977; Simpson, 1905; Hecker, 1844; Shrewsbury, 1970), and although this dreadfulness is certainly perceived to be an aspect of plague by those who encounter it, the concept of a plague has not been articulated or developed in a comprehensive manner, except by Camus (1948) who used it as a literary device.

My purpose in writing this dissertation is to analyse the plague; that is, to provide and account for the features which make the publicly shared and acknowledged concept of a plague possible.

This orientation to the plague reflects the phenomenological character of this dissertation. It departs from conventional sociological theory in certain key respects. Phenomenological sociology does not equate social phenomena to natural phenomena. It

therefore does not employ a scientific methodology in its study of social phenomena (Walsh, 1972:16).<sup>3</sup>

Phenomenological sociology views the "social world" as the "existential product of human activity" which is

sustained and changed by such activity. Insofar as the social world is intersubjectively produced by its members it becomes externalized vis a vis them - that is, it comes to possess a degree of objective facticity. In this sense, Durkheim is not entirely mistaken in arguing for the objective (factual) character of the social world but he fails to understand that the facticity of the social world resides in the manner by which its members apprehend it. (Walsh, 1972:18)

Although the use of certain structural concepts, eg. boundary maintenance in Chapter 3 and the sick role in Chapter 5, may seem incongruent with the phenomenological perspective, the reified character of the social order has been taken into account. This facilitated a conceptualization of society as a whole; but this was not my main purpose in using structural concepts. I have emphasized their achieved character. For example, in order to conceive of a social system maintaining certain boundaries relative to an environment, for phenomenological purposes, it is necessary to know that boundary maintenance is contingent

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3. Phenomenological sociology has been comprehensively developed in the work of Alfred A. Schutz. See Collected Papers, Volumes I, II, III (1962, 1964, 1966) and The Phenomenology of the Social World, (1962, 1964, 1966).

upon members' decisions to use certain concepts as points of reference for defining certain situations in their everyday lives. Thus, the community's tendency to boundary maintenance relative to the plague, is apprehended phenomenologically as its members' decision to avoid using the plague as a resource for structuring social reality until it seemed absolutely necessary to do otherwise.

Similarly, the sick role, analysed in relation to macabre art in Chapter Five, is not viewed as a type of behaviour which actors inherit, prefabricated from the social system. It is a description of what people need to know in order to conceive of themselves as sick. Walsh (1972:62) suggests

What systems theorists identify as structural features of the social system, namely, norms, values, culture, roles and so on, are structural conditions by virtue of their recognition and definition as such by actors; in other words, social structure necessarily refers to the actors' sense of social structure, assembled through a common scheme of reference...

Phenomenological sociology is concerned with the way in which social order is constituted by members. It demonstrates how society is produced as an ongoing accomplishment of its members interactions which are formed by their notions and perceptions of reality (Walsh, 1972:20).

The phenomenologist suspends his belief in social reality in order to behold and describe the routine practices and procedures of interpretation which members use in their interactions. This warrants the phenomenologist's use of a methodology which departs from that of conventional sociology. It is concerned with the logical connection between belief and action. Phenomenological sociology dispenses with causal explanations which imply that there is a mechanical association between social facts (Walsh, 1972:20, 29).

This disregard for positivistic interpretations of reality is feasible if we keep this precept in mind: that is, social phenomena are the achievements of rule-governed, meaningful, and oriented activity (Walsh, 1972:29).

The sociological explanation of the rule-governed character of social action is not, then, a causal explanation but an explanation of how actors can be seen to fall under social descriptions of them (social rules) available to the members of society. It attempts to elucidate the construction of action by social rules by way of an examination of the logics utilized by members of society when making sense of settings of social interactions (Walsh, 1972:30).

The phenomenological sociologist makes inferences about the logic which makes social action accessible and available to the understanding of any member (Blum and

McHugh, 1971). For example, a prostitute's decision to obtain lucrative funds makes her choice of a profession intelligible to a member.

The phenomenological sociologist who describes and elaborates upon members' procedures for making sense of social phenomena is not exempt from articulating the resources he uses to produce his analysis. Phenomenological sociology is reflexive. Walsh (1972:34) explains,

The sociologist's own account is itself an interpretation which, in documenting the appearances, actions, and situational factors as evidence of an underlying pattern of meaning relies on just this underlying pattern of meaning and relevancies to make sense.

Phillipson (1972:141) expresses the particular reflexivity of phenomenological accounts of reality:

Whatever the techniques used by the sociologist for revealing the processes of members' construction, accomplishment and maintenance of their realities, the methodological problem is to make the processes of negotiation explicit enough to allow for their adequate reconstruction by a reader. Only through this revelation can we know how the research, hence the theory was accomplished through the negotiation of contingent events.

This explains my use of certain philosophical insights which would seem odd within the context of conventional sociology. Socrates' ideas about the importance of preparing for death have given impetus to

my inquiry concerning the impact of the plague on the members of medieval society. Socrates' thoughts about death added depth to my formulation of how widespread, collective, and premature death from the plague was traumatic for medieval actors.

While certain philosophical arguments are used as resources for inquiry, they are not implicated in my interpretations of members' orientations to reality. Members' interests are typically and routinely characterized as different from philosophical ones. However, philosophy does provide a standard of comparison which makes the moral evaluation of social phenomena possible. For example, Chapter Four contains an analysis of genocide which is specific to the near extermination of the Jews in the Middle Ages. I was interested in demonstrating how philosophy is an alternative to genocide which is viewed by some sociologists as a destructive relation to anomaly. The recommendation of philosophy in contrast to a mere exegesis of genocide makes reference to the possibility of other, more constructive relationships to disorder. This approach to sociology reflects a theoretical commitment to apprehend and weigh the significance of social phenomena. It follows Simmel's comment that a cosmic ethics would "treat not only every person but everything

as if it were its own end." (Simmel, 1950:XX).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the tendency to examine the implications of any form of life which is subject to analytic scrutiny is a feature of a phenomenological orientation to analysis. McHugh and associates (1974:2) have developed this approach to analysis:

Analysis is generative...To analyse is to address the possibility of any finding, puzzle, sense, resolution, answer, interest, location, phenomenon ...Analysis is the concern not with anything said or written but with the grounds of whatever is said---the foundations that make what is said possible, sensible, conceivable.

Analysis attempts to show how social phenomena are enactments of their practitioners' conceptualizations of reality. Social action is not independent of theory: it is an accomplishment which embodies both theory and practice. Analysis typically exemplifies the understanding which it achieves in relation to its topic: the practice of analysis recommends itself as a way of life. It is a demonstration of the logic which makes its conceptualization of a topic possible. Thus, analysis makes reference to the resources which are inextricable features of its

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4. For the record, Simmel was one sociologist who followed his own advice. His frequent allusions to philosophy have confounded the readers of his sociology to such a degree that Kurt Wolff proposed they be viewed as attempts to "ennoble or spiritualize sociology by elevating it to the rank of epistemological inquiry" (Simmel, 1950:XXXIX-XL).

practical achievement. Analysis generates an alternative to conventional theories which leave the logic which grounds their interpretations of reality unexamined. This approach to sociology is developed in the following works: Blum (in Douglas, (1970) (1974) (1978)) (in Scott and Douglas, 1972), Blum and McHugh (1971) (1978), McHugh (in Douglas, 1970, and Drietzal, 1970), Foss (1972), and Raffel (1979).

My desire to analyse the plague in relation to this tradition gave me a sense of how to begin reading and writing about the literature which pertained to the plague.<sup>5</sup> My work was both sustained and refurbished by the notion that there is something essential about a plague that makes it what it is, that differentiates it from other phenomena, and that facilitates the shaping of perceptions and responses to it which make it a social phenomenon. This analytic concern with the nature of plague does not exclude the theoretic process of decisiveness whereby social actors generated their responses to the plague. Winch (1958:52-3) shows how judgment is an integral feature of any activity which is rule-governed and which therefore constitutes a "way of life" . I have attempted to demonstrate the interplay which obscured the dis-

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5. Although I did not intentionally limit my research to accounts of the Black Death, they comprise the bulk of my data because they were the most accessible accounts of the plague.

tinctions between (objective) facts and (subjective) judgments and made the social production of the plague possible.

The question which guided my inquiry was: What is there about a plague that compels members of society to act in such extreme and immoderate ways when it strikes their communities? I commenced working with an idea of the influence which the plague exerted upon the members of the societies it struck. This has enhanced the sociological import of this inquiry. Berger and Luckmann (1966:103) note,

It is important to understand that the institutional order is continually threatened by the presence of realities that are meaningless in its terms.

and Weber (1964:93) maintains,

In all the sciences of human action, account must be taken of processes and phenomena which are devoid of subjective meaning, in the role of stimuli, results, favoring or hindering circumstances.

To conceive of the plague as an influence is to intimate that men and women are not the sole authors of their fates and to contend that their lives may be touched, and even altered, by exigencies which they can not control. This, however, does not preclude a sense of the role humans play in generating their responses to those exigencies. I am not arguing that the plague, in itself, produced changes in society. Such a causal explanation would demean the theoreticity of social

actors via its imputation of responsibility for social change to a set of inanimate circumstances. To assume that this were so would, moreover, compel us to forget what social actors needed to know in order to both produce and respond to that set of circumstances as a plague.

McHugh (in Douglas, 1973) demonstrates positivism's failure to take account of the social (that is, publicly shared and available) procedures which make various ascriptions of reality possible. It is not that there is no such thing as a plague: I am arguing that the plague is a concept used to organize and make reference to a particular set of circumstances which is collectively authored, understood and oriented to as a fact. This process is, at the same time, never quite captured by the facts which obscure it. Winch's (1958:55) statements regarding Oakeshott's view "...that a form of human activity can never be summed up in a set of explicit precepts. The activity 'goes beyond' the precepts..." are sensible within this context.

## The Implications of Disease

An inquiry concerning the plague must also take the notion of disease into account if its purpose is to analyse the plague in a comprehensive manner because the plague is, first and foremost, a form of disease. Sontag's (1977, 1978) work on Illness as Metaphor has, in this respect been useful. She ridicules modern conceptions of cancer which are synonyms for death and decay, which implicate the repressed and emotionally defective character of the cancer victim, and which are used as metaphors for the most nefarious types of evil. She argues that these ideas about cancer are oppressive in the sense that they do not help those who have cancer to differentiate themselves from the disease. These popular notions also sanction character judgments about those who suffer from cancer, they may lead them to feel responsible and guilty for the disease and, in general, they perpetuate the stigma that surrounds cancer.<sup>6</sup>

Sontag (1977, 1978:4) dedicates her inquiry to an "elucidation" of and a "liberation" from the myths about cancer. She attempts to generate some intellectual distance from the popular moral and punitive beliefs about

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6. See Goffman (1963) for a comprehensive sociological treatment of the phenomenon of stigma.

cancer which ultimately prove to be oppressive rather than enlightening to those who contract the illness. Her solution to the constraining character of cancer usage, i.e., an actor's everyday prescriptions and methods for producing the particular context in which cancer is understandable,<sup>7</sup> is the illumination of its oppressive nature which her work creates. Sontag's approach to cancer is critical in the sense that she debunks conventional notions and perceptions of that disease.

A sociological view of illness, in contrast to Sontag's, would show how cancer is a social construction. Moreover, it would show how the institution of any social activity is a matter of its practitioners' selection (McHugh and associates, 1974:1-20). It stands to reason that the possibility of social behaviours also provides for alternatives to them. Winch (1958:65) notes,

Understanding something involves understanding the contradictory too...conduct which is the product of understanding, and only that, is conduct to which there

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7. Weber (1964:121) defines usage as "an actually existent probability of a uniformity in the orientation of social action...if and in so far as the probability of its maintenance among a group of persons is determined entirely by its actual practice." Winch (1958) provides some good philosophical insights about usage. He also explains Wittgenstein's (1958, 1969) contribution to its development in relation to a theory of language. Garfinkel (1967) and Sudnow (1967) depict the dynamics of usage in social settings. Their work demonstrates an important feature of usage: that is, that members' constructions of reality are not independent of or distinct from the methods employed to produce them.

is an alternative.

The popular conceptions of cancer, as Sontag demonstrates, do not contribute to a measured understanding of the disease; yet, the more scientifically objective view of the disease, which she advocates as the solution to popular confusion, would still not touch upon the social process which gives cancer a meaning and which, therefore, makes the ascription of different meanings possible. Kellert (1976:223) notes,

...people relativistically assign the health and illness labels on the basis of norms and standards of adaptation.

Sontag overlooks the case that the popular conceptions about cancer are products of an attempt which people make to socialize a potentially overwhelming experience: that is, to make the disease sensible in the context of everyday life.

My approach to the plague, and to disease, in general, is integrative in the sense that I have attempted to make a place for the plague in social life. I have tried to show that when the plague is socially constituted to warrant chaos in social and moral life, it reinforces the powerlessness and apathy of those who are beleaguered by the plague, and therefore, lessens their chances of survival.

I have chosen to do the most sympathetic readings

possible of plague-related behaviours in the sense that I have striven to show how they were grounded in their practitioners' interest in survival. This corresponds to Becker's (1973:5) characterization of cultural hero systems

...in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning...The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count.

This conception of heroism as an orientation which directs the seemingly mundane and ordinary behaviours of social actors in everyday life is feasible if we recall Aristotle's (1971:25) statement:

It is thought that every activity, artistic or scientific, in fact every deliberate action of pursuit, has for its object the attainment of some good. We may therefore assent to the view that 'the good' is 'that at which all things aim.'

The feasibility of using a heroic system to interpret plague-related behaviours is also shown if we consider the general nature of the relation between disease and the organism it strikes. Riese (1953:20) explains,

Disease is a state of suffering subject to change and evolution and associated with impaired function. Mankind has always looked at disease as at reduced

life, the destructive nature of disease indeed being its most impressive feature. But disease also reveals the effort of the organism to resist destruction and to that extent disease is a constructive condition.

The plague brought death to medieval society on a massive scale.<sup>8</sup> If we follow Riese's logic in assuming that every organism stricken with disease strives for life, we can surmise that those threatened with death from the plague did not wish to facilitate this, but that they sought ways to resist extinction via their responses to the plague. This is analogous to Lifton's (1961:4) explanation of his work in History and Human Survival:

...the essays do explore ways in which men and women --- some of them exposed to the most extreme experiences of our extreme epoch --- suffer, survive, adapt, and evolve new modes of feeling and thought, of rebellion, and of life.

Aristotle's notion that every activity aims at some good strengthens the concept of social action by making reference to the deep purpose which fosters any social action and which, therefore, enables both participant and observer to provide for its intelligibility within particular contexts. Winch (1958:53), for example, invokes this kind of logic in order to show how the behaviour of an anarchist is social rather than crazy:

The anarchist has reasons for acting

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8. This is developed, at length, in Chapter Two.

as he does; he makes a point of not being governed by explicit, rigid norms. Although he retains his freedom of choice, yet they are still significant choices that he makes: they are guided by considerations, and he may have good reasons for choosing one course rather than another.

Both the concept of social action as meaningful behaviour and the way in which a disease compels a stricken organism to fight for life have influenced my decision to regard the behaviours of those who faced the plague as attempts to affirm the good of life. The rationale for analysing the plague in this way follows. Disease is a social construction. This alerts us to the powers of authority which people exercise in relation to disease. They are able to select and give credence to the form that any phenomenon might take. Thus, any social construction is also a display of its constituents' liveliness: it involves a decision they have made relative to the shaping of their world.

Disease also creates a condition in the organism which gives it a reason to struggle for life. The diseased organism strives to preserve itself against extinction. It works to maintain itself as an organism. Thus, disease necessitates a resurgence of life in the organism which is warranted by what it (disease) is. Disease is not solely debilitating: it is a condition

in which life seeks to renew itself, regardless of its success or failure. It is within this context, then, that the medieval actors' responses to the Black Death make sense as modes of resistance to the wholesale death and destruction wrought by the plague.

The Problem of Validity Regarding  
History and Social Behaviour

This dissertation is essentially a sociological analysis of certain historical accounts of the plague. My orientation to the interpretation of plague-related phenomena is similar to Weber's (1964:89) conception of meaning as

...the theoretically conceived pure type of subjective meaning attributed to the hypothetical actor or actors in a given type of action. In no case does it refer to an objectively correct meaning or one which is true in some metaphysical sense.

This work is primarily meant to offer a way of understanding various medieval, and even some modern, responses to the plague via a demonstration of their intelligibility in particular contexts. I do not preclude the possibility of other readings; instead, I invite the reader to participate in the work of formulating the behaviours which are ultimately examples of social actions that have been precipitated by overwhelming conditions. I do not claim exegetical fidelity in relation to these materials. This would obscure the analytic way in which I have approached them. Blum (1973:vii) articulates this orientation to inquiry:

The distortional character of all reading and speaking must be kept

in mind, not as a problem to be corrected, but as a method of affirming the commitment of the reader/speaker. It is through the distortions that the reader will discover --- if he takes the time --- the commitment for which this work speaks. This is not to say that I refuse responsibility for what I say about works, but that the reader must center his attention on how I could say it as a method of preserving the intelligibility of the work.

This insight concerning the distortional character of speech may also be used to recommend an active (rather than passive) form of historical understanding. Jonas (1974:249) notes that a historical communication is, like a work of art, monological:

...we stand opposite a self-enclosed, definitive entity which can tell us nothing about itself beyond what it already is. With its finished creation and dismissal into the world, it has assumed that silent infinity of a passive potential for interpretation and reiterated experience which it shares with the past.

He (1974:256) contends that the reader must bring new life to the historical text by engaging sympathy, imagination, and reason:

Reaching beyond my actual experience --- though nourished by it --- my possibility extends into that which has never been a part of my experience but, as human, is in the general range of man, and what it lets me thus experience indirectly by

participation in the symbolically revealed reality of the other enlarges my capacity for future, direct experience of my own.

He (1974:257) reveals that historical understanding involves both the eternal and the mutable aspects of life:

Only this we know: the self-transcending feat of understanding takes place on the base and within the bounds of that abiding common humanity which is somehow always at our call...This bottom ground we still share with the most alien of other civilizations. But the manifoldness that arises up from this ground is not deducible from it and is generally unforeseeable. The "ground" does not determine, it merely enables things to arise. The closer human things stay to this elementary...level, the simpler is the task of understanding them... The extrahistorical element in history is thus what is most accessible to historical understanding, available as it is in its sameness to all of us at all times; and it is the premise for everything else. But, then, proliferating around this persistent core, come the mutations of historical man in their endless never recurring diversity; it is for their sake, for all the nuances they display, that we study history--- and not to meet the old acquaintances.

I have attempted to exemplify Jonas' sense of history in this work. The theorist approaches the past like Simmel's (1971:145-6) stranger: that is, as one who encounters the other with a certain reserve. The stranger acknowledges the other's particularity at the same time

that he retains his perspective. The stranger exhibits a readiness to engage the other in a mode of discourse which is relevant to his immediate concerns but which is not prejudiced by them.

While Simmel (1971:145) demonstrates that the stranger's characteristic nearness and distance make him someone with whom it is easy to speak, Jonas (1974) shows that historical communications are dead in the sense that they can not enter into dialogue: they have no insights to offer us about themselves. History must be made to speak. The theorist, then, assumes the burden of history as he rewrites it and attempts to demonstrate its relevance to the timeless needs of his contemporaries.

A good historian must preserve the tension between the uniqueness of the past and the nearness of the familiar. He must, in a sense, make history strange, but compelling enough to draw his contemporaries into a process whereby they attempt to transform the antics of past civilizations into stories that touch a unity that is constant through the flux of historical change. The plague has, in this way, provided us with an opportunity to develop the ways in which men and women responded to extraordinary conditions in relation to a theory of social action.

## An Overview of the Dissertation and Chapter Synopsis

I have articulated the logic which grounds my interpretations of plague-related phenomena. I have demonstrated how the theoretical and analytical perspective of this study precludes a methodology that is separate from the process of inquiring about these phenomena. The methodology may therefore be understood as an intrinsic feature of the attempt to account for, make sense of, and, generally, provide for the sociality of the behaviours which are my topics. This refusal to generate a distinction between theory and practice is similar to McHugh's and associates' (1974:10) recommendation that their papers be read as examples of their method: they are "exemplifications of that which makes them possible."

This approach to sociological inquiry is fostered by a recognition of the interest in the relation between ideas and social actions which both philosophy and sociology share (Winch, 1958:91, 133). Hence, it gives impetus to a kind of work which attempts to trace internal relations and conventions rather than to apply "generalizations and theories of the scientific sort to particular instances." (Winch, 1958: 131, 133)

The sociological --- rather than historical ---

organization of this work allows for an imaginative treatment of the materials in the sense that I have not felt constrained to reproduce them in the chronological order which adherence to an ossified (historical) tradition would demand.

The numerous historical references to the plague in this thesis are examples of social behaviours. I have used them in order to capture the atmosphere of everyday life in the Middle Ages and to enhance our appreciation of an epoch that today seems barbaric and removed from our ken.<sup>9</sup>

I selected these historical texts, which were secondary sources, because they were popular accounts of the plague. They gave me a sense of what typical medieval actors confronted in their experience with the disease. The ways in which these texts expressed the similar thoughts and actions of members of culturally different plague-stricken groups, e.g., Italian, French, German, and British, made it possible for me to read them as examples of medieval community life. They helped me to focus on the social aspect of the plague.

I spent some time thinking about these materials, and I attempted to organize them in relation to ideas

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9. See Nisbet (1976) for an interesting treatment of the similarities between art and sociology.

which could warrant their intelligibility. I then chose a variety of phenomena which were formulable both as responses to the plague and events in their own right in the sense that they arose in different contexts. They therefore required different ascriptions of meaning in the course of their analyses. The analyses of these phenomena constitute the remaining four chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter One is a demonstration of the relevance which the study of plague has for sociology, and an articulation of my general theoretical framework. In Chapter Two, I argue that the unique form of collective and premature death which the plague brought to bear upon medieval societies necessitated their members' adaptation of crude and simple methods to resist the insignificance of death from the plague. In Chapter Three, I observe that the social production of a plague as an event in the life of the community warrants its members' denial, panic and vigilance. These different responses are engendered by different conceptions of a plague which I develop at length. In Chapter Four, I show how the persecution of medieval Jews for their alleged role in spreading the plague may be read as an attempt which the medieval actor made to challenge the supernatural explanation that the plague was the work of a vengeful God. I also

formulate anti-Semitism as an attempt to exorcise the threat which anomaly posed to the social order via the destruction of deviants. In Chapter Five, I develop the relation between the vile way in which the plague infected the body and the macabre art of the Middle Ages. I demonstrate how this mode of perceiving death was not as gruesome as it appears to be, but how it was an attempt to keep death at bay. Thus, it emerges as an aesthetic form that shows a deep commitment to life.

## CHAPTER II

### THE IMPACT OF PLAGUE UPON MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

In this chapter I show how the plague altered medieval society by relating the history of the Black Death to a general description of life in the Middle Ages. I formulate a way for us to think of how the plague appeared to the members of medieval society by describing their conceptions of life and death.

It is impossible to give more than a superficial account of any actor's social relations without also taking his ideas about reality into consideration (Winch, 1958:23). Thus, my description of life in the Middle Ages illuminates the context in which the medieval actors' responses to the plague are sensible to an audience of strangers. My discussion in this Chapter is critical and basic to the analyses of the plague-related phenomena in the remaining chapters of this work. It gives the reader a general way to conceive of the social consequences of the plague.

## Life in the Middle Ages

Calamities and indigence were far more afflicting than at present; it was more difficult to guard against them, and to find solace. Illness and health presented a more striking contrast, the cold and darkness of winter were more real evils. Honours and riches were relished with greater avidity and contrasted more vividly with surrounding misery. We, at the present day, can hardly understand the keenness with which a fur coat, a good fire on the hearth, a soft bed, a glass of wine were formerly enjoyed. (Huizinga, 1954:9)

Huizinga's (1954:9-31) observation that life in the Middle Ages had a violent and dramatic tone is reiterated by other historians, e.g., Ziegler (1969), Tuchman (1978), Heer (1962), and Boase (1972). Medieval life seems particularly brutal in contrast to modern life. This observation would not mean anything to medieval actors in the sense that they did not have a standard --- like the quality of modern life --- with which to compare their experience (Winch: 1958:32). Medieval actors were probably unaware of how mean their lives actually were. However, it is difficult for me not to portray medieval life as hardship insofar as my research in the area has confirmed my suspicions that medieval life never departed from the general form of hardship.

By the middle of the thirteenth century, Europe was becoming overpopulated, as existing methods of agriculture could not satisfy the increasing demand for sustenance (Ziegler, 1969:31-2). The frigid climate of Western Europe aggravated the situation further for it shortened the growing season. Thus, "...famine, the dark horseman of the Apocalypse, became familiar to all." (Tuchman, 1978:24)

Life expectancy was short: it varied between twenty and forty years in the period from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries (Goldscheider, 1971, in Marshall, 1980:11). The infant mortality rate was high (Heer, 1962:52), and Tuchman (1978:50) speculates that it probably contributed to the lack of importance which members of medieval society attached to childhood. Aries (1962:34) notes that "there was no place for childhood in the medieval world..." and that "...childhood was a period of transition which passed quickly and which was just as quickly forgotten."

If a child reached the age of seven, his life as a miniature adult began: in general, the medieval population was young: "about half...was under twenty-one, and one-third, under fourteen." This could account for "the medieval inability to restrain any kind of impulse" (Tuchman, 1978:52). Huizinga (1954:10) notes that the

"perpetual oscillation between despair and distracted joy, between cruelty and pious tenderness" was typical of life in the Middle Ages.

Pain, a fact of medieval life, was expressed freely. "Lepers sounded their rattles and went about in processions, beggars exhibited their deformity and their misery in churches." (Huizinga, 1954:9) Boase (1972:9) notes that there was no relief from the horror of surgery, which was usually amputation. Disfiguring wounds were given and received by knights in battle (Boase, 1972:9). Both confession to crime and its punishment were attained through the use of torture (Huizinga, 1954:11-2), a technique calculated to maintain "life in pain" commensurate to the gravity of the offense (Foucault, 1977:8-11). Torture was employed to create "a thousand deaths" before pity was taken upon the criminal and he was allowed to die.<sup>1</sup>

Heer (1962:52) notes that "...disease, hunger, and death were always present" in medieval life. The states to which the body were routinely subjected, e.g., starvation, deformity, assault and torture influenced the actors' perceptions of their lives as cruel and brutal. Huizinga (1954:30) asks,

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1. Foucault (1977:33-4) thinks that the disappearance of torture as a public spectacle is significant insofar as it shows "a slackening of the hold on the body."

Is it surprising that the people could see their fate and that of the world only as an endless succession of evils? Bad government, exactions, the cupidity and violence of the great wars and brigandage, scarcity, misery, and pestilence --- to this is contemporary history nearly reduced in the eyes of the people.

Although Christianity was an essential component of medieval life (Tuchman, 1978:32), it did not mitigate the peoples' sufferings for they were never really assured of their salvation. Heer (1967:89) notes, "The masses despaired --- this is proved a hundred times over --- of the possibility of a Christian life on earth." Tuchman (1978:34) states that, "No one doubted in the Middle Ages that the vast majority would be eternally damned." Huizinga (1954:30-1) reports: "According to a popular belief current towards the end of the fourteenth century, no one, since the beginning of the great Western schism had entered Paradise."

A modern student of history could yield to the temptation to typify life in the Middle Ages as an unrelenting assault of humanity by reality: that is, as a popular subjection of the social (ie., the actor's faculty for choice and understanding) to natural conditions that always contained the threat of possible disaster. The Middle Ages may be thought of as a time which engendered "a high degree of irritability" in its constituents

(Huizinga, 1954:15): it was difficult for them to differentiate themselves from the exigencies which were decisive to their survival. Their presence was threatening enough to give medieval life a contingent and unsettled air. Ariès (1974:44) explains,

...the man of the late Middle Ages was very acutely conscious that he had been granted a stay of execution, that this delay would be a brief one, and that death was always present within him shattering his ambitions and poisoning his pleasures.

The medieval actors can be thought of as being in a situation which required them to organize the tension between nature and society. They had to orient and respond to the natural conditions that plagued them, thereby bringing their differences (their sociality) into play. They could have reproduced the brutality of nature in their everyday interactions or they could have used sympathy and understanding in order to form their interactions. The behaviours of medieval actors reflected their imitative or mediated relations to nature. One could argue, for example, that the thousand or so tiny deaths that were inflicted on the recipients of torture merely replicated the natural forms of assault, like famine, earthquakes, and the plague.<sup>2</sup> Thus, when they tortured each

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2. Eliot (1972:7) argues that the terrors of disease and plague made death "an enemy that constantly threatened to interrupt life" to humanity before the advent of advanced industrial society. This sense of death's imminence in life was not strictly confined to medieval populations. Marshall (1980:10-18) explains that the "mortality revolution", i.e., increased life expectancy, low infant mortality, and control of infectious diseases only began in the latter part of the 18th century.

other the members of medieval society duplicated the brutality of nature. They did not humanize their society by orienting to the education of the criminal instead of his punishment.<sup>3</sup>

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3. This is a way to depict how the members of medieval society were responsible for their fate. This was inextricably tied to their construction of the moral order. This is, of course, a suggestion. I am not claiming that it is an accurate depiction of the medieval actors' perception of reality: it is only a way for us to conceive of them as social actors and make sense of their situation. Thus, sociology is an attempt to organize and make sense of forms of life which may or may not have taken "the ultimate meaning" of their conduct (Weber, 1946:152). Winch (1958: 89) points out that this differentiates it from the natural sciences:

...reflective understanding must necessarily presuppose, if it is to count as genuine understanding at all, the participant's unreflective understanding...Similarly, although the reflective student of society, or of a particular mode of social life, may find it necessary to use concepts which are not taken from the forms of activity which he is investigating, but which are taken from the context of his own investigation, still these technical concepts of his will employ a previous understanding of those other concepts which belong to the activities under investigation.

## The Natural History of the Black Death

It is easy to say that medieval man lived closer to the threshold of death than his modern counterpart and that the impact of such wholesale destruction was therefore not so severe as it would have been today. But nothing could have prepared him for the horrors of 1348 and 1349. (Ziegler, 1969:148)

The members of medieval society were probably accustomed to the hardship of their everyday lives. Yet, their familiarity with suffering did not lessen the shock of the plague, which was extraordinary, even in the context of medieval life. The Black Death was "the most frightful" pandemic "that has ever afflicted mankind" (Hirst, 1953:13). Tuchman (1978:94) states that modern demographers have more or less accepted Froissart's claim that "a third of the world died" from plague in the Middle Ages. Gregg (1978:9) agrees with this figure, but Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976: 151) are more conservative in their estimate that the plague killed one quarter of the world's population.

Although some authors differ in regard to the exact date that the plague struck a certain place, most accounts of its progression through Europe are similar. These accounts comprise a kind of natural history of the Black Death. This is a sketch of the plague, drawn from secondary sources, rather than a rigorous account based on primary

research.

Gregg (1978:6), Ziegler (1969:26) and Nohl (1961:8) concur that the plague originated in Central Asia. It moved south and west from there, and it struck China and India (Gregg, 1978:6). It advanced through the lands of the Khitai and struck the Uzebeks in November 1346 (Dols, 1977:38, 51). It progressed through Transoxiana and Persia, then it moved on from the Crimea to the Mediterranean (Dols, 1977:38). The plague was communicated to Europe from Asia via the Genoese factory at Kaffa (Ziegler, 1969:15-6). The Christian traders had been besieged by the Janibeg Kepchak Khan and the Mongolian army for several years (Gregg, 1978:6). During the last seige, in 1346, the Mongolian army was infected by the plague, and the Janibeg Khan had his soldiers' corpses catapulted over the walls of the city (Ziegler, 1969:16). Although the beleaguered Christians disposed of the corpses by dropping them into the sea as soon as they had touched the ground, they could not ward off the plague (Dols, 1977:53). Some of the infected Genoese took to their galleys and headed for Constantinople (Dols, 1977:53). By the time they arrived in Messina, Sicily in October 1347, most of the crew was either dead or dying from the plague (Tuchman, 1978:92; Nohl, 1961:8). The Messinese helped to spread the plague through the Western Mediterranean by driving the contaminated ships out of their port (Dols, 1977:54; Nohl, 1961:8). Dols

(1977:54) notes that the plague followed the main trade routes from Tunis to North Africa, to Corsica and Sardinia, to the Balearics, Almeria, Valencia, Barcelona and Southern Italy. By the spring of 1348, the plague had spread to Venice and Genoa: it was established in Sicily and on the European mainland (Ziegler, 1969:17).

Hecker (1844:6) claims that the Black Death hit France from Avignon: in June, 1348, it struck Paris (Tuchman, 1978:93). At this time, it also traveled through the Rhine valleys and the Moselle (Gregg, 1978:8). Plague started in England in the town of Melcombe Regis either in late July or early August 1348. It also invaded Ireland at that time (Shrewsbury, 1970:37, 40). The pestilence abated during the winter months in England, but it flared up again in the summer of 1349. It moved from the southwest coastal area to Bristol, Oxford and London (Shrewsbury, 1970:37). Although the plague was raging in Scotland in 1350, it never really hit the Highlands (Shrewsbury, 1970:45-6).

The plague was brought to Scandanavia from England by a ship that sailed from London to Bergen (Hecker, 1844:8) in May 1349 (Dols, 1977:55). It continued on to Poland and it arrived in Russia two years after it had first appeared in Southern Europe (Hecker, 1844:8). Hirst (1953:14) observes that "the Great Mortality took about three years to sweep over Europe and was followed by successive

waves of lesser magnitude up to 1388."

## A Social History of the Plague

The plague appeared suddenly and without warning (Ziegler, 1969:17), and it immediately became an unalterable fact of medieval life, a condition with which everyone had to contend. The pervasiveness of the plague was facilitated by the rapid spread of the disease from one person to the next, "its most alarming feature" (Ziegler, 1969:23). One chronicler wrote,

The contagion was so great that one sick person, so to speak, could "infect the whole world...A touch, even a breath, was sufficient to transmit the malady."  
(Gasquet quoted in Lifton, 1967:517)

The plague usually meant death to anyone it infected. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:151) estimate that it was fatal to 90 per cent of those who contracted it. If we consider the high mortality rate that followed the plague everywhere along with Berger and Luckmann's (1966:101) statement that "death...posits the most terrifying threat to the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life", then it makes sense to assume that the sudden and widespread way in which the plague made death a feature of medieval life must have intensified the actors' perception of their lives as fleeting and uncertain.

Sometimes people who had had no complaint the night

before were found dead the following morning (Tuchman, 1978: 92). This is illustrated in the following story: A pilgrim to St. James of Compostella (Spain) stopped at an inn in Salvatierra on his way home. He dined with the host who seemed to be healthy, paid for his room, and retired for the evening. The next morning he found that the innkeeper, his daughters, and their servant had expired during the night. A chronicler remarked that the pilgrim "...made all haste to leave the place" (LiMuisis quoted in Ziegler, 1969:117).

Other anecdotes show the way in which the plague shook the ground of medieval life and served to "spread and intensify the general feeling of crisis endemic toward the end of the medieval period" (Heer, 1962:26). In Whitchurch, Britain the inquisition of the post mortem on the Le Strange family displays the alacrity with which the plague worked. On August 20th, John Le Strange died, leaving three sons, Fulk, Humphrey, and John the Younger. When the inquiry was held on August 30th, Fulk had been dead for two days. Before Fulk's inquest could be held, Humphrey died. Only John survived (Ziegler, 1969:196).

Sometimes priests and physicians were stricken by the plague and expired as they were attending the sick (Ziegler, 1969:20). Tuchman (1978:94) notes, "Everywhere reports speak of the sick dying too fast for the living to bury". Ziegler (1969:57) gives a sympathetic account of the

escalated rate of mortality in Orvieto,

It is still difficult to conceive the impact of a catastrophe which, within four or five months, removed every second person from a small and closely knit community. In every family of four in Orvieto, one of the parents and one of the children could statistically expect to die.

In Siena in 1347, men had started building a cathedral which was meant to be the greatest in the world. The plague struck and most of the workers succumbed to it. City funds were diverted and the project was abandoned midway (Ziegler, 1969:58). Tuchman (1978:96) notes, "The cathedral's truncated transept still stands in permanent witness to the sweep of death's scythe."

The rural communities were also ravaged by the plague. Boccaccio (1972:57) reports that many peasants lay dead in the fields, on the roads, and in their homes. The living were too distracted by the pestilence to attend to their chores. Consequently, the crops were not harvested and all kinds of domestic animals were left to wander freely through the countryside.

The Black Death played havoc with medieval society. The fear and misery which were precipitated by the pestilence at every turn revivify Berger and Luckmann's (1966:103) observation that

The constant possibility of anomic terror is actualized whenever legitimations that obscure the precariousness of social reality

are threatened or collapse.

The impact of the plague upon medieval society is considered in the following section.

## The Importance of Preparing for Death

Ariès (1974:2-3) comments that in the Middle Ages, deaths by the plague were terrible for they happened without warning. Normally, one was forewarned: one sensed when one's death was approaching and one accepted it (Ariès, 1974: 7).

This concept of death as an event in life which one could anticipate and prepare oneself for was not unique to the millennium which Ariès describes as having a "tamed" attitude toward death. It was articulated and developed by Plato in the *Phaedo*. Socrates taught that philosophy is a preparation for death (Choron, 1963:49-50).<sup>4</sup>

Philosophy is the practice in which the philosopher engages: the philosopher willfully engages in a practice which readies him for death. He chooses to orient to death (to what he does not know): thus, he makes death an integral feature of his life. He uses it as a point of departure for what he does. Philosophy is the practice whereby the philosopher organizes the tension between what he knows (life) and what he does not know (death).

The philosopher makes death an occasion for self-

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4. See the *Phaedo* for the specifics of the dialogue in Plato (1971). Also, Friedlander (1969) for an explanation.

realization; that is for the fulfillment of his role as a philosopher. Thus, it helps him to achieve a relation to the unknown. The philosopher approaches death thoughtfully. The prospect of death does not alienate him or give him a reason to stop inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Socrates demonstrated this when he refused to run away from his executioners in Athens and spent the time before his death in reflection.

Socrates chose to die in Athens because he preferred to do philosophy rather than to live in silence. He did not allow the prospect of his actual death to collapse the tension between the unknown and the known. He chose not to live without philosophy (i.e., without the best form of life that was possible for him) which his life in exile would have entailed.<sup>6</sup>

Death without philosophy is intimidating. Death --- as a condition that is not tempered by life --- is frightening because it is merely unknown. The unexamined death is

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5. Koestenbaum (1976) attempts to revivify this orientation to death within the context of modern life. He (1971:259, 266) argues that death may be a source of inspiration for life rather than one of fear insofar as one can use it as an occasion to reflect, to face possibilities which the prospect of not-being brings to light. Koestenbaum (1976:32, 33) suggests that one who faces death honestly may transform his life insofar as he is challenged by death (by the unknown) to generate a sense of the meaning of his mortality which can endure through and entertain the prospect of not being.

6. See the Apology, the Crito and the Phaedo (in Plato, 1971) which encompass the Last Days of Socrates.

never brought into the foreground of what is known. It can never offer anything of consequence to life (like philosophy). The unphilosophical death never touches the richness of the interplay between what is unknown and what is known. Its potential to mystify the familiar by reminding its constituent of the presence of the unknown never becomes a viable practice for him. Thus, an unphilosophical death seems capricious.

It is awesome in the sense that it is the limit of mortality, yet it is accidental. Death occurs without reason. It is an exigency which is decisive to one's survival, but death never has to account for itself. Death is unyielding and indifferent to human endeavour: it is often thought of as having its own logic. We may fool ourselves by looking for the justice in death, but that is a human task, an ascription of meaning. Johnstone (1978:23) states, "... death turns out not to be the sort of thing that has a nature --- unless its nature is to be a problem."

Death is more powerful than life in the sense that all life ends in death: no one can escape it. Its absolute finality insinuates the ineffectualness of the will, for, ultimately, death cannot be controlled. Death can be typified as "an outsider, both unpredictable and difficult to comprehend" (Marshall, 1978:23). As a matter of fact, life always defers to death. Thus, "death is an inevitable

part of the human condition" (Marshall, 1980:2).

The fact that death is inescapable suggests that all people must face the prospect of death at sometime in their lives. Lofland (1978:14) states,

...no human group of which we have any knowledge fails to take death into account. Everywhere and always humans think about it and develop beliefs regarding it and produce emotions toward it and do things relative to it. What they think, believe, feel, and do is, of course, variant. But that they think, believe, feel, and do is a universal.

The sheer pervasiveness of death makes it seem powerful, but what is the power of death? The power of death is a feature of the kind of condition that it is: death is indifferent to our relation to it. It occurs regardless of whether we accept it, reject it, or find a way to integrate it in our lives. The possibility of responding to death in every instance that a response is warranted, however, does give us the opportunity to exercise ourselves in relation to the unalterable condition that death is. Thus, we may make our death into whatever we choose to make it. In the face of death, humans may discover their own powers inasmuch as they may give it a form. Ariès work (1974) is an illustration of this.

Death is powerful in the sense that it forces one to face a condition about which one has no real say. Yet, in the act of confronting one's death, one discovers that one

has a say: one has the ability to make one's death relevant to life. The power of death, in this way, turns the individual back to himself, to his ability to relate to death. Thus, Socrates showed how death can be used as an occasion to discover one's affinity with the unknown. He taught how death may give one the opportunity to recover (rather than to lose) one's self.

Thus far, we have noted that Socrates recommended philosophy as a preparation for death. He treated death ironically in the sense that he used it as an occasion for dialogue rather than as a reason for silence. Socrates recollected his passion for philosophy in the face of death. He did not externalize his death by treating it as an intrusion. Instead, he used it to revivify his commitment to philosophy: to organize the tension between the unknown and the known. Socrates showed how one could restrain one's impulse to leave one's relation to death unexamined, thereby taming its capriciousness (which is a feature of one's avoiding the thought of death). Socrates taught that death needs to be tamed: The thought of death which one responds to silently conquers its author in the sense that he has relinquished his privilege to die decisively. Nietzsche (1954:183-4) also addresses the importance of dying well:

Die at the right time --- thus teaches  
Zarathustra. Of course, how could  
those who never live at the right time  
die at the right time? Would that they

had never been born! Thus I counsel the superfluous. But even the superfluous still make a fuss about their dying: and even the hollowest nut still wants to be cracked. Everybody considers dying important; but, as yet, death is no festival. As yet men have not learned how one hallows the most beautiful festivals.

I show you the death that consummates --- a spur and a promise to the survivors. He that consummates his life dies his death victoriously, surrounded by those who hope and promise. Thus, should one learn to die; and there should be no festival where one dying thus does not hallow the oaths of the living.

Nietzsche exhorts the reader to participate in death as fully as life: both life and death must be confronted with spirit. Those who "hope and promise" shatter the security of conventional understandings as they struggle to make a place for the unfathomable (death) in their lives. If their lives are exemplary, then so must their deaths be. By choosing to die freely, they relinquish their attachment to the familiar and proceed with the same abandon that marked their lives. Jaspers (1965:323) elaborates upon Nietzsche's view of death, "Viewed as an end, death itself is really an expression of life. One can attain mastery over death and life through the way he conceives of them..."; when the way he conceives of them reflects his organization of his life as an abiding and consistent example of that practice.<sup>7</sup>

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7. I am indebted to Peter McHugh for making this point in his comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

Nietzsche, like Socrates, emphasizes that one's orientation to death is more important than the mere fact of death. The decision to exercise one's self in relation to one's death and to die decisively differentiates the philosophical approach to death from others.

## The Inappropriateness of Philosophy in the Plague Context

In the preceding section, I demonstrated how philosophy may be thought of as a preparation for death. By showing how a life of inquiry enables one to die well, Socrates was also teaching that a good death takes the work of a lifetime. The sudden and dramatic way in which the plague brought death to bear upon medieval society, then, raises questions which are critical to our understanding of the actors' behaviours at that time. What happens when one does not have a lifetime to prepare for death? How can we make sense of responses to death which are not philosophical?<sup>8</sup>

Lofland (1978:16) states:

The culture and organization of death --- the complex of thinkings, beliefs, feelings and doings relative to it --- in any given group at any given time, then is not so much a culture and organization of universal death (although it may contain elements of such). It is rather, a culture and

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8. The asking of these questions is not independent of the recommendation that one should prepare for death. This is different from making the assumption that everyone has a lifetime to prepare for death. The latter would preclude awareness that, given the appropriate span of time, an individual may choose either to prepare for death or not to prepare for death.

organization of characteristic death or deaths. If the latter changes, old ways of acting and feeling and thinking may seem unsatisfactory or irrelevant or inappropriate or incomplete. And while the old ways may persist despite their perceived inadequacies, it seems likely that eventually humans will construct for themselves a new, or at least altered, death culture and organization --- a new "craft of dying" --- better able to contain the new experience.

I am not implying that the plague engendered a situation in which a philosophical approach to death was replaced by a more direct one. I have emphasized Socrates' arguments concerning the importance of preparing for death in an attempt to show how, if the problem of relating to death is basic and essential to the philosopher, and how, more importantly, if it is thought to be a feature of a good life, then the unqualified and immediate way in which the plague thrust death upon medieval society must have certainly been cataclysmic to its members.

My intention here is not to juxtapose philosophical and commonsensical approaches to death. The idea of philosophical death is a standard which facilitates the formulation of plague as a phenomenon which violated and interfered with the medieval actor's conceptions of appropriate death.

With the advent of plague, death took a form that was anything but tame; moreover, the medieval population was not equipped to deal with it in a knowledgeable way.

Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:151) note, "Medicine, religion, and magic had little if any effect, although all were thrown into the combat." It is not surprising, then, that most of the responses to the plague in the Middle Ages were unphilosophical: the actors could not theorize about the place of death in their lives. Instead, they were compelled to find suitable and diverse ways to quiet and subdue the "uncontrollable and repulsive" (Kastenbaum and Aisenberg, 1976:149) form of death which accompanied the plague.

An unqualified and immediate death is unphilosophical insofar as it is not integrated by the dying person. It has not been tempered by its constituent: an unqualified and immediate death has a victim rather than an author. Those who approach death philosophically, on the other hand, qualify it. They orient to death as a source which has the potential to make their lives better by reminding them of the unknown. An unqualified and immediate death on the other hand, is the individual's point of reference for conceiving of death. It is the standard to which the individual reacts rather than the opportunity one takes to be responsible for death. Death is not used to confront the mystery which it presents to the one who dies in an unqualified and immediate way.

My observation that the medieval actors' responses to the plague could not be philosophical is not an intell-

ectual criticism: it is meant to convey a sense of how medieval life was influenced and shaped by concerns of an immediate nature. As this work progresses, I will make sense of ordinary action and restrain my impulse to recommend philosophy, given the extremity of the medieval actors' situation.

The problems that dominated life in the Middle Ages such as wars, fires, earthquakes, torture, and pestilence (Kastenbaum and Aisenberg, 1976:150) were pressing in the sense that they could be decisive to anyone's survival. Hence, they required solutions, procedures that were instigated to stop the rush of exigencies that threatened the lives of medieval actors in fateful ways. It was, in this way, necessary for them to be practically oriented.<sup>9</sup>

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9. The institution of practical measures as solutions to disasters is common in societies that are routinely subject to danger in the sense that "knowing what to do" after an accident helps to allay everyday anxiety and also helps to restore things to normal more quickly. Lucas (1969:6) demonstrates that this was the case in a mining community whose inhabitants were "periodically confronted with the practical problems of death." After an accident occurred in the mine, the members of the community always performed certain tasks, e.g., recovering the bodies of the dead miners, informing their families, arranging their funerals and burials, mourning for them, and looking after their widows and their children. Lucas (1969:6) states, "When recurrent problems persist over the years, affecting to some degree every individual in a community...common expectations and social arrangements tend to emerge. Through constant dealing with death and danger on an ad hoc basis, patterns of behavior become customary and through time so widely used that they can be considered as norms, codes, and institutional arrangements."

Lofland (1978:19-20) comments that acute diseases like plague kill their victims with relative speed, and so, they make for a brief period of dying. She explains:

...for large numbers of humans in the premodern world, the question of what to do when facing personal death --- how to act --- was not a question that required a very involved or complex answer. The period of time available for doing anything was simply too short. (Lofland, 1978:35)

In the remaining sections of this dissertation I make sense of approaches to death that were ordinary and simplistic: hence, the kind of death engendered by plague was the point of reference for the medieval actors' responses to it. In the course of analysing these plague-related behaviours the brief time that medieval actors had to respond to death should be kept in mind as a factor that influenced their constitution. This condition kept them from discovering their full potential when they were dying from the plague. At certain times, then, external conditions may influence actors' decisions to pursue courses of action which do not require them to push their powers for self-actualization to the limit. While I am not saying that purely practical actions are preferable to philosophy, I am implying that they are understandable in certain contexts.

Plague as Premature  
and Inappropriate Death

Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:146) propose that "words and actions concerning death may be considered as jointly constituting a system." They maintain that all societies have constructed death systems whereby they attempt to face death both individually and socially. The medieval actors' responses to the plague which serve as objects of my inquiry can be thought of as a death system.

A death system is different from the philosophical approach to death in the sense that its constituents use it to quiet the power of death and thereby control it. A death system subdues and routinizes death: its constituents are not philosophers in the sense that they are not interested in keeping the tension between what is known (life) and what is unknown (death) alive. They seek to keep death at bay and to thereby continue with the business of living, untouched, as it were by death, except when they have to be: that is, when the exigency of death interferes with their lives. They do not attempt to engage the unknown quality of death in a way that would make their lives philosophical: that is, as an organization of life (what is known) and death (the unknown).

Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:149) maintain that

the medieval death system tended to reproduce the excesses relative to the kind of death which dominated that time.

They argue that this was warranted by the circumstances:

The overwhelming emotional impact of the Black Death and its associated terrors had to be met on its own terms with a counter attack of intense emotionality.  
(Kastenbaum and Aisenberg, 1976:157)

The medieval death system can be typified as one in which social actors responded to the plague with expressions that replicated its extremity. The medieval actors met the challenge of emotion with emotion. They oriented to the plague as oppressive enough to dictate their mode of response to it. The brutality of the plague, i.e. its sheer animal dumbness which merely impressed itself upon them, was the point of reference for their behaviours. This curtailed their ways of responding to the plague: instead of invoking their difference from the plague in order to produce an expression which transformed it, they subjected it to the same conditions which it had exerted upon them. In some ways, the medieval death system was underdeveloped and immature: for the most part, its constituents did not act in their capacity to differentiate themselves from the plague in a radical way: they did not challenge the authority they gave the plague to set the parameters of their response to the kind of death it was.<sup>10</sup>

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10. The sophisticated imagery of the Dance of Death is an exception to this generalization. See my discussion in Chapter Five, pages 223-227.

While the medieval death system was adequate in the sense that it represented the actors' way of coping with the extreme circumstances of the plague, it was also limited in the sense that it never broke with that condition. Its constituents never upset the complicity of their relation to the plague in a way that would have required them to push their own powers to the limit. They did not engage their difference in forming their responses to the plague: they responded to extremity with emotion.

Thus, I would speculate that most of those who were struck by the plague probably experienced the frustration which is the fate of those who instigate acts of passive aggression. They never challenge the authority of the condition or person they resist. Hence, the passive aggressives' responsibility for their participation in the construction of their problem is obscured. These passive forms of resistance (like the medieval death system) indicate their constituents' use of a "ressentiment" morality (Scheler, 1972). Their sense of identity, of themselves as practitioners, is totally dependent upon what they happen to oppose.

In this section, I discuss some responses to the plague which offered an alternative to the conventional death system.

Tuchman (1978:93) quotes this Welsh lament which

typified the plague as

death coming into our midst like black  
smoke, a plague which cuts off the  
young, a rootless phantom which has  
no mercy for fair countenance. Woe<sup>11</sup>  
is me of the shilling in the armpit!

This lament suggests that one would not mind a death that one could make a place for or respond to as appropriate within the context of one's life, but that one does mind this form of "premature death" (Parsons, 1951:430).

Premature death refers to a situation which requires members to confront their mortality at a time that they are not prepared to confront it. Premature death strikes when members are unconvinced of their need to die. Thus, premature death is a possibility for those who have not been moved by philosophy: that is, for those who have not attempted to make their lives into an occasion to mediate the tension between the unknown and the known. Their lack of appreciation for the power of death --- for the opportunity it gives them to respond to the unknown --- enables them to conceive of it as premature. They are unconvinced of their need to relate to death in a vital way.

The presence of premature death in a society indicates the breakdown of its organization. It confounds its constituents inasmuch as they are unable to integrate

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11. The "shilling in the armpit" probably refers to the buboes or swellings in the armpit, groin, and neck which are symptoms of plague.

it into their lives. Premature death does not make sense as long as the members of the community fail to respond to it as appropriate. Thus, its presence in a community indicates the futility of social life. Premature death impedes the achievement of public understanding. Its very designation as "premature death" shows the community's failure to comprehend it.

Parsons (1951:444) notes that "...premature death is one of the most important situations in all societies, demanding complex emotional adjustments on the part of the dying person, if the probability is known to him in advance, and on the part of survivors." Parsons indicates that premature death must be made meaningful. It must be brought into the realm of social understandings if the members of the community are ever to recover from the blow it has dealt them, and which they, in turn, have made a feature of their definition of the situation. Premature death poses a threat to a society's identity in the sense that its members are unable to relate to it in a responsible way. Thus, they must recover their authority in order to end their construction of it as premature.

For the moment, I will return to the medieval actors' definition of the plague as premature death and their ensuing attempt to routinize and ascribe significance to it within the context of their everyday life. A reading of Ariès

(1974:44-5) gives me reason to think that the members of medieval society felt --- quite strongly --- that they needed to live out the time that had been allotted to them. As Parsons (1951:430) would say, "They needed to act out their full quota of social roles."

...the man of the late Middle Ages was very acutely conscious that he had merely been granted a stay of execution, that this delay would be a brief one, and that death was always present within him, shattering his ambitions and poisoning his pleasures. And that man felt a love of life which we today can scarcely understand because of our increased longevity.

The Welsh lament (quoted on page 64) demonstrates how the plague interfered with the medieval actors' sense of destiny by threatening to take their lives at a time when they were not prepared to die. The lament also expresses some grief over the fact that the plague, more often than not, killed the younger members of society. They would have had to make sense of the plague and give it a place within the context of medieval life. As Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:150) point out, the plague devastated "a society that had expended generations of children and young adults on a succession of crusades." The plague was demoralizing to medieval society in the sense that when it took its youth, it also took the promise of a future.<sup>12</sup> It halted temporarily, their perpetuation of their social order. It interfered

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12. Noting the work of Joseph Kett (1971), Marshall

with their work of ascribing meaning to extraordinary and meaningless events like the plague.

The plague intensified the medieval actors' feelings of solitude and subservience to a cruel fate. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:151) remark:

The medieval death system was unable to offer an effective technological defense. Most medical and quasi-medical procedures were completely useless, the necessary sanitation measures were not comprehended. Social controls and adjustments did not ease much of the burden from the individual. Authorities were exceedingly hard pressed even to direct the mass collection and disposal of the corpses, let alone offer much solace to the living. We must therefore conclude that it was the individual --- ready or not --- who had to bear the psychological onslaught of the Black Death...with whatever intellectual and emotional resources he could muster.

Lifton's (1967:30) observation about the nature of death in Hiroshima after the blast of the atomic bomb also holds for the communities that were besieged by the plague: that is, that the natural order of living and dying was replaced by an unnatural order of life dominated by death. When death strikes as prematurely and collectively as it does in disasters of such magnitude, it seems "absolutely disconnected" from life. Death is so "abrupt, total, and arbitrary" that it evades relation to any form of vitality

(1980:20-22) suggests that it is useful to think of the impact of mortality in the life cycle on different family members. In contrast to former times, parents no longer anticipate that any of their children will die before they do.

(Lifton, 1967:474).

The plague, then, struck the medieval population as a form of death that did not flow from life: if anything, it seemed to be a monstrous joke. "Oh, happy posterity, who will not experience such abysmal woe and will look upon our testimony as a fable," Petrarch (quoted in Ziegler, 1969:45) wrote, appealing to those who would succeed him to preserve the reality of the situation and to respect it for the horrendous experience it was.

The plague forced death upon a society that could only orient to it as superfluous. The citizens of the Middle Ages had no use for such a collective form of death at that point for they felt that their lives were brief enough. The plague was a terrible reminder of mortality for people who, according to Aries (1974:44), never forgot the "fragility of life."

One may surmise, further, that the way in which the plague took its victims reinforced the actors' perception of it as a great waste of life. Lifton's (1967:480) description of Hiroshima after the blitz is analogous to the situation that was brought about by the pestilence:

Death was not only everywhere, but  
was bizarre, unnatural, indecent,  
absurd.

The plague made death too easy, too cheap. Death was like a commodity, something which one contracted

externally and independently of one's own production (Marx, 1887:76-87). Everyone's death was really no one's death for no particulars were needed to satisfy the high rate of mortality which the plague exacted. It is possible to imagine that both the victims and the survivors of the plague felt insignificant and small in relation to the possibility of their deaths: they were lost to the sheer numbers that constituted the phenomenon.

Lifton (1967:411) repeats a survivor's remark about Hiroshima which is relevant to this discussion:

One was not allowed to have his own way of dying, but was simply annihilated with everyone else.

Lifton remarks that this person "could not emotionally absorb or creatively transform the massive anonymity and irrelevance of A-bomb deaths." Thus, disasters of this magnitude always seem to affront and insult their victims by showing them just how dispensable they are.<sup>13</sup>

The plague facilitated its victims' externalization of death. It happened to them without any need for their authority or role in its achievement. Death from the plague was so quick: it occurred within a few days, almost

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13. Eliot (1972:5) argues that "...the hundred million or so man-made deaths of the twentieth century... are comparable with the scale of death from disease and plague which was the accepted norm before the century. Indeed, man-made death has largely replaced these as a source of untimely death."

before its victims knew what was happening to them. For example, Hirst (1953:11) states, "The remarkable account given by Procopius of the ravages of the disease at Constantinople...is typical of all historic outbreaks of bubonic plague down to the present day...At the acme of the epidemic more than 10,000 people died each day and it became impossible to bury all the bodies."

The victims of the plague were, in a sense, unable to witness their departure from life for they did not have any time to contemplate their deaths. The plague must have seemed like a form of mockery to the living for both its manner of infection and contagion showed them how death was not of their choosing. More dramatically, it showed them how they were not even essential to their deaths.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the plague engendered a situation for the members of medieval society, relative to their deaths, which was very different from the modern one. Lofland (1978:17-8) observes that now "dying is often prolonged." This gives moderns the opportunity to approach their deaths in a more complex way than those in former times could.

Later, we shall note how medieval responses to the

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14. Lofland (1978:21) points out that "While the plague may not have been a major source of death in the premodern world, as a form of death --- involving communicability and acute illness --- it was apparently relatively typical."

plague and methods of dealing with death were unreflective in the sense that they did not really develop or articulate concerns relative to one's dying in a meaningful way. In contrast to this, moderns have spent so much time deliberating about their deaths and constructing different ways of dying, that they have generated a new grammar of death. Lofland (1978) provides a detailed and insightful account of this recent phenomenon which is becoming a social fact inasmuch as it is widely practiced by its constituents.

## Making Sense of the Plague

Parsons (1951:371) dwells upon the community's need to make sense of inappropriate and untimely forms of death:

Thus premature death, if not the mortality of men in general is surely a frustrating phenomenon, not only prospectively for the victim but for the survivors who have been attached to him. It is a situation calling for emotional readjustment and cognitive rationalization...Above all "the problem of evil" and "the problem of meaningless suffering" are focal points in this situation of strain.

Parsons suggests that the community that is touched by premature death needs to reinterpret and make sense of the experience which reminds it of its mortality by relating it to universal values concerning life and death, i.e., ones which are broader and deeper in scope than a segregated community can generate. The community needs to turn its troubling brush with premature death into a lesson that will educate it about life and, therefore, revivify its desire to survive in spite of the blow which it has been dealt by untimely death. The question of interest here is, how were the citizens of the Middle Ages able to transform their uneasiness with the plague into a practice which would revivify their commitment to social life?

The medieval actors were aware of their vulnerability to the plague. As Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:151) point

out, they "could all but see Death stalking through the land."

The plague put medieval actors in a predicament in which they were conscious of their identity and apprehensive as they faced the prospect of its demise. The plague brought their tendency to respond to the plague in a passive and compliant way to light. The plague threatened them with social extinction. Their initial formulation of it as a premature death reflected their failure to respond to it as members of a community: that is, as parts of a whole that endeavoured to make sense out of events which were in and of themselves, senseless. As constituents of a social order that faced destruction, the members of medieval society had to generate values which would enable them to engage their sociality in the course of their everyday interactions. They had to strengthen their conviction of their need to live in a social way. It is feasible that the plague gave the medieval actors the opportunity to confront the weakness of their identity. They were able to revivify it as they reestablished social organization in wake of their dispersed condition.

One way in which some preserved their sense of social organization was by their keeping chronicles of the plague. By writing their history, these medieval actors were able to minimize the impact of premature death. They

made it into an event which deserved their commentary. A number of these writings are referred to in most recent studies of the plague. For example, see Ziegler (1969), Nohl (1961), Lifton (1967:479-555), Tuchman (1978:92-155), Dols (1977), and Shrewsbury (1970).

One of the most eloquent chronicles was left by John Clyn. Tuchman (1978:95) tells his story:

In Kilkenny, Ireland, Brother John Clyn of the Friars Minor, another monk left alone among dead men, kept a record of what happened lest "things which should be remembered perish with time and vanish from the memory of those who come after us." Sensing "the whole world, as it were, placed within the grasp of the Evil One," and waiting for death to visit him too, he wrote, "I leave parchment to continue this work, if perchance, any man survive and any of the race of Adam escape this pestilence and carry on the work I have begun."

An identification with what endured through time and a sense of belonging to something which the ravages of plague could not obscure enabled John Clyn to write history: Thus, he held fast to a vision of humanity that could not be silenced by the relentless circumstances of the plague. We can think of his work as a display of his decision to combat death by orienting to life. He kept a chronicle of the plague for the sake of educating those who would succeed him. His work is an example of a legitimation that is instituted in anticipation of a break in historical understanding:

The problem of legitimation inevitably arises when the objectifications of the now historic institutional order are to be transmitted to a new generation. At that point...the self-evident character of the institutions can no longer be maintained by means of the individual's own recollection and habitualization. The unity of history and biography is broken. In order to restore it, and thus to make intelligible both aspects of it, there must be "explanations" of the salient elements of the institutional tradition. Legitimation is this process of explaining and justifying. (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:93)

The chroniclers of the plague like John Clyn, Boccaccio, De Foe, and Ibn Khaldun attempted to end the meaninglessness which was the real threat of extinction they perceived from the plague. Their desire to preserve their experience for posterity gave them a way to organize it in a social way. It required them to pursue a course of action which was generated by their commitment to public understanding of the event which had previously left them dumbfounded. They revitalized their identity as social beings as they began writing their history, thereby integrating the plague into their lives. At that point their treatment of it as a premature death stopped insofar as they had ceased to allow themselves to be governed by the inappropriateness of the plague.

Those who wrote the history of the plague oriented to it in a responsible manner by making it a topic for dis-

course. By thinking of it as something which could be written about, they differentiated themselves from a condition which they had previously given the power to silence and disperse them. Those who wrote the history of the plague recovered their sociality as their activity made the plague public. They transformed it into an occasion to resist hysteria and abstraction. They subdued the impact of the plague as they wrote history and brought their sociality into play against it. They tempered the plague with reason. Becker (1973:7) makes a point which is relevant to these authors' responses to the plague: "Society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning."

The chroniclers of the plague managed to undermine its effect insofar as they preserved a sense of the importance of their struggle by telling their story. In order to do this, they had to assume that their story was worth telling, i.e., that it would be beneficial, and perhaps even inspirational, to those who would eventually hear it. In finding a way to orient to the future through their writing, they resisted complete appropriation by the pestilence.

The writing of plague chronicles, then, is understandable as a form of "symbolic immortality". Lifton (1967:186) notes,

...in the more profound individual and cultural expressions of resignation there can be a predominant element of transcendence: of psychologically "taking in" an experience, however extreme, and simultaneously reasserting one's sense of connection with vast human and natural forces which extend beyond that experience and outlast its annihilation; that is, of reasserting one's sense of immortality.

Tuchman (1978:95), aware of this reorganization of experience and consequent orientation to a vision of life which the plague could not destroy, comments, "Brother John Clyn as noted by another hand, died of the pestilence, but he foiled oblivion."

The chroniclers of the plague managed to reverse their position of passive deference to it. Speaking for its victims and survivors, they made the plague subordinate to their authority by making the plague's historical survival dependent upon their writings which preserved it. Yet, this is not important: they wrote history to reaffirm their identity, to experience their powers as social beings, and to rekindle their sense of community in an environment which was hostile to it.

This interpretation of historical writings as a mode of resistance to the plague can be used to specify the general relation between plague and society. Given the circumstances of the plague, premature death is an event which the community must take exception to and resist in

ways that are immediately available and accessible to it.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the members of medieval society perceived the cruelty and injustice of their fate relative to the phenomenon of the plague. In order to end their conceptualization of it as premature, they had to differentiate themselves from the scourge. They reaffirmed their identity and withstood the pestilential attack by showing who they were, what they valued and wished to preserve in their lives. The chroniclers of the plague represented the medieval community as they articulated its members' sentiments and concerns regarding the plague. The chroniclers' responses were more sophisticated than the conventional ones of ordinary members. They transformed the plague into a topic of discourse and preserved its particularity instead of subduing it by making it appear routine and mundane. My analyses of other plague-related behaviours, like the community's panic and vigilance, the persecution of the Jews, and the macabre motifs in medieval art and literature, which comprise the remaining chapters of this dissertation are organized by this theme of heroic resistance to pestilence. In each chapter I illustrate and articulate the features of these phenomena which make them unique. I do not fit each example of plague-

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15. The folk ballad is a more modern example of a form of resistance to premature death. Commenting upon Hendrix (1977), Marshall (1980:52) notes that the ballads do not, as a rule, "deal with natural or non-violent death."

related behaviour to an external and independent theory. Instead, I show how we, as critical readers of these events, may achieve particular understandings of them.

## Chapter Summary

I have, in this chapter, described life in the Middle Ages. The trappings of medieval life were different from those of modern life. The use of the body, for example, was extreme: it constituted the core of medieval experience. As a matter of fact, the body was routinely subjected to disease, malnutrition, mutilation, and torture. I suggest that the severity of these conditions, which continually impinged upon the members of medieval society, influenced their perceptions of certain phenomena and their responses to them.

The citizens of the Middle Ages had to make use of resources that were accessible to them at the time in order to constitute their activities. Hence, their approaches and solutions to the problems that confounded them seem bizarre to us today. I show how they made sense in the contexts in which they were instituted. In this chapter, then, I have made a place for certain medieval phenomena by demonstrating the situations in which they arose and the actors' metaphysical concerns which made them possible.

Life in the Middle Ages was crude and brutal. The Black Death, no doubt, must have intensified the actors' feelings of subjection to pain and suffering. The plague

brought the phenomenon of premature death to bear upon a society which perceived the brevity of its time on earth. Death from the plague was quick and collective: no one had much time to prepare for it. The plague made death meaningless: it must have seemed to mock the living for it worked in a way in which it was easy for them to perceive that they were not even necessary constituents of their deaths.

In order to withstand the impending annihilation from the plague, medieval actors had to develop ways of restraining the hold which death was exerting upon their society. In other words, they had to undermine the authority of the plague by stopping its tendency to reduce their lives to insignificance. This was achieved, in one way, by writing history. The authors of plague chronicles committed their experience with the disease to memory and thereby preserved it for posterity. They affirmed their identity and undermined the power of the plague. In order to speak relevantly to future generations, they had to conceive of themselves as members of a community which would survive the horrors of the plague.

Thus far, I have made a case for inspirational readings of the plague chronicles. In the chapters that follow, I continue to make sense of the medieval actors' struggles with relentless circumstances. I wish to revivify the attempts which medieval society made to tame the plague,

and, to show, in a deeper way, what humanity in duress requires to preserve its humanity.

## CHAPTER III

### DENIAL, PANIC AND VIGILANCE: THE COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE

In this chapter I examine the different ways in which various communities responded to the plague. The accounts of members' behaviours are taken from chronicles of ancient, medieval and modern plagues.<sup>1</sup> Some works of fiction are also included in this discussion of the community's relation to the plague.

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1. Garfinkel (1967:35) defines a society's members as those who "encounter and know the moral order as the perceivedly normal courses of action --- familiar scenes of everyday affairs, the world of daily life known in common with others and with others taken for granted." Members are both cognizant and constituents of the understandings which make a community an ongoing, collective, practical and intellectual achievement. Language is essential to any ascription of sociality to members insofar as the practice of speaking and understanding is an integral feature of community life. Winch (1958:44) chides social psychologists for their general failure to view language in this light: "...the notions of having a language, and the notions that go along with that such as meaning, intelligibility, and so on --- these are taken for granted. The impression given is that first there is a language (with words having a meaning, statements capable of being true and false) and then, this being given, it comes to enter human relationships and to be modified by the particular human relationships into which it does so enter. What is missed is that those very categories of meaning, etc., are logically dependent for their sense on social interaction between men ... There is no discussion of how the very existence of concepts depends upon group-life."

## The Social Production of the Plague

The courses of action which members initiated and achieved as a result of their perceptions of the presence of the plague in their communities were features of its social production. This process was reflexive insofar as the actions of members relative to the pestilence were not independent of their conceptions of it which arose in the course of their everyday interactions.

In this chapter I demonstrate how members' conceptions of the plague which were features of their communities' responses to it changed in relation to the different contexts of their awareness of its existence. Thus, the behaviours of denial, panic and vigilance are understandable as courses of action which reflected different conceptions of a plague at the same time that they also constituted different versions of it.

Winch (1958:55) notes that social action is a whole which cannot be reduced to its parts without suffering the loss of the ineffable quality of its achievement:

Generally both the ends sought and the means employed in human life, so far from generating forms of social activity depend for their very being on those forms.

The behaviours of denial, panic and vigilance which

represent members' intellectual and practical struggles with the plague embody their various orientations to the means they used to accomplish the ends they desired in the course of their actions. This authorizes their social character in a traditional sense:

...processes or conditions, whether they are animate or inanimate, human or non-human, are in the present sense devoid of meaning insofar as they cannot be related to an intended purpose. That is to say that they are devoid of meaning if they cannot be related to action in the role of means or ends but constitute only the stimulus, the favoring or hindering circumstances.

Weber (1947:93) thus defines social behaviour. The emphasis which he places upon rationality in relation to the means/end schema makes the value-free study of behaviours impossible. If anything, Weber's statements show how the sociologist chooses to think of social actions as meaningful: he has stipulated that they must make sense. Insofar as social actions do make sense, they meet the sociologist's standard for conceiving of action more than they meet the actors' criteria for adequacy in regard to their own behaviours.<sup>2</sup> Meaningful action, thus references the sociological limits of knowledge: it does not represent the objectively true character of analyzed behaviours. I do not purport that my readings of the ancient, medieval and modern members'

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2. Winch (1958:89) has been cited in regard to this matter. See Chapter Two, pp. 40.

responses to the plague are valid in a scientific sense, or even value free. They are, however, true to phenomenological standards of analysis: they demonstrate ways in which the actors' responses may be thought of as sensible.

## The City

Thus far, the discussion of social responses to the plague has presupposed the existence and the nature of the medieval and the modern city while it has neglected to attend to their characteristics. Inasmuch as these are pertinent to a general understanding of community life, it is appropriate to devote some time to them in this section.

Primitive though it may be, every stable society feels the need of providing its members with centers of assembly or meeting places. Observance of religious rites, maintenance of markets, and political and judicial gatherings bring about designation of localities intended for the assembly of those who wish to do so. Military needs have a still more positive effect. Populations have to prepare refuges where will be found momentary protection from the enemy in case of invasion. War is as old as humanity and the construction of fortresses almost as old as war. The first buildings erected by man seem to have been protecting walls.  
(Pirenne, 1925:39-40)

Those structures were only used on special occasions --- either for civic and religious ceremonies or when wars forced people to find a retreat. As civilization progressed, these temporary abodes became permanent residences  
(Pirienne, 1925:40).

Temples arose; magistrates or chieftans established their residence; merchants and artisans came to settle. What first

had been only an occasional center of assembly became a city, the administrative, religious, political and economic center of all the territory of the tribe whose name it customarily took.  
(Pirenne, 1925:40-1)

Pirenne demonstrates how the first cities were organized by social needs: Martindale (in Weber, 1958: 13) reiterates this observation in a theory of the modern city. Those who initially assembled together for any number of practical reasons eventually wound up staying together. When they started to orient to their collectivity as a permanent and on-going condition of their existence, the city was born.

Medieval cities were constituted by the consanguine interactions which Weber, according to Martindale (in Weber, 1958:106) typified as Vergemeinschaftung. Pirenne (1925: 142-4) explains that medieval community spirit was promoted by the city peace, a law which required any burgher to support and aid any other burgher who was in need. It applied to the total populace of the city. Tuchman (1978: 39) observes that medieval life was, for the most part, "supportive because it was lived collectively in infinite numbers of groups, orders, associations, and brotherhoods. Never was man less alone. Even in bedrooms married couples often slept in company with their servants and children... privacy was unknown."

The extreme intimacy and proximity which typified

most medieval relationships provided an ideal environment for the propagation and transmission of the plague. Hirst (1953:12) notes:

Human plague was essentially an affair of urban communities. Without gross aggregations of population there can be no major epidemics and without lively commercial intercourse between towns they can not spread.

## Boundary Maintenance and the Community

The medieval actors' kindred dispositions toward others --- which helps us to imagine what city life in the Middle Ages was like --- is more of a descriptive than an analytical insight insofar as it does not touch upon the deep organizational features of social systems which will be addressed in this section. The work of Parsons (1951) and Erikson (in Rubington and Weinberg, 1973:26-30) is used to formulate a general way in which the different modes of the communities' responses to the plague may be conceptualized.

Parsons (1951:482) defines a boundary maintaining type of social system as

a way of saying that, relative to its environment, that is to fluctuations in the factors of the environment, it maintains certain constancies of pattern whether this constancy be static or moving.

Erikson (in Rubington and Weinberg, 1973:28-9) explains that the diversity of human behaviour was so great that social groups used boundary maintenance as a form of social control: that is, to limit the kinds of behaviour which occurred within their defined cultural territories.

Boundaries, then, are an important point

of reference for persons participating in any system. A people may define its boundaries by referring to a geographical location, a set of honored traditions, a particular religious or political viewpoint, an occupational speciality, a common language or just some local way of doing things; but in any case members of the group have some ideas of the contours of the niche they occupy in social space. They know where the group begins and ends as a special entity; they know what kinds of experience "belong" within these precincts and what kinds do not. (Erikson in Rubington and Weinberg, 1973: 28-9)

Erikson insinuates that boundary maintenance is a process whereby the group formalizes its identity: its members get a sense of who they are in relation to the kinds of behaviours that constitute the group to which they belong. It is not premature to assume that this happens in any group in which members experience some unity and think of themselves as constituents of a whole that is greater than their individual selves.

Both the insights of Parsons and Erikson give us a way to grasp the members' of medieval communities responses to the plague. If medieval communities were stable in the sense that they provided goods and services to members who were aware of the benefits they derived from their situation, then it is reasonable to suppose that their unity was sustained via the process of boundary maintenance. Thus, the appearance of the plague in medieval communities probably represented the introduction of a

pernicious condition in the lives of their members.

Parsons (1951:482) suggests that situations like this constitute a point of departure for theoretical analysis:

Theory relative to such systems is directed to the analysis of the conditions under which such a given constant system pattern will be maintained and conversely, the conditions under which it will be altered in determinate ways.

Parsons shows that boundary maintenance procedures are basic to social systems whether they are sustained or threatened. This insight facilitates a theoretical grasp of the intrinsic unity of the variegated responses of different communities to the plague. They may be understood as reflections of the communities' attempts to preserve, sustain, and even, reorganize their boundaries in relation to the pernicious condition that threatened them. This is developed at length in the rest of this chapter.

### The Beginning of the Plague in London

Both Ziegler (1969:13, 15) and Tuchman (1978:93) observe that the plague initially became an event in community life as rumors about its presence in the Far East began to spread through Europe. No one there was very interested in the subject until the plague actually got a foothold in Messina (Sicily) (Ziegler, 1969:15, 40, and Tuchman, 1978:93).

DeFoe's (1966) remarks concerning the Great Plague of London evince a similar tendency of the community to attempt to avoid the thought of the plague. This is the focal point of my discussion in the next two sections.

DeFoe's (1966:23) story begins in the following way:

It was about the beginning of September 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbors, heard in ordinary discourse that the plague was returned again in Holland...We had no such thing as printed newspapers in those days to spread rumours and reports of things, and to improve them by the invention of men, as I have lived to see them practised since. But such things as these were gathered from the letters of merchants and others who corresponded abroad, and from them was handed about by word of mouth only; so that things did not spread instantly over the whole nation as they do now. But it seems that the government had a true account of it and several councils were held about ways to prevent its

coming over; but all was kept very private. Hence, it was that this rumour died off again, and people began to forget it as a thing we were very little concerned in, and that we hoped was not true.

DeFoe's narrative continues with the information that the rumors about the plague ceased for a few months, but started again when two men died of the disease and the news of their demise was publicized.

The people showed a great concern at this and began to be alarmed all over town, and the more, because in the last week in December 1664 another man died in the same house of the same distemper. (DeFoe, 1966:24)

No additional cases of plague were reported for six weeks and the people relaxed, but a death that occurred in the middle of February

...turned the people's eyes pretty much toward that end of town, and the weekly bills showed an increase of burials in St. Giles parish more than usual, it began to be suspected that plague was among the people at that end of town, and that many had died of it, though they had taken care to keep it as much from the knowledge of the public as possible. (DeFoe, 1966:24)

There was an increase in the weekly mortality bills in a number of parishes, and DeFoe (1966:24-5) states that that was unusual for that time of year. The fact that one week's bill "being a higher number than had been known to have been buried in one week since the preceding visitation

of 1656" was particularly alarming (DeFoe, 1966:26).

As the weather grew cold the mortality rates decreased and everyone began to think that the danger had passed. DeFoe, however, interjects a note of caution: the number of deaths recorded at the parish of St. Giles where the first cases of plague had occurred continued to stay high.

This alarmed us all again and terrible apprehensions were among the people, especially the weather being now changed and growing warm, and the summer being at hand.

Everyone's hopes for the best increased as the bills decreased again. However, their new found optimism was short-lived: the number of deaths both increased and spread to other parishes the following week. The clement weather in May, on the other hand, gave the people reason to feel healthy. They thought that the plague was confined to one area of town and that it would not extend any further. DeFoe (166:27) comments that the low mortality rate in the first two weeks of that month seemed to confirm their beliefs.

We continued in these hopes for a few days, but it was but for a few, for the people were no more to be deceived thus; they searched the houses and found that the plague was really spread everyway, and that many died of it everyday. So that now all our extenuations abated, and it was no more to be concealed; nay it quickly appeared that the infection had spread itself beyond all hopes of abatement...

## Awareness Contexts, Plague, and the Community

DeFoe's comments about the initial stages of London's citizens encounter with the plague in 1664 and 1665 have been recounted. All told, it took about nine months for them to acknowledge the fact that the plague was spread throughout their community. Although that constituted their definition of the plague as an epidemic, it was not the beginning of their involvement with the plague. DeFoe portrays it as an oscillation between admission and negation of its presence in the community.

The citizens' initial encounter with the plague can be typified as a crisis of consciousness which was relative to their willingness to come to terms with their knowledge that plague was in their community. Thus, in order for them to make the plague into a social fact,<sup>3</sup> the citizens of London had to admit, both publically and privately that it was exigent to their lives. Thus, they had to orient to it accordingly.<sup>4</sup>

Glaser and Strauss's (in Manis and Meltzer, 1967:

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3. Although I have borrowed Durkheim's (1938:2) term, my definition of a social fact is different from his. Whereas, he uses it to refer to "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling ...existing outside the individual and consciousness", I am using it to refer to any phenomenon which an individual chooses to consider real and which it is possible for others to comprehend in a similar way.

4. It was at this point --- of the community's grap-

430) use of "awareness contexts" to talk about "the total combination of what specific people, groups, organizations, communities or nations know what about a specific issue" is relevant to the analysis of the community's initial struggle with the plague inasmuch as it has been characterized as a crisis of consciousness. There are, according to Glaser and Strauss, two basic types of awareness contexts, the open and the closed, which indicate either total knowledge of an issue or complete ignorance of it. The pretense and suspicion awareness contexts are variations of these. The former, a derivative of the open awareness context occurs when people possess knowledge of something, but act as if they are ignorant. The latter, a derivative of the closed awareness context, refers to a situation in which people do not know the truth but have begun to suspect that it is other than what they think.<sup>5</sup> The plight of the terminally ill patient who surmises that the hospital staff has not levelled with him about the gravity of his condition is an example of this (Glaser and Strauss, 1965:47).

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pling with the reality of the plague --- that it began to constitute a matter of sociological interest. Plague qua plague is a bacillus, a microorganism that has no known faculty for language, thought, or will. It is only sociologically interesting when it is socially produced as an event which people deem worth attending to in the course of their lives.

5. My summary of these contexts of awareness is a simplified and generalized version of Glaser and Strauss's work. For a more complex treatment of awareness in relation to the problem of death and dying see Glaser and Strauss, 1965.

DeFoe's account of the community's attempt to orient to the plague has illuminated varying degrees of its knowledge which are best described in terms of awareness contexts. Awareness contexts will be doubly useful to this analysis if they are related to the community's interest in maintaining boundaries which was discussed in Section III. The different contexts of awareness represent the extent to which a community permits knowledge of an extraneous event to penetrate its boundaries and become a point of reference for the definitions of reality and ensuing courses of action which comprise its everyday life.

The community's initial struggle with the plague, which was described earlier as an oscillation between admission and negation of its presence therein, thus constitutes a point of departure for a discussion which follows in the next section, of the community's effort to maintain its boundaries and preserve its identity in the face of a formidable exigency.

### Different Contexts of Awareness

Recall Ziegler's (1969:13, 15) and Tuchman's (1978: 93) observations that the plague first appeared in Europe as a rumor that generally went unheeded. DeFoe (1966:23) also indicates that rumors about the plague did not pose much of a threat to the ordinary citizen. Its alleged presence in Holland was of little or no consequence to those in London. In fact, they preferred not to even contemplate the presence of the plague in their midst.

One feature of the citizen's hesitation to entertain any thoughts of plague was probably due to its initial appearance in the city as a rumor. Shibutani (1966:3) points out that "The central attribute of rumor --- as it is commonly conceived --- is error." Rumors are easily discounted because they are generally thought to be false or, at least, extremely dubious reports (Shibutani, 1966:3). Conventionally speaking, a rumor is not a fact: a member does not have to consider any phenomenon to which a rumor pertains to be true.<sup>6</sup>

The citizens' dismissal of the rumors about the presence of plague in Holland can be thought of as their

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6. Rumors are sociologically interesting, on the other hand, if they are viewed as members' collective attempts to define and interpret extraordinary events (Shibutani, 1966:9-17).

maintenance of a closed awareness context in relation to news of plague. Their failure to pursue it any further or to use it as a warning to fortify themselves against a possible scourge shows that they did not wish to take the matter very seriously. Although DeFoe indicates that news of the plague had penetrated the community's boundaries, its members did not integrate it into their lives in the sense that they did not use it as a resource for much thought or action.<sup>7</sup> They were, at best, reluctant to entertain any thoughts of plague in their community.

DeFoe reports that a few months after the rumors about the plague had circulated in London, a slight number of cases were duly noted, but they were sporadic and isolated enough to be disregarded by the majority of citizens. Although the plague posed more of a threat to the community as an actuality than as a rumor, its members nonetheless chose a closed context of awareness in relation to it. They thereby refused to acknowledge that it had any objective reality, an attribution which the social construction of plague would require. The presence of plague in the community did not, at this point, make it impossible for members to overlook it as a point of reference for their everyday lives: their use of boundary maintenance, in this respect, enabled

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7. At this point, the community members' peripheral awareness of the plague could have facilitated their use of a suspicion awareness context, especially if they had started to think that there was some truth to the rumors about it.

them to keep the plague out of the community in both an intellectual and a symbolic way. Thus, the first few cases of the disease in London could be treated as mere coincidences.

As the weekly mortality bills increased at St. Giles' parish about six weeks after the first deaths had occurred, DeFoe relays the news that the people hoped that the plague was confined to that area of town. Their willingness to, at least, speculate about the ramifications of the increasing number of deaths in a particular section of town shows that they were acting within a context of suspicion awareness. Their failure to constitute the plague as an epidemic, i.e., as a disease that was attacking a large number of people at the same time in a similar fashion (Foucault, 1975:23) indicates their tenacious interest in maintaining a closed awareness context. They reorganized their sense of the community's boundaries and began to consider themselves residents of particular sections of town in order to manage their adherence to an uninformed point of view. Thus, the relinquishment of their membership in a larger community enabled those who hoped that **the** plague was confined to one area of town keep the plague at bay for a while.

DeFoe also points out that the parishoners of St. Giles tried to keep the news that the plague was among them quiet for as long as they could. They were beyond the other citizens in an intellectual sense for they were using

pretense, a modified version of the open awareness context. Thus, when they recognized the fact that the plague was an epidemic, they chose to appear ignorant of it. The attraction which pretense awareness holds for its constituents is tied to one of its structural features: that is, it successfully precludes the possibility of one's having to orient to what one knows in a responsible manner for as long as it is maintained. Thus, Glaser and Strauss (1965: 78) observe that, in hospitals, "a chief organizational consequence of the mutual pretense context is that it eliminates any possibility that staff members might 'work with' patients psychologically, on a self-conscious professional basis."<sup>8</sup>

Even when the citizens of London had reason to conclude that the plague was epidemic, i.e., when the weekly death count exceeded that of a previous visitation, they still searched for signs that would have indicated that the threat had passed. This is an example of their oscillation between intellectual admission and negation of the objective reality of the plague while they waited for it to disappear. Hence, their initial response to the plague was passive in the sense that they were willing, at least temporarily, to let their fate rest with a contingency; that is, with the condition of whether or not the plague had

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8. In another context, McHugh (in Dreitzel, 1970: 169) notes that an actor can ward off a charge of deviance by playing dumb and acting as if he didn't know he had committed an offense.

taken root in London.<sup>9</sup> This choice is feasible if we consider the fact that they would have had to fully acknowledge both the presence of the plague and its consequences for their community in order to take action against it. An act of resistance is also an affirmation of what it opposes. The longer the citizens of London postponed responding to the plague in a forthright manner, the longer they postponed their authorship of it as a social fact;<sup>10</sup> that is, as a phenomenon which they would have decided was exigent to the community in a way that corresponded to its objective existence.

DeFoe indicates that the citizens of London continued to hope that the plague would pass despite the fact that the death toll in the infected parish had stayed high. However, when they searched all the domiciles and discovered that people were suffering and dying from the plague everywhere, they finally reached the conclusion that it was epidemic.

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9. This condition was a pattern of the plague's invasion of a community which was not confined to London. Tuchman (1978:93) remarks: "In a given area the plague accomplished its kill within four to six months and then faded, except in the larger cities, where rooting into the close-quartered population, it abated during the winter only to reappear in spring and rage for another six months."

10. This does not imply that I have not already been discussing a version of the plague which members both responded to and constructed as grounds for ignorance and/or pretense. It is feasible that when these behaviours comprise the community's notion of a plague, its members fear the consequences of defining it as real to such a great extent that they avoid orienting to it in a context of open awareness in order to ward off their sanctioning of that reality.

Thus, the search for plague victims was warranted by the notion that a victim of the plague constituted an actual incidence of the disease. The search for victims of the plague was probably instituted as the authorities suspected that many cases of plague in the community were not being reported. Hence, their suspicions about the presence of plague in the community were confirmed as they located, identified, and enumerated its victims.

Although the plague's invasion of both the member's and the community's body proper was the condition which set the stage for their involvement, the objective existence of the plague did not constitute sufficient or immediate cause for response to it.<sup>11</sup> The citizens of London would neither acknowledge the presence of the plague within their community nor act within a context of open awareness until the disease was so prevalent that it was impossible for them to deny it with any degree of conviction or effectiveness and still appear to be in touch with reality. This coincides with Glaser and Strauss's (1965:75) observation that

Pretense generally collapses when certain conditions make its maintenance increasingly difficult.

The conditions which make pretense and denial collapse are not purely external in the sense that they

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11. Victor W. Marshall's comments on an earlier draft of this chapter helped me to articulate this point.

can be accounted for solely in terms of the plague. The plague was indifferent to its acknowledgment within the community. The plague did not make a difference to the community, i.e., it did not really provide grounds for a change in its members' use of awareness. The difference which the acknowledgment of the plague made within the community was a matter of consequence to its members insofar as it reflected the transformation of their orientation to community life. They decided to let go of pretense at the point that its maintenance would have destroyed their achievement of community, i.e., the shared and specific understandings which make social actions intelligible. In other words, the members of the community stopped their pretense about the plague in order to maintain the integrity of their community.

The maintenance of pretense undermines social organization when it obscures the fact that its constituents have authorized two opposing realities. The one which they work to deny is more important to them in terms of the value which they have assigned to their acknowledgment of it as a point of reference for their definitions of themselves. In other words, pretense collapses when the members of the community decide that the lie they are working to sustain implies their failure to be responsible and to orient to a condition or set of circumstances in a way that would unify their thoughts and their actions.

It is reasonable to suggest that pretense collapses as social actors begin to think of their actions as immature; that is, as failing to meet the standards which foster sociality, which generate the possibility for public understandings, discourse, and actions. Thus, actors let go of pretense when they have learned that their place in the community is realized via their maturity. They show maturity by making their definition of a situation like the plague public and acknowledging its consequences, rather than letting it remain concealed. The collapse of pretense signifies a decision to make some knowledge available to all members of the community as a resource. The actors who let go of pretense give their associates the occasion to orient to an issue. The collapse of pretense can be understood, in this way, as a community's recovery of its sociality.

The prevalence of plague in the community was the external condition which members decided warranted their need to relate to each other in a more responsible way than they had previously. Their adoption of open awareness facilitated their recovery of community life. The prevalence of plague therein was also an essential feature of their social construction of an epidemic. This serves as the focal point of discussion in the following Section.

## Numbers and Epidemics

Foucault (1973:23) comments:

...an epidemic is more than a particular form of a disease...There is no difference in nature or species...between an individual disease and an epidemic phenomenon; it is enough that a sporadic malady be reproduced a number of times for it to constitute an epidemic. It is a purely mathematical problem of the threshold: the sporadic disease is merely a submarginal epidemic.

There must be an adequate number of cases for the plague to be considered an epidemic. Foucault demonstrates that its social construction depends largely upon a mathematical perception. Thus far, we have seen that the citizens of London began to relate to the plague in a context of open awareness after they had perceived the great extent to which it had spread through their community. They achieved this by means of a mathematical ascription. A calculation of the total number of people dying from the plague finally led them to conclude that it did, indeed, comprise a visitation.

If the citizens of communities that were beleaguered by the plague let pretense collapse when they decided to make their knowledge about it public, then their use of number in regard to the plague enabled them to orient to the representation of its distribution through the community. Number enabled them to objectify the presence of plague in

the community: that is, to behold it in way that was removed from the particular contexts in which individual cases occurred at the same time that it was relevant to all of them. The numerical representation of plague was derived from the individual cases of it.

Number gave the members of the community a way to conceptualize the point at which their lives met that of the plague. It informed them of the commonality between the plague and the community: the lives of its members were what both forms --- of natural and social life --- shared. Number bridged the gap between the plague and the community. It showed its members the extent to which the plague had become part of the community: the numbers of those dead from the plague could never be independent of its members.

As incidences of plague increased, the difference between the plague and the community wavered: the former represented the appropriation of those who were infected by the pestilence. Number gave the members of the community a way to see themselves becoming instances of plague: that is, parts of a whole (the plague) which they neither wished to represent or be incorporated by. Thus, the shock of recognition which followed the community members' count of deaths from the plague, spurred their definition of the plague as a social problem. They started to orient to it as a condition about which something had to be done in order

for them to end their vanquishment. It is reasonable to suggest that a population's use of number to determine the extent to which an extraneous power has penetrated its community is threatening only when its members consider themselves part of a whole which is in danger of being obliterated by a foreign power.

The threat which the plague posed to the community summoned its members to reaffirm their sense of themselves as a group independent of the plague. Thus, the use of number enabled them to organize and respond to the plague as a social phenomenon. The pervasiveness of its distribution --- represented by the numbers of those dead from the plague --- informed them that the plague was a problem which the majority of the population shared. This facilitated their conceptualization of the plague as a visitation: a destructive presence which had the potential to effect everyone and undermine community life.

Camus's (1948) depiction of a plague also shows that its social construction requires an attribution of sufficient quantity relative to incidences of the disease. Camus (1948:34), like DeFoe, illustrates the reticence with which the thought of plague was met by the people of Oran. Everyone knew about the plague, but no one wanted to admit it. The plague was initially unspeakable within the community. The people's reluctance to utter the

word, plague, reflected their belief that speech about the plague gave it a degree of reality that it would not attain if it were never mentioned. The community members' silence in regard to the plague was warranted by their fear that saying it would bring it into being.<sup>12</sup>

This tactic was ultimately futile for silence did not make the plague disappear. Instead, its presence in the community became too conspicuous to support the members' feigned ignorance of it. This change occurred as they started to note the number of deaths from plague. Thus, it was not the actual incidence of plague in the community, but its mathematical reproduction which showed the threat which the plague posed to community life. It was eventually used to authorize and confirm the epidemic in Oran.

According to Camus (1948:59) the uttering of the word, plague, was an intellectual victory for the citizens

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12. This reluctance to speak about the plague is not just a literary device which Camus used to emphasize his characters' dread of the plague. Shrewsbury (1970:41-2) speculates about Chaucer's reason for never mentioning the plague in the Canterbury Tales: "...in adult life he believed in the superstition of the personification of pestilential disease---which was a common aberration of the public mind up to the end of the eighteenth century --- in which case the less he said about the plague, the better it would be for his personal safety."

Sontag (1977, 1978:6) also notes this tendency to assign proclivity to forthright speeches about disease: "In Stendhal's Armance (1827) the hero's mother refuses to say 'tuberculosis' for fear that pronouncing the word will hasten the course of her son's malady. And Karl Menninger observes...that the "very word 'cancer' is said to kill some patients who would not have succumbed so quickly to the malignancy from which they suffer."

of Oran inasmuch as it indicated their readiness to deal with their predicament in a responsible manner. Before the assets of open awareness are discussed here, however, the drawbacks of that context relative to the plague will be considered. The fact that members almost always oriented to the disadvantages of open awareness before they oriented to its advantages in their initial struggles with the plague warrants inquiry. This problem is addressed in the following two sections: the first is an account of the plague in San Francisco at the turn of this century while the second is an attempt to provide for the significance of the community's opposition to any form of open awareness in relation to the epidemic.

## Plague in San Francisco

The community's organized efforts to maintain the semblance of a closed context of awareness throughout its encounter with the plague was typical of the first epidemic in San Francisco. Gregg (1978:31-8) recounts this story:

The first plague epidemic in the United States began in San Francisco in the early part of the twentieth century. Acting on the suspicion that plague had caused the death of a man in Chinatown, the Board of Health ordered twelve square blocks of that area to be sectioned off so that it could search for more victims of the disease (Gregg, 1978:31-2).

When local businessmen heard about these precautions they "greeted with cold fury the suggestion that plague stalked the streets of San Francisco" (Gregg, 1978:32). Most of the city's newspapers initiated a venomous attack on the Health Department's attempts to quell the epidemic.

Thus, two different awareness contexts were being used by different groups at the outset of the first San Francisco epidemic. The city health authorities were aware of plague in the community. They were concerned about the prospect of an epidemic. Those who were involved in commerce, on the other hand, maintained closed awareness in order to ward

off the harm which a declaration of plague would have done to business in the city.

Although plague was confirmed when a rat and two guinea pigs, injected with tissue from the buboes of the first victim, died from the disease, the city government yielded to political pressure and the quarantine on Chinatown was lifted two and a half days after it had gone into effect (Gregg, 1978:32).

When health inspectors tried to examine the residences within the infected area to find any additional victims, the locals refused to cooperate and hid the bodies of the deceased from them. Five weeks after the first case of plague had been confirmed in San Francisco, the Board of Health officially announced that the plague was in the city. When house to house inspections were resumed, the residents locked their houses and stores and generally refused to comply with the authorities (Gregg, 1978:33).

The Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service petitioned the President for the authority to pass anti-plague regulations. This was approved, but the measures were so antagonistic and oppressive to the Chinese that the leaders of their community filed for a restraining order to be issued against the Federal Government. It was granted: the City Supervisors were the only ones permitted to limit movement in San Francisco (Gregg, 1978:34). When they,

in turn, asked Governor Henry T. Gage to help them with the anti-plague campaign he refused. After some deliberation, he concluded that "plague did not nor did ever exist in California" (Gregg, 1978:34). He fired those members of the State Board of Health who insisted that it did and replaced them with new ones who, Gregg (1978:34) notes "were prepared to swear that it was white and that it did not exist, at least not in California." Although sixty one deaths from the plague had been reported by the time that the State Board of Health issued its report for 1900-1902, they were not mentioned in the document.

The Governor condemned the plague scare in his message to the legislature, and he maintained that the bacillus which made the laboratory animals die was taken from cultures that had been imported into the state. He suggested that the unauthorized transportation of plague cultures should be illegal, and punishable by life imprisonment, and that any public announcement about the presence of plague be made into a felony (Gregg, 1978:35).

While the city government, the Board of Health, and most local physicians acknowledged the presence of the plague in San Francisco, the Governor, the State Board of Health, the Merchants Association, the railroad and shipbuilding companies, the area newspapers and residents did not. About two months after the first case of plague

had been reported, the Secretary of the Treasury appointed a team of experts to determine whether or not there was plague in San Francisco (Gregg, 1978:35). Its members were two professors who had been colleagues at John Hopkins Hospital, Simon Flexner and L. F. Barker. Professor F. G. Novy of the University of Michigan was the team's bacteriologist. Gregg (1978:35) comments that "it was an experienced and highly qualified group."

Governor Gage attempted to get the State Legislature to pass a bill that would stop the Flexner Commission's work, but he was unsuccessful. He did manage, however, to get the University of California to evict the team from the laboratory they had been using on campus.

Gregg (1978:36) reports that eventually some of San Francisco's prominent businessmen decided that it would be in their best interest to get the debate about the plague settled. At this point, one can imagine that an affirmation of plague was preferable to the state of uncertainty which was fostered by its denial. The latter had more negative consequences for the community than a simple declaration of plague would have had: the continued denial of plague would impede any resolution of the problem, thereby prolonging it indefinitely.

As news that the city's local businessmen had given their support to the Flexner Commission circulated through

the state, the Governor's campaign against it lost momentum. Exactly one year to the day that the first victim of the plague had been discovered in the Bay City, the commission's report went to the Federal Government, and a massive cleanup of Chinatown was started (Gregg, 1978:36).

Governor Gage persisted obdurately in his attempt to thwart anti-plague measures. He would not allow any other cities in the State to be inspected for evidence of the disease, and when he retired in 1903, he was still insisting that there had never been any incidences of plague in California. By that time, ninety-three plague related deaths had occurred (Gregg, 1978:37).

The last victim of the epidemic died in February, 1904. All in all, there had been one hundred and twenty-six cases of plague which had resulted in one hundred and twenty-two deaths. Gregg's (1978:38) concluding remarks are critical of San Francisco's first struggle with the plague:

The sorry tale of America's first plague epidemic had ended. The refusal to admit the existence of plague in the face of overwhelming evidence and the political and economic interference with sound measures to protect the health of the community were old stories elsewhere but the California epidemic marked their first appearance in America.

Gregg's account of the plague in San Francisco differs from DeFoe's chronicle of the plague in London in the sense that the vested interests of the community's business

leaders and politicians in stifling news of the plague are more pronounced. This alerts us to the role which economics plays in some actors' structuring of reality. The businessmen in San Francisco who opposed the plague transformed it into a nuisance: that is, something that had the potential to interfere with their achievement of profits. Yet DeFoe's account of the plague is similar to Gregg's in the sense that most of the residents of San Francisco strove to avoid the thought of plague by failing to concede its presence in their community.

The story of the first plague epidemic in San Francisco approximates Hirst's (1953:76-7) observation (about the community's reception of news):

No name in medicine sounds so ominous as plague, none is so charged with mass emotion. Almost invariably any announcement of the advent of the dread scourge excites a hostile popular reaction; such news is welcome neither to the responsible authorities nor to the commercial interests likely to be affected by stringent plague preventive measures. The doctor courageous enough to diagnose the first case is commonly denounced as an 'Enemy of the People'.

The "hostile popular reaction" to news of plague in the community which Gregg's story captured so well is, according to Hirst, a typical social response. It reflects members' refusal to use the plague as a point of reference for definitions of reality in their everyday lives. This intransigence to the plague is understandable as the

community's attempt to maintain its boundaries by adhering to static conceptions of reality.

The community refers to the normative definitions and understandings of reality. Community is achieved at that point at which the plague is understandable as a plague to all its competent members. Thus far, we have noted that communities tend to deny the plague. Their members do not wish to make a place for death in their lives - for whatever reasons they might have: i.e., it is unpleasant, frightening, bad for business. However, my point is that a definition of plague qua plague always involved the community's acknowledgment of death as an intrinsic feature of plague.

We have seen that the pursuit of a closed context of awareness, relative to the plague, in London and San Francisco was an illusion which the citizens of those cities could not sustain for very long. While they were maintaining a closed context of awareness, however, they did manage to domesticate a hostile environment through their work of denial.

Winch (1958:64) states that, "What is ruinous to a settled mode of behavior, of whatever kind, is an unsettled environment."

This is feasible only if we can imagine a reason for the actor's behaviour that is not merely warranted by an unstable environment. It is necessary to take the threat,

which the unstable environment poses to the actor's life, into account in order to make sense of his decision to change. Thus, the social changes which were eventually precipitated by the plague in San Francisco and London were concomitantly animated by the community members' interest in preserving life as a whole --- which the plague threatened to destroy. Thus the plague --- or unstable environment --- gave them a reason to orient to their lives in a cautious way. It required them to make changes that were necessary for their preservation.

The community members' interest in preserving their lives as a whole was an abiding concern which the plague merely gave them a reason to recall, to orient to, and to use as a resource relative to the actions they took against it. Thus, it would be foolish to think that their belief in community life --- which both made possible and sustained their practical actions against the plague --- was a temporary state of mind which the plague had induced in them.

The accounts of DeFoe and Gregg can be read as supporting the opinion that the communities' interests in denying the plague were too deeply rooted, i.e. tied to their interest in life as a whole, to be dismissed as symptoms of collective hysteria. Moreover, a characterization of them as hysterical would imply that they were deeply irrelevant: that is, that members' denials of the plague had no bearing

on any other aspect of their lives.

I propose, instead, that these collective efforts to deny the presence of the plague in the community were grounded in a certain conception of the plague which was used as a point of reference for its social production. Winch (1958:44) points out the importance of keeping the interdependence between thought and sociality in mind. He comments that, "...the very existence of concepts depends on group life." This suggests that the conception of plague which facilitated its denial was an ongoing, collective, and understandable achievement of members' participation in the community which provided a context for their particular responses and constitution of it.

## Death and Ignorance

Governor Gage's contention that people in San Francisco were dying from "syphilitic septicemia" rather than the plague (Gregg, 1978:37) shows that he did not deny the presence of a disease in the city. He did, however, deny the presence of plague vehemently. The question, why is the plague avoided like the plague? is discussed in this section.

The name Black Death, which was commonly given to the plague of 1348, must be regarded as the expression of horror aroused by this uncanny disease.  
(Nohl, 1961:7)

The author of this passage requests us to take the relation between death and the plague, which is evoked by the title, seriously. His statement suggests that the ways in which people talked about the plague never failed to mention death: humanity's conception of plague has, through the ages, been dominated by an image of death (Gregg, 1978: 3-13). Plague is virtually a synonym for death.<sup>13</sup> DeFoe (1966:50) captures this when he described the impact of the plague on the citizens of London:

...the minds of the people were agitated  
...and a kind of sadness and horror sat  
upon the countenances even of the common

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13. The plague is similar in this respect to cancer. See Sontag (1977, 1978:8, 9).

people. Death was before their eyes and everybody began to think of their graves.

The popular rendition of plague as a harbinger of death is well founded in history and coincides with the testimony of experts. The plague is, according to McNeill (1976:175), notorious for "the heavy die-off it provoked among its hosts." Kastenbaum and Aisenberg's (1976:175) estimate that the Black Death killed 90 per cent of those who contracted it was noted earlier in Chapter Two (page 45). The death toll of the Great Plague of London, which DeFoe chronicles, approached 100,000 (Gregg, 1978:11), and Gregg (1978:38) claims that the apparent mortality rate in the San Francisco epidemic, which was recounted in the preceding section, was 97 per cent. Thus, infection by the plague almost always resulted in the death of its victim, and the plague can, for this reason, be thought of as a fatal disease. Sudnow (1967:65) notes:

As predisposing conditions...the so-called "fatal illnesses" constitute good predictors of death, i.e. their located presence warrants making a prediction of death within limits that could not be specified without their location.

It is reasonable to assume that members' denial of the presence of plague in their communities, which has been duly noted in this chapter, is also an attempt to keep death out.

This is feasible if we consider the particular

form of death which the plague brought to those it struck.<sup>14</sup> It was untimely, extraordinary and unnatural. It was an external and collective phenomenon which dehumanized its victims via the massive number of fatalities it exacted from them. Death from the plague was so fast that no one had any time to prepare for it. DeFoe (1966:179) observes:

It is true that...the fury of contagion was such...and people sickened so fast and died so soon, that it was impossible, and indeed to no purpose, to go about to inquire who was sick and who was well, or to shut them up with such exactness as the thing required, almost every house in a whole street being infected, and in many places every person in some of the houses...

Once the plague was established in a community, it was totally destructive (Ziegler, 1969:209). Camus (1948: 163) writes, "In the memories of those who lived through them, the grim days of the plague...stand out...like the slow, deliberate progress of some monstrous thing crushing out all upon its path." Death from the plague seemed unavoidable. DeFoe (1966:209) characterizes it in this way:

The plague, like a great fire, if a few houses only are contiguous where it happens, can only burn a few houses; or if it begins in a single ...house, can only burn that lone house where it begins. But if it begins in a close built town or city and gets ahead, there its fury increases: it rages over the whole place and consumes all it can reach.

Death from the plague was also extremely unpleasant.

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14. See "The Image of Plague as Premature and Inappropriate Death" in Chapter Two, pages 61-71.

Nohl (1961:7-8) describes it in the following manner:

Those infected felt themselves penetrated by a pain throughout their whole bodies, and so to say, undermined. Then there developed on the thighs or upper arms a boil about the size of a lentil which the people called "burn boil"...This infected the whole body and penetrated it so that the patient violently vomited blood. This vomiting of blood continued without intermission for three days, there being no means of healing it, and then the patient expired.

These aspects of plague-related death are particularly telling. They support the conclusion that no one, if given the opportunity, would ever choose to die from the plague. Its characteristics simply subvert any positive value (or good) which could, realistically and immediately, be assigned to it.

Death from the plague made it difficult for its victims to die well. They could not experience a Socratic death for they were unable to relate to their deaths vitally. The plague gave them a reason to orient to the degeneration of their bodies as the total aspect of their death. The body's failure to function as a normal body (to work in the service of life qua life) when it was infected with the plague predisposed the actor's orientation to it as the cause of death. This obscured the possibility of an authoritative death: it destroyed the sense of how death could be chosen and facilitated a construction of it as something that merely happened to the body.

This observation gives credence to the members' sustained attempts to maintain a context of closed awareness when their communities were threatened by the plague. They were not willing to accept that kind of death in their lives: they did not want to use it as a point of reference for the achievement of their everyday practical and intellectual activities.<sup>15</sup> A community's unwillingness to acknowledge the presence of plague therein also indicates its hesitancy to reorganize the boundaries (which facilitates the construction of its identity) relative to an untimely, inappropriate, dehumanizing and grotesque death.<sup>16</sup>

Foucault (1965:7, 13-7) notes that these structures of exclusion have remained constant through time although their foci have changed, and Erikson (in Rubington and Weinberg, 1973:29-30) articulates a rationale for them:

People who gather together in communities need to be able to describe and anticipate those areas of experience which lie outside the immediate compass of the group --- the unseen dangers which in any culture and in any age seem to threaten its security. Traditional folklore depicting demons, devils, witches, and evil spirits may be one way to give form to these

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15. The community members' adherence to a closed context of awareness, relative to the plague, must really be thought of as pretense awareness (which is an informed mimicry of ignorance) insofar as it has just been typified as an election.

16. The community's resistance to death from the plague is analogous to Douglas's (1966:2, 40) analysis of hygiene as members' attempts to maintain order by eliminating dirt from the environment.

otherwise formless dangers...

The prevailing depictions of the plague in the Middle Ages, e.g., "a man on a black horse or a black giant striding through the countryside", "Pest Jungfrau who had only to raise her hand to infect a victim," and the Lithuanian plague maiden who "waved a red scarf through the door or window of a house to infect its inhabitants" (Ziegler, 1969:18, 85-6), must have, as Erikson suggests, dispelled some of the fears which people associated with the disease.

These attempts which people made to exclude death from their midst either by denying the presence of the plague or by personifying it in folklore could not be sustained for very long because death from the plague was far too pervasive and real to be discounted. Ziegler (1969:57) for example, notes that the Black Death first struck the town of Orvieto in April, 1348. The mortality rate there was high - about half the population succumbed to the plague. Yet Ziegler points out that "until the end of June the official records made no mention of the plague. Business as usual was the order of the day. Then the strain became too great." Boccaccio's (1972:55-6) depiction of the omnipresence of death in Florence is a scene which was typical to most epidemics of the plague (Tuchman, 1978:94-5):

As for the common people and a large number of the bourgeoisie, they presented a much more pathetic spectacle, for the majority of them were constrained, either by poverty

or the hope of survival, to remain in their houses. Being confined to their own parts of the city, they fell ill daily in the thousands, and since they had no one to assist them or attend to their needs, they inevitably perished almost without exception. Many dropped dead in the open streets, both by day and by night, whilst a great many others, though dying in their own houses, drew their neighbors' attention to the fact more by the smell of their rotting corpses. And what with these, and the others who were dying all over the city, bodies were here, there and everywhere.

Lifton (1967:481) notes that those who survived situations, like the plague, which literally immersed them in death experienced "a jarring awareness of the fact of death". Glaser and Strauss (1965:76) indicate that such a dominant embodiment of death eventually predisposes the dying and those who attend to them to forsake pretense:

...when a patient finds it increasingly difficult to hang onto a semblance of his former healthy self and begins to become a person who is visibly dying, both he and staff are increasingly prone to say so openly...

Thus, the widespread diffusion of death in societies which are stricken by the plague eventually gave people no recourse other than open awareness relative to their situation.<sup>17</sup> The choice of open awareness, relative to the plague, was achieved as the actors realized that the very life

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17. The success of the maintenance of closed awareness of the plague in San Francisco was probably due to the relatively low number of deaths that occurred there. The life of the community was not as readily threatened as that of those in the Middle Ages were.

of their community was being usurped by pestilence. The condition that triggered their decision to acknowledge the presence of the plague represented the point at which the disease was embodied by the community. Its members' ability to orient to themselves realistically --- that is, as belonging to a community that was dominated by pestilence --- indicates their recovery of health. It shows how they could imagine themselves as parts of a whole (the plague) which they would never choose to be. Thus, they had not severed their relationship to possibility. They were still open to life in the sense that they could entertain thoughts about their fate.

Yet, their use of open awareness speaks, much more favorably, for their decision to take hold of their fate, to orient to their lives in a way which showed that their actions did have consequences. Their use of open awareness was precipitated by their decision not to be part of an insidious whole (the plague) but to work to recover themselves as members of the community to which they rightfully belonged. Thus, the condition which facilitated their use of open awareness (that is, the widespread diffusion of death in societies that were stricken by the plague) enabled the actors to behold their difference between their sociality (their membership in a community) and their fate as victims of the plague. They chose to orient to their fate as a way of displaying their sociality, and thus resist complete

appropriation by the pestilence. They were thereby compelled to accept and integrate a particularly malevolent form of death into their lives. The consequences of this are discussed in the following section.

## Death and the Community

The situation of those who were plagued is similar to that of those who survived the blast of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima in the sense that each required its victims to cope with a particularly malevolent form of collective and untimely death. However, the two situations differ in certain key respects. The atomic bomb was a form of unnatural and technological destruction. It left deadly residues in the bodies of those who were exposed to it which could have effected them at any time after contact (Lifton, 1967:57). The survivors of the atomic bomb have inherited a permanent condition, "a life long sense of vulnerability to the same grotesque death" (Lifton, 1967:481).

The existence of the bomb was not a permanent threat to the members of the community in the sense that it dissipated immediately after it was dropped. The experience of the bomb qua bomb had ended. Its consequences, however, were a permanent source of mystery for survivors: they still appeared to take their toll from their bodies in an unpredictable way. Unlike the bomb, the plague remained unfathomable as long as it was in the community.<sup>18</sup> It could not be domesticated in the same way that the bomb had been because

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18. I am indebted to Peter McHugh for pointing this out to me in response to an earlier draft of this chapter.

its existence was subject to change at any time.<sup>19</sup> The plagues, on the other hand, were relatively short in duration. The community's encounter with death ceased once the scourge has passed (Lifton, 1967:481).

However, the plague usually remained in an afflicted community for any time between a couple of months and a few years.<sup>20</sup> The length of time that the plague stayed in a community can be thought of as its encounter with actual death. What are the implications of an actual death encounter for members?

Lifton (1967:480) suggests that death leaves an imprint on survivors which is a product of their perceptions and experiences of the particular form of death they had encountered. Survivors of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and of the plagues in the Middle Ages were left with a sense of "grotesque death" through "the monstrous alteration of the body substance" which both phenomena caused in their victims (Lifton, 1967:480).

Survivors lose their innocence of death through their exposure to a particularly macabre and demeaning form of it (Lifton, 1967:484). Those who survive mass death

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19. Lifton (1967:79) notes that many survivors have nicknamed the bomb, pikadon (flash-boom) and that this is their way of transforming the bomb into an ordinary experience, i.e., one to which they can refer their everyday conceptions of reality.

20. This is documented in Chapter One:2-4; Chapter Two:42-44 and; Chapter Three:103.

have a tendency to associate their "overwhelming external experience of near-absolute annihilation...with related tendencies of the inner life" which create "an ill defined but powerfully felt image of ultimate death and separation." Lifton (1967:486) refers to the survivors of the Black Death who left behind intense written accounts of the sensation of being in the midst of a doomsday experience as an example of this.<sup>21</sup>

Lifton (1967:483) demonstrates that survivors fear "being contaminated by death itself" and that they often experience repercussions of this in their everyday lives:

In perceiving this death taint, outsiders experience a threat to their own sense of human continuity or symbolic immortality, and feel death guilt and death anxiety activated within themselves. (Lifton, 1967:170)

The survivor's difficulties in dealing with death are thereby reinforced by the meanings which are socially assigned to death.

Death, especially when inappropriate and premature, is the essence of breakdown and separation (Lifton, 1967:487).

Survivors ultimately have problems distinguishing the extraneous rupture of life from their own sense of life. Thus, they almost always adapt and internalize the conditions of their subjection to death. This results in their perception of the state of "death in life"

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<sup>21</sup>. See my remarks on the commentary left by John Clyn in Chapter Two, pages 39-41.

a state of such radically impaired existence that no one feels related to the activities and moral standards of the life process. (Lifton, 1967: 503)

Survivors are prone to perpetuate their exposure to death in a symbolic way and thereby reconstitute their identities:

We know the identity of the dead to be a treadmill of unresolved grief in which the work of mourning is never accomplished. (Lifton, 1967:504)

Lifton demonstrates how the objectified presence of death in a community provides an occasion for a radical reorganization of the boundaries which facilitates the members' construction of their identities. Thus, death penetrates the boundaries of the community intellectually and symbolically as well as physically: its presence influences members' morbid and devitalized orientations to life. These are intensified by the difficulties which they experience in distinguishing themselves from the meanings they assign to death, a process which makes its institution in the community possible.

Thus far, the community's reluctance to host death from the plague has been developed and brought to the point where its adoption of open awareness becomes necessary. Lifton explains how the abiding presence of death in a community has devitalizing consequences for members' definitions of themselves. The question of how the plague

influenced its victims' construction of their identities is considered in the following section.

## The Implications of Plague for Identity

Public announcements of plague in most communities were invariably followed by panics (Tuchman, 1978:96-7; Ziegler, 1969; Nohl, 1961; Hirst, 1953:16-8; Thucydides, 1954:151-6; Zinsser, 1963:129). These were significant in the sense that the authorities' declaration of the plague gave it a degree of reality which made it a fact for the community. Although most members knew about the plague before it was announced, official announcements fixed it in the public mind. Hence, panic was a response to absolute certainty about the plague which was facilitated by official word of it. Boccaccio (1972:52-3) comments that in the face of so much suffering, "all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city." He describes the situation in Florence:

It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbors and rarely or never visiting their relatives, addressing them only from a distance; this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse and almost incredible was the fact that mothers and fathers refused to nurse and assist their own children as though they did not belong to them. (Boccaccio, 1972:53-4)

Guy de Chauliac, the Pope's physician at Avignon reports, "A father did not visit his son, nor the son his father. Charity was dead." (Tuchman, 1978:97) This observation was repeated - almost exactly - by Agnolo di Tura of Siena (Ziegler, 1969:58). The scene during the Great Plague of London was, according to DeFoe (1966:99) no less chaotic:

...it is scarce credible what dreadful cases happened in particular families everyday. People in the rage of the distemper, or in the torment of their swellings, which was indeed intolerable, running out of their own government, raving and distracted, and oftentimes laying violent hands upon themselves, throwing themselves out at their windows, shooting themselves, etc., mothers murdering their own children in their lunacy, some dying of mere grief as passion, some of mere fright and surprise without any infection at all, others frightened into idiotism and foolish distractions, some into despair and lunacy, others into melancholy madness.

These panics were members' responses to their definitions of the plague as a disaster, an event "determined by impersonal, inexorable forces against which human action has little effect" (Cohen, 1972:52). They were consequences of its impact: panics result from members' "immediate, unorganized response to death, injury, and destruction" (Cohen, 1972:23).

Thus, panics invariably reflect social dispersion. They occur when a disaster is viewed as such a tremendous

threat to life that members yield to the urgency of the situation and respond by making individual safety their first priority. Tuchman (1978:96) comments that, during the Black Death, many people echoed charges of inhumanity that were never contested "for the plague was not the kind of calamity that inspired mutual help. Its loathesomeness and deadliness did not herd people together in mutual distress but only prompted their desire to escape each other."<sup>22</sup> In this report Lifton (1967:46) notes that the individual's pre-occupation with survival is a universal psychological tendency in the face of massive death immersion. It creates a kind of social amnesia whereby --- as the accounts of Boccaccio, de Chauliac, and DeFoe have illustrated --- members forget their obligations to perform those duties which Durkheim (1938:1) characterizes as "defined externally in law and in custom."<sup>23</sup>

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22. There were some exceptions to this rule. When he retired one Venetian Health Officer received an annuity of 25 gold ducats because he had stayed in the city "when nearly all physicians withdrew on account of fear and terror." At the Hotel Dieu in Paris where the death toll approached 500 a day, the nuns attended to the sick with unselfish devotion, and most of them perished. The plague attacked the German clergy with exceptional violence probably because of the conscientious way in which they performed their duties (Ziegler, 1969:53, 80, 86). When the plague struck Marseilles the Jesuits and the Capucins "hastened from all quarters of the world to place themselves at the service of those attacked by the plague. At that time members of these Orders were to be seen in the streets...who had hardly recovered from the disease...dragged themselves along on their sticks to hear the confessions of the dying." (Nohl, 1961:83)

23. This must have been disastrous to the general tone of medieval life which was described earlier as consanguine, supportive, and very sociable.

The panic stricken group is similar to the crowd in the sense that the behaviours of both exhibit nondifferentiating tendencies. LeBon (1960:39-40, 27-30) observes that crowds are particularly susceptible to suggestion: they are always ready to assume the identity of whatever idea or sentiment happens to appeal to them.

LeBon's ideas about social contagion are relevant to an analysis of the panics which followed news of the plague in most communities. The random and dispersed behaviours of members, which are collected by the notion of panic, may be thought of as reproductions of the behaviours of plague bacilli or microorganisms in the sense that neither oriented to anything other than sheer physical life and survival. Marx's (1967:294) insight concerning the difference between humans and animals lends credence to this observation:

The animal is immediately one with its life activity, not distinct from it. The animal is its life activity. Man makes his life activity itself into an object of will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity.

Panics are understandable as the members' inability to respond to their situation adequately; that is, with a sense of what they need to maintain themselves apart from the pestilence. The victims and survivors of the plague initially failed to respond to it with any degree of identity or difference. They were intellectually overcome by the plague insofar as they yielded to their definitions of it by

acting as if it had interjected a set of conditions into their lives which they could not change.

Thucydides' (1954:154) observation to this effect that

The most terrible thing of all was the despair into which people fell when they realized they had caught the plague; for they would immediately adopt an attitude of utter hopelessness, and by giving in in this way, would lose their powers of resistance.

was repeated by DeFoe (1966:187):

...the people were brought into a condition to despair of life and abandon themselves ...but looking upon themselves all as so many dead corpses, they came to the churches without the least caution and crowded together as if their lives were of no consequence.

Both Thucydides and DeFoe show how the members of beleaguered communities reproduced the conditions of the plague in all facets of their lives and thereby constructed them as unalterable, fatal, and utterly consequential to their lives. They surrendered their intellectual digression to the plague insofar as they made it a point of reference for their definitions of their fate.<sup>24</sup> They were able to, as DeFoe put it, "look upon themselves as so many dead corpses" by anticipating the physical effects of the plague and succumbing to them intellectually. They thought of themselves as dead. As Thucydides notes, they generated their own executions prior to those wrought by the plague.

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24. Sontag (1977, 1978) has made this point about the demoralizing tendency of social definitions of diseases.

The community's decision to define a plague as a plague in order to maintain its integrity as a producer of social reality (which was discussed on page 105) does not preclude the possibility of panic as a response to the plague. Once it was so defined, the plague became real. The members of the community panicked as they perceived their inability to deal with it.

Panic followed the community's acknowledgment of the plague. While members exercised their responsibility in order to define the plague, they panicked as they related to it on a purely emotional level. They neglected the authority which they invoked to define the plague as they let their fates be subject to it. Thus, two different aspects of the community's relation to the plague, which are not mutually exclusive, have been discussed here.<sup>25</sup>

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25. Although differential responses to the plague have been mentioned (page 118) these do not comprise an area of great concern. My research is focused on the general definition of plague in the community.

## Recovery from the Plague

Glaser and Strauss (1965:79) comment that "openness does not eliminate complexity." In this respect, we have noted and discussed the panics which almost always followed the community members' definitions of the plague as a disaster. Thus, their use of a context of open awareness in regard to the plague, engendered a crisis of identity within the community: most of its members were so overwhelmed by the plague qua plague they lost their ability to differentiate themselves from it and failed to orient to it in a responsible or authoritative manner.

Cohen (1972:23) indicates that this is an immediate response to disaster which abates as the involved parties begin to do inventory: "to take a preliminary picture of what has happened and of their own situation relative to it. Rescue, remedy, and recovery usually follow" (Cohen, 1972:23). Community members thereby attempt to aid survivors in both direct and indirect ways, to relieve the constraints of their situation and to adapt to the changes which were precipitated by the disaster.<sup>26</sup>

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26. Although Shibutani (1966:31) points out that rumors are a constituent feature of the community members' attempts to make sense of the disaster, and therefore, are part of the inventory, we have noted how most people stopped talking to each other during the plague. Their silence was probably a consequence of their fear of contagion.

Some examples of the activities which were instituted by members as the communities began to recover from the shock of the plague are:

A specially appointed panel in Venice recommended that barges be used to take the bodies of the dead to remote areas where they were to be buried at least five feet underground. It also instituted strict control of immigration and established quarantine stations (Ziegler, 1969:53). In Milan, the houses of the afflicted were shut up and their occupants were left to die inside them (Ziegler, 1969:54). In Germany, members of the Brethren of the Cross marched in processions from town to town and practiced self-flagellation. According to Tuchman (1978:114), they

saw themselves as redeemers who, by reenacting the scourging of Christ upon their own bodies and making the blood flow would atone for human wickedness and earn another chance for mankind.

Although the Flagellants did more harm than good in the sense that they intensified popular antagonism toward the Jews and actually helped to spread the plague by carrying it with them from place to place, Ziegler (1969:98) and Nohl (1961:139) remark that they represented a remarkable step toward self-help for the members of medieval society.<sup>27</sup>

Their use of self-help can be understood as a popular

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27. The Flagellants are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

attempt to appeal directly to God for help from the plague instead of seeking the aid of his intermediaries in the Church. This differed from official strategies against the plague. The authorities made rules which required the members of the community to cooperate with them in the battle against the plague.

Ziegler (1969:73, 74-5) points out that medical measures which were taken against the plague, like bleeding, restrictions on exercise and diet, and the use of herbal potions and elixirs, were essentially morale building exercises: they made the physician feel somewhat in control of the situation and gave the patient a way to orient to life rather than death.

DeFoe (1966:58, 60) notes that in London the Mayor and Aldermen appointed examiners and watchmen to every parish and infected house "to prevent the spreading of the distemper." The magistrates also ordered that the sick be sequestered, that their personal effects be aired and that their houses be shut up and marked (DeFoe, 1966:60-1). They had the streets of the city cleaned and advised people not to eat unwholesome meat, fish or corn. The magistrates prohibited drama and celebrations; they also forbade beggars to exhibit their deformities or display corpses in public.

Public health officials were able to launch a successful anti-plague campaign during the second San Francisco

epidemic in 1907 (Gregg, 1978:70). The Mayor requested aid from the Federal Government after the twenty-fifth case of the disease was reported there. A Citizen's Health Committee was established in order to organize the community to exterminate the numerous rats which hosted plague infected fleas (Todd, 1909:10). People were urged to keep their garbage cans closed and to destroy all the rats' nests they could find (Todd, 1909:45). Stables and chicken coops were required to have concrete floors and to be rat proof (Gregg, 1978:68). Housewives were urged not to patronize filthy or rodent infected stores (Todd, 1909:75). The Citizen's Health Committee had decided that the people's casual attitude toward rats in their community had to be destroyed if the plague were ever to be stopped. Todd (1909:83) recalls:

Before the year was out it got so a man could hardly go to a church to pray or to a cigar store to punch a slot machine that he did not hear something about rats and the plague.

The news about the rats was announced in every area of life in San Francisco. Rat destruction and cleanliness were preached from the pulpit, and anti-rat propoganda was taught in the schools (Todd, 1909:101, 118). Gregg (1978:69) maintains that the success of the campaign was due to its pervasiveness: there were 205 cases of plague which resulted in only 88 deaths. The mortality rate had decreased from 97 per cent during the first epidemic to 40-60 per cent

during the second one.

## Vigilance: A Revitalization of Community

The measures against the plague which were instituted as the members of various communities began to recover from the shock of orienting to the disease in a context of open awareness illustrate Foucault's (1973:25-6) observation:

A medicine of epidemics could achieve full significance only if it was supplemented by constant, constricting intervention. A medicine of epidemics could exist only if supplemented by a police: to supervise the location of mines and cemeteries, to get as many corpses as possible cremated instead of buried, to control the sale of bread, wine and meat...to supervise the running of abattoirs and dye works, and to prohibit unhealthy housing; after a detailed study of the whole country, a set of health regulations would have to be drawn up that would be read at service or mass every Sunday and holy day; and which would explain how one should feed and dress oneself, how to avoid illness, and how to prevent or cure prevailing diseases... Lastly, a body of health inspectors would have to be set up that could be sent out to the provinces, placing each one in charge of a particular department...

How is it possible to understand Foucault's suggestion that vigilance must be instituted within the community if its members are to ward off the threat of an epidemic?

A feature of the plague's conceptualization is militaristic rhetoric.<sup>28</sup> The plague is analogous to a mysterious enemy that infiltrates the community's boundaries.

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28. See Sontag (1977, 1978:64-7) for a similar point about conceptualizations of cancer.

The plague's presence in the community resembles both an invasion and an occupation. Its visibility is never separate from its deadliness: the plague is evinced in the community as a large number of its members begin to suffer and die from it.

Thus, anti-plague measures, if any, must be instituted after the fact of the plague: that is, after its presence is visible to the members of the community. These are authored by a "public"; those who, according to Shibutani (1966:38) "regard themselves as likely to become involved in the consequences of the event and are sufficiently concerned to interest themselves in the possibility of control."

Measures against the plague can be initiated only after the public recognizes the fact that the plague's presence in the community is purely instrumental, that it is there for its own nourishment and sustenance. Thus, the relationship between the plague and the community can be characterized as one of the parasite and host. The plague, however, is a parasite that kills: its presence within the community can not be tolerated if the community orients to its survival as a priority.

Thus, the militaristic ways of talking about the plague are sustained from the shock of impact to remedy and recovery. The notion of plague as a parasite that destroys its host requires the community to engage in battle against

it, to eliminate it because the nature of plague makes the conditions for co-habitation impossible. Thus, the battle against the plague requires a strategy. The public must take account of the whole context of the relation between the plague and the community before it can generate a plan for action that would undermine that relation.

Vigilance is the public's answer to the demands of the strategy. It is practicable as the members of the community begin to understand that they are resources for the plague; that is, that they are inadvertently giving it life by being available to it in ways which foster its propagation. Vigilance thereby represents the public's decision not to give itself to the plague so readily, but to be miserly with itself and drive the parasite into oblivion. The use of vigilance in various communities, which was described earlier, required members to organize themselves in an attempt to stop the conditions which were contributing to the spread of the plague.<sup>29</sup>

The community's use of vigilance in its attempt to thwart the plague illuminates the fundamental difference between the pestilence and its victims. Vigilance is the community's solution to its problem of providing succor for the plague, a condition which its members know they can alter.

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29. This observation holds for all examples given in the last section except the Flagellants. They practiced supplication rather than vigilance.

Thus, vigilance is the practice of their consciousness, their ability to evaluate their situation and change it according to their judgment. Winch (1958:64) speaks of this quality:

The only mode of life which can undergo a meaningful development in response to environmental changes is one which contains within itself the means of assessing the behavior it prescribes.

The plague, on the other hand, can not alter its course in response to a change in conditions: it can only be effected by them. An effect is not an orientation in the sense that it merely requires a correspondence to a change in conditions. It does not require any knowledge of them.

While they were in a state of panic, the members of beleaguered communities were like the plague in the sense that their behaviours seemed random, accidental and disoriented. The plague was only being what it was when it exhibited similar properties: the panic stricken members were, on the other hand, responding to danger. They had allowed themselves to be moved by their conceptualization of the plague as a presence that would harm them; one from which they thought that it was necessary to flee. Panic was an immediate way in which members removed themselves from the presence of danger: it was a consequence of their decision that the farther they were away from the plague, the better. Their panic was an extreme response to the plague in the sense that, in choosing panic, they left their potential to orient to the plague in a

responsible way untouched. Thus, their panic did not include their understanding of themselves as beings who did not have to run away from a plague, but who could stay and deal with it. Once they had recovered a sense of themselves as beings who could take their situation into account and influence their fate, they recalled the assets of social organization. They became vigilant in response to the plague and thereby ended their panic.

Unlike the behaviours of the plague, those of the social actors it threatened to destroy can be organized by the notions of panic and vigilance. Vigilance is always possible for those who are panic-stricken insofar as it is a reorientation of their response to danger. The decision to disperse includes the decision to organize insofar as each one lacks the other in an essential way, but is also a point of reference for each. The decision to disperse can be thought of as a decision not to organize. Similarly, the decision to organize can be thought of as a decision not to disperse.

The communities' institution of vigilant measures against the pestilence was a reaffirmation of its identity insofar as its members showed that they could unite as a group and resist the plague. Vigilance was achieved only after its members made use of their faculty for judgement: they differentiated themselves from the plague by orienting to

their survival in a way that required them to know how the plague threatened the community by giving them, its members, reason to disperse rather than to collect themselves as a group. Their decision to unite by taking vigilant measures to resist the plague was also a decision to re achieve their unity. Thus, their decision to take action against the plague constituted the recovery of their sociality which the plague had given them reason to forget when they were in a state of panic.

The success of vigilance for the community, regardless of its outcome relative to a death toll, was the re achievement of its unity. The members of the community had to reorganize themselves to fight the plague. In order to do that, they had to redefine themselves as constituents of a body which could extricate an abominable form of death from its boundaries, putting the common good before individual survival. The institution of vigilance required members of the community to differentiate themselves from the plague intellectually. It also strengthened them in the sense that it made them exercise those very powers of judgement against which a plague is powerless.

Camus (1948:278) captures this in his concluding remarks about his protagonist's thoughts about the plague:

None the less, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of final victory. It could be only the record of what assuredly would have to be done in

the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.

The plague is destined to be what it is in the sense that it can only propagate or die. It can not, as far as we know, choose another form of life. Yet, it gives those who encounter it the opportunity to yield to dehumanizing conditions or to find themselves through their ability to differentiate themselves from a scourge. Although the members of the communities that were beleaguered by the plague faced both situations, we have noted how their decision to be vigilant was a reaffirmation of their sociality which the plague could not destroy.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have provided a rationale for the development of members' responses to plague in the community. Their general sense of the community's response to the plague does not preclude the possibility of other, differential responses to it. It merely recovers the social construction of the plague as a phenomenon which most members of the community initially understood in a particular way.

The initial response to the plague in most communities was one of denial. Members worked hard to maintain closed awareness relative to the fact of the plague. I have argued that their commitment to ignorance makes sense if one considers the grotesque form of death which the plague vested on the community. Denial is understandable as a boundary maintaining device, its purpose being to keep death out of the community. As the plague spread through the community and killed a large number of its members, however, it was impossible for survivors to deny its existence and still appear to be in touch with reality.

The consequences of the community's open awareness of the plague were diverse. It compelled members to admit and integrate an abominable form of death into their lives. Robert J. Lifton's (1967) study of the survivors of the

blast of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima shows that this is extremely difficult. Survivors have a tendency to identify themselves with death and thereby adopt devitalized and morbid orientations to life.

This survivor's predicament was evinced as panic and lawlessness followed the impact of the plague in most communities. Members were so overcome by the hostile conditions of the plague that they forgot that they were essentially beings who could differentiate themselves from them.

I have shown how they brought their faculty for intellectual digression into play as they recovered themselves from the shock of the plague by taking action against it. Their decision to act responsibly was a victory for them in the sense that it required them to exercise their powers of intellect against the mindless and pestilential form of life.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PERSECUTION OF MEDIEVAL JEWS

The plague of 1348 intensified the Western Europeans' feelings of anti-Semitism to such a great degree that they exterminated a large number of medieval Jews (Ziegler, 1969: 111). In this chapter I discuss and analyse the relation between the plague and anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages.

I show the inadequacy of using contemporary theories of anti-Semitism to account for the plague-specific pogroms. The medieval actors' hostilities toward the Jews were fostered by their religious beliefs. These were intensified by the particular crisis which the plague vested upon medieval society. The transformation of its members' orientation to deviance was precipitated by their successful degradation of the Jews. They were reconstructed as asocial beings whose elimination was justified by what they were. I argue that this need to destroy the enemy is antithetical to philosophy which advocates a healthy relation to disorder.

### Anti-Semitism

Sartre (1956) paints a vivid picture of modern anti-Semitism which coincides with its psychoanalytic interpretation (Ackerman and Jahoda, 1950) and the study of the Authoritarian Personality (Adorno, et al., 1950). These authors articulate the essential features of the anti-Semitic character which is developed here.

Anti-Semitic types are inclined to prejudge. They form "categorical generalizations" about people which are unfounded in reality and which are incognizant of individual differences (Ackerman and Jahoda, 1950:3). This contributes to their tendency to stereotype; that is, to maintain an unshaken belief in categorical generalizations in the face of contrary evidence (Ackerman and Jahoda, 1950:4).

Adorno (1950:617) points out that people's tendencies to stereotype shape their experience. The anti-Semites' objection to the Jews precedes their contact with them and enables them to perceive Jews in a negative manner (Sartre, 1956:13).

Sartre (1958:17) argues that the anti-Semites' hate of the Jew is merely incidental to their deeper need of something to hate. It mirrors their election "to live on the plane of passion" which enables them to reason

falsely and to replicate the impenetrability of stone (Sartre, 1958:18). Anti-Semites feign durability to ward off involvement. They do not want to touch or be touched: they are not open to the world and its influences (Sartre, 1956:18-9).

The study of the Authoritarian Personality has similarly revealed an approach devoid of genuine affect in almost all areas of its subjects' lives (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1950:385) in addition to their "anti-intrceptive tendencies": these reference a pervasive fear of any display, discussion, or analysis of human phenomena (Adorno et al., 1950:235). Ackerman and Jahoda (1950:32-3) note that anti-Semites are unable to initiate and sustain genuine interpersonal relationships.

Anti-Semites fear difference. This reflects their inability to establish satisfactory relations with others which is hidden by their need for conformity and belonging (Ackerman and Jahoda, 1950:34). Difference represents strength, maturity, and independence, qualities which anti-Semites' interest in conformity prevent them from achieving (Ackerman and Jahoda, 1950:35). Thus, anti-Semites oppose difference: it represents a threat to their already tenuous sense of identity (Levinson, 1950:147).

The outgroup represents an external challenge. As long as anything different survives, the fascist character feels threatened, no matter

how weak the other might be...  
(Adorno, 1950:632)

The anti-Semites' need to obliterate difference, "to liquidate the outgroups altogether, to keep them entirely subordinate or to segregate them in such a way as to minimize contact with the ingroups" (Levinson, 1950:150) results from their avoidance of an inner conflict. Anti-Semites are unable to face their possession of those very qualities which they attribute to the outgroup and consequently rally against. "Thus, it is not oneself but others that are seen as hostile and threatening. Or else one's own weakness leads to an exaggerated condemnation of everything that is weak" (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1950:474).

The works of these authors insinuate that anti-Semitism is a result of certain flaws in the character of its constituents. While this may be the case in certain instances, this explanation neglects the social aspect of anti-Semitism. It lets it stand as an individual's problem and it does not deal with the issues which are raised by the history of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is an orientation which has been instituted and acted upon by large numbers of people at certain periods in time. Thus, it would not be possible or practicable unless it related to some collective ideas about reality: that is, ones which made sense within certain contexts and were therefore accessible and available to social actors for use in their construction of reality.

Hence, my aim here is to show how medieval anti-Semitism was a routine feature of the popular religious beliefs which dominated their lives.

## Medieval Jews

The leper vied with the Jews as scapegoats in the Middle Ages (Ziegler, 1969:99), but the Jews were hated more intensely. Roth (1969:212) explains that the Jews were stigmatized as a race of pariahs, singled out for insults, attacks, and massacres at any outburst of popular feeling.

The Jews were "a perpetual insult to the newly established Church" (Tuchman, 1978:109). Isaac (1964:33) writes:

For the Christian apostolate in pagan lands, there was nothing more irritating or more galling than the passionate resistance of the Jews which they encountered everywhere, their refusal to recognize Jesus as Christ...and as his only "Son". In the eyes of the pagan world this obstinate refusal was a stunning contradiction of Christian teachings.

From the Christian's point of view, the Jews had said no to salvation. The Jews' adherence to their faith indicated that Christianity was not for everyone. Moreover, the Jews' refusal to convert undermined the basic principle of Catholicism which purported to be a religion for all.

Since the Jews had refused to cooperate with the Church, her recourse was to separate them from the faithful (Tuchman, 1978:109). As early as the fourth century,

Jews were deprived of their civil rights (Tuchman, 1978:109). This oppression continued into the Middle Ages. The rigid structure of feudal society, based upon a notion of a shared faith, excluded the Jew from participation as vassal, lord, or baron (Roth, 1969:201). Jews could not own property and they were forbidden to join the craft guilds (Roth, 1969:209). In 1179 the Church decreed that Jews could neither live nor work among Christians. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) forbade Jews to hold public office and required them to wear a badge so that they could be easily identified (Heer, 1962:310).

The Jews were maligned by a society that also made them its functionaries. They were compelled to perform tasks which were either objectionable or forbidden to Christians. Jews acted as gravediggers (Tuchman, 1978:112) and public executioners (Roth, 1969:212), occupations which did not contribute to their popularity. The medieval Jews were most notorious for the role they played in lending money. Ziegler (1969:100) states:

Usury was the only field of economic activity left open to them; an open field...since it was forbidden by Christian canon law.

Although the rabbinical authorities never fully sanctioned the practice and forbade one Jew to lend to another, "in the end they had to yield to circumstance" (Roth, 1969:205-6). The European Jews prospered in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They lent money almost exclusively

to the upper classes (Roth, 1969:207), and they were beneficiaries and supporters of the Crown (Heer, 1967:84). But their situation was precarious. Tuchman (1978:111) explains:

They lived entirely dependent upon the King's protection, subject to confiscations and expulsions and the hazards of royal favor.

The Jews were soon prey to "the accumulated hatred of capitalism" (Nohl, 1961:122). The lower classes resented them for giving financial aid to the aristocracy (Roth, 1969:201) and for the protection which they received in return from the Crown (Nohl, 1961:122-3). The Jews were also hated for the profits they made from the high rates of interest they charged their clients (Roth, 1969:210). The Crown's only interest in them was economic: the King had every reason to wish for the demise of the Jews he protected since he stood to inherit their wealth when they died (Heer, 1967:85).

As the Italian bankers began to dominate commerce (Roth, 1969:208), and the recession of the fourteenth century reduced his fortune, the Jew "dwindled to a small moneylender and pawnbroker. He acquired a large clientele of petty debtors so that everyday more people had cause to wish him out of the way" (Ziegler, 1969:100). Meanwhile religious antagonism toward the Jews had been on an upswing since the beginning of the Crusades in 1096 (Heer, 1962:310).

Trachtenberg (1943:19, 20) demonstrates how the Jews came to be identified with Satan as archenemies of Jesus in Christian legend. He notes:

The struggle against the forces of evil in the spiritual realm, exemplified by the devil and his cohorts, and against the enemies of the Church in the material world, prosecuted with unparalleled vigor during the later medieval age, impressed this subtle amalgamation of the Christ legend indelibly upon the public mind: the devil and the Jew joined forces, in Christian belief, not only in the war against Jesus during his life on earth but also in the contemporaneous war against the Church and its civilization. All the power of Christian propaganda was exerted to arouse fear and hatred of the Jews, for while Jesus fought the devil on his ground, his agents must destroy the agents of the devil on theirs, lest Satan inherit the earth and truth and salvation be lost. Christendom was summoned to be a holy war of extermination, of which the Jews were only incidentally the objects. It was Satan whom Christian Europe sought to crush. (Trachtenberg, 1943:21-2).

Heer (1967:68-70) claims that in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, anti-Semitic feelings among the people were rekindled by the preachers of the newly established mendicant orders, particularly the Dominicans and the Franciscans. The Jews were thought to be in league with the Devil (Heer, 1967:68-70). They were accused of murdering Christian children and drinking their blood "for a variety of sinister purposes from sadism and sorcery to the need, as unnatural beings, for Christian blood to give them a human appearance" (Tuchman, 1978:111).

The Jews were also ridiculed in the art of the Middle Ages. Heer (1967:90) writes:

In this epoch of permanent civil war, peasants' revolts and rebellions, animosity towards the Jews grew out of the massacres themselves. The killing was inspired by fear of the Devil...and followed by loathing. Where there was no Jews they had to be invented --- in religious plays, pictures, and lampoons. The growth of Christian anti-Semitism in Europe in the late Middle Ages were closely associated with the development of folk art and folk literature. Popular fables, farces, ballads, woodcuts, broadsheets, pictures in pilgrimage churches, all betray the longing for a legitimate outlet for enormous waves of fear, hate, envy, mockery, greed, and aggression which was found in the Jew.

In the beginning of the fifteenth century, pictures of sows suckling "little Jewish monsters" appeared in churches (Heer, 1967:81). The Jew was likened to Satan in popular legends and described as having horns, a goat's beard, a tail, huge genitals, and a fiendish smell (Trachtenberg, 1943:44-7).<sup>1</sup>

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1. Arendt (1958:8) distinguishes between modern anti-Semitism and the "old religious Jew hatred" of the Dark Ages, which has been described here. She claims that the former had political rather than economic roots: it was fostered by the economic alliances which Jews formed with the nation state which caused them to be identified with its power. Their lack of political judgment left them unaware of their precarious position in the conflict between the state and society. Their distrust of the masses and the importance they assigned to the family contributed to their being suspected of "working for the destruction of all social structures." (Arendt, 1958:17, 23, 25, 28)

Thus far, I have focused upon the social aspect of medieval anti-Semitism by showing how it was a feature of its constituents' religious beliefs. Isaac (1964:33) points out that Christians had to destroy "the prestige of their adversary by a campaign to discredit him" in order to preserve the supremacy of their faith. Thus, anti-Semitism was an option for anyone who interpreted the teachings of Christ imperialistically: that is, as dictating the moral boundaries for all conduct.

This reification of religious doctrine in medieval society was used to establish boundaries for the actors' notions about what constituted appropriate behaviours. It legitimated the popular orientation to the Jews as "outsiders", i.e. those whose failures to accede to the moral order makes them a threat to the group (Becker, 1963:1). Thus viewed as a social phenomenon, anti-Semitism is an example of deviance production. This is discussed in the next section.

## Deviance, the Jews, and the Plague

Deviance is produced as a group decides that others have failed to conform to the standards it has authorized which constitute its sense of appropriate behaviour (Becker, 1963:9). An ascription of deviance is the result of a judgment which precedes its constituents' conceptualizations of a course of action that can be accepted or rejected by an actor who is cognizant of that choice. (McHugh in Dreitzel, 1970:152)

The presence of deviants concretizes the absence of conformity for the community, but deviants always have the potential to remind the community of the value of conformity. It is impossible for anyone to conceive of deviants without referring their conduct back to the standard that they have not chosen to exemplify.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the idea of the deviant exudes conformity (Erikson, 1966:21). Although their behaviours appear to contradict it, deviants help to preserve the community's sense of value.

It is possible to conceive of deviance as a necessary, and even conservative, element of social life (Parsons, 1951: 88, Durkheim, 1938:67-73; Erikson, 1966:4, 13; Scott, 1972:10;

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2. Parsons (1951:251) also makes this point in regard to the relation between a judgment of deviance and the system to which it applies.

Mead, 1964:215-7). Deviance is an exemplification of a community's relation to value as one which is grounded in choice. Deviance is a consequence of a community's notion that members' decisions to accept or reject its values sanctions their social treatment; hence, both the deviants' and the conformists' senses of identity follow that decision. Deviance strengthens a society's conviction that its members are what they have chosen to be: their identity is achieved in the process by which they define deviance (Erikson, 1966:13).

Although a society may punish its deviants it must also maintain them insofar as they play a vital role in its constitution as a source of orientation for its members. Scott (1972:31) notes that a society does not usually kill its deviants because that would not reaffirm the truth of the values to which the deviants fail to conform as well as their control does. Mead (1964:116-7) argues that as antagonisms between groups develop, a group's impulses to obliterate the enemy are replaced by ones which are functional to the larger social whole. This results in the evolution of new social forms.

In the previous section we noted how the medieval Jews were compelled to adopt a variety of social roles which were either forbidden or distasteful to most Christians. The observations that Scott and Mead make regarding the relation between deviance and society suggest that the

Jewish role in the Middle Ages was relatively stable. The Christians needed the Jews to help them define the moral boundaries which strengthened their sense of identity: their attitude toward the Jews would be conservative in the sense that it would tend to maintain their deviant role. The medieval Christians who initiated acts of aggression against the Jews faced the prospect of losing the resource which facilitated their social organization.

Yet, shortly after the plague struck Europe in 1348, the popular treatment of the Jew changed from accommodative to genocidal.<sup>3</sup> Abrahams (1969:332) explains:

In the Middle Ages, the popular imagination invariably flew to poisoning as the explanation of epidemics, and the Jews were massacred by thousands during the outbreaks of fanatical madness which seized upon Europe in consequence of the Black Death. (Abrahams, 1969:332)

The Jews were attacked for poisoning the wells in Southern France in the spring of 1348. They were accused of conspiring "to kill and destroy the whole Christendom and have leadership over the whole world" (Tuchman, 1978:

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3. The persecutions of Jews in medieval Europe were, for the most part, initiated and executed by the common people. They were influenced by the preachings of those in the mendicant orders and the Flagellants. Although the Pope forbade these attacks, his pronouncements were not heeded. The persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages was a popular movement. It was different from the witch hunts which were "well organized campaigns, initiated, financed and executed by Church and State" (Ehrenreich and English, 1973:9).

109). Massacres followed in Provence, Narbonne, and Carcassonne; about fifty thousand Jews were executed in Burgundy (Nohl, 1961:115).

Two bulls (i.e., official documents) issued by Pope Clement IV in July and September 1348 which forbade assaults on the Jews under the pain of excommunication (Nohl, 1961:115) went unheeded (Heer, 1967:89) and the campaign against the Jews escalated.

The first formal trial was held in Chillon in September 1348 (Ziegler, 1969:104). "A Jewish surgeon there, Balavignus, revealed that several Jews in a town in the south of France...had compounded a poison out of Christians' hearts, spiders, frogs, lizards, human flesh, and sacred hosts, and had distributed the resultant powder to be deposited in wells and streams which supplied Christians with water" (Trachtenberg, 1943:104). Ziegler (1969:104) notes that this confession was exacted after Balavignus was racked and tortured. When news of it reached neighboring towns and villages, violence against the Jews increased (Ziegler, 1969:104). On September 21, 1348, a decree never to admit Jews into Zurich was passed by the Council (Nohl, 1961:115). The entire Jewish community of Basle was thrown into a wooden shack and burned alive (Roth, 1969:232). In November, 1348, the Jews of Solothurn, Zofingen, and Stuttgart were executed in a similar manner (Ziegler, 1969:105). The land-

grave Frederick of Thuringia-Meisen was so agitated that some Jews were left alive in his Kingdom that he asked the municipal council of Nordhausen to burn all Jews "for the praise and honor of God and the benefit of Christianity" (Nohl, 1961:116). The attacks on the Jews continued through the winter months (Ziegler, 1969:105) and they occurred in almost "every town in German speaking countries" (Heer, 1967: 89).

The Jews' situation was worsened by the Flagellants (Nohl, 1961:141). They traveled in procession from town to town and scourged themselves in the hope of atoning for their sins and appeasing the angry God who had thrust the plague upon an evil world (Backman, 1977:161-8). Trachtenberg (1943:105) points out that their aims actually constituted an unconscious rejection of the well poisoning theory, but logic was not their forte. Tuchman (1978:115) states:

In every town they entered the  
Flagellants rushed for the Jewish  
quarter, trailed by citizens howling  
for revenge upon the "poisoners of  
the wells.:

In Konigsberg, Freiburg, Nurnburg, Regensburg, Munich and Augsburg, "the Jews were slaughtered with a thoroughness that seemed to seek the final solution" (Tuchman, 1978:115). The Flagellants were implicated in massacres that took place in Frankfurt and Brussels (Ziegler, 1969:108). Two thousand Jews were killed in Stras-

bourg in February, 1349 after the citizens merely heard rumors that the plague was approaching their city (Ziegler, 1969:105). In Cologne, Worms, Esslingen, and Oppenheim, the Jews chose mass suicide instead of murder by the angry mob (Roth, 1969:233, and Nohl, 1961:117). In the spring of 1349, the Jews of the Hansa towns were walled up in their domiciles and left to die (Ziegler, 1969:105). In the late summer of that year, six thousand Jews were killed after they had initiated an attack and slain two hundred Christians in Mainz; three thousand Jews also died in Erfurt (Tuchman, 1978:116).

The Flagellants soon earned the disapproval of the Church (Trachtenberg, 1943:105). Tuchman (1978:115) explains:

Growing in arrogance, they became overt in antagonism to the Church. The Masters assumed the right to hear confession and grant absolution or impose penance, which not only denied the priests their fee for these services but challenged ecclesiastical authority at its core. Priests who intervened against them were stoned and the populace was incited to join in the stoning. Opponents were denounced as scorpions and Anti-Christ. Organized in some cases by apostate priests or fanatic dissidents the Flagellants took possession of churches, disrupted services, ridiculed the Eucharist, looted altars and claimed the power to cast out evil spirits and raise the dead...

In October 1349, Pope Clement IV issued a bull which denounced the Flagellants for their role in persecuting the Jews. He called for the dispersal of the Order and also

for the arrest of any members who refused to comply with his orders (Tuchman, 1978:116). The Flagellants disappeared as the clerical pressure against them mounted (Nohl, 1961:43), and the persecutions of the Jews diminished as the plague abated (Ziegler, 1969:110). By 1351, both instances of natural and social pestilence had passed.

## The Flagellants

Some historians (e.g., Ziegler, 1969:87 and Backman, 1977:161-9) express sympathy for the Flagellants, for their actions were meant to stop the plague. Nohl (1971:139) interprets their seemingly excessive behaviours in a rational way:

The Flagellant Movement, based emphatically on the laity, must be regarded as an attempt at self help on the part of the people who, deeply disappointed by the Church, in the great distress of the Black Death, for the first time found the courage to appeal to God directly with supplication for help and salvation, without the intervention of the clergy. To the empty formalism and sale of indulgences of the Church and the immorality of its representatives who publicly indulged in all excesses of lasciviousness, it opposed the bitter earnestness of repentance which found its most distinct expression in the act of self-scourging.

The popularity of the Flagellant Movement can be thought of as a vital response to the plague for, in order to consider the possibility of Flagellation (and the persecution of Jews which it instigated), its practitioners had to imagine that their actions could have some effect on the plague.

Whether they engaged in flagellation or responded to the movement enthusiastically by killing the Jews, the members of medieval society were resisting "the age old tendency of the faithful to look upon pestilence as a sign of divine

wrath and punishment" (Hirst, 1953:14). Instead, they were daring to take matters into their own hands by appealing directly to God. The members of medieval society were asserting themselves insofar as the actions they took against the plague were generated by the belief that they could make a difference to God: that is, that he might yield to their entreaties to stop the plague. Thus, their use of bizarre techniques to stop the plague undermined the possibility of their passivity which would have been reinforced by the supernatural explanation that the plague was God's will.

The belief that the plague is the work of God is a punitive one for it includes a notion of God's decision to inflict pain on those whose conduct has offended him. It reinforces its believers' dependence upon God by reminding them of their ultimate powerlessness in relation to their creator. If the plague is really the work of a being who is omnipotent, then nothing can be done about it until his anger is appeased. The only thing for one to do in these circumstances is to accept one's punishment, to suffer and die from the plague. Hence, the supernatural explanation for the plague insures the passivity of its constituents.

In a broader context, Marcuse (in Feifel, 1959:74) argues that other worldly explanations for the necessity of death foster a passivity in people which serves the ends of the established order:

...death is an institution and a value: the cohesion of the social order depends to a considerable extent on the effectiveness with which individuals comply with death as more than a natural necessity; on their willingness, even urge, to die many deaths which are not natural; on their agreement to sacrifice themselves and not to fight death "too much". Life is not to be valued too highly, at least not as the supreme good. The social order demands compliance with toil and resignation, heroism, and punishment for sin. The established civilization does not function without a considerable degree of unfreedom; and death, the ultimate cause of all anxiety, sustains unfreedom.

The supernatural explanation for the necessity of plague is also cruel in the sense that it gives its subscribers reason to doubt their own worth. It indicates that they have been rejected and abandoned by the very being who gave them life. If they can not find succor in their God, whose bond to them is original and basic, with whom, then, can they find succor? The supernatural explanation for pestilence is also a conviction of its constituents' guilt.

The members of medieval society found a way to mitigate their guilt as they chose to believe that the Jews had spread the plague. By blaming it on others, they managed to deemphasize the role they had supposedly played in bringing the plague upon themselves: they were then free to devote themselves to vengeance. This corresponds to Parson's (1951:405) definition of projection as a mechanism of defense whereby ego orients to alter as a

source of disturbance and an object of resentment. However, an explanation which does not require invocation of defensive projection, and which is more social than psychological in character may be given. The degree of passion with which the members of medieval society pursued and punished the Jews for their alleged role in spreading the plague and their defiance of the Pope's prohibitions on those attacks may also indicate that they preferred a secular explanation for the plague to a religious one. This is feasible if we consider the following:

The Jews were, like the Christians, embodied. Their activities were sensuous: that is, able to be perceived through sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. The medieval actors' adherence to the idea that the Jews had spread the plague was a way for them to maintain that the plague was a worldly phenomenon whose source could be identified, located, and eliminated. This enabled them to collapse the tension between the visible plague and its invisible source (God) and to end their definition of it as a mystery, i.e. a phenomenon which they could not make sense of. Thus, the belief that the Jews had spread the plague gave the members of medieval society a way to organize themselves in relation to the disease: it facilitated their institution of a course of action (genocide) which made them feel that they were in control of their fate. This solution to the problem they

faced with the plague required them to redefine their relation to the Jews. This is discussed in the next section.

## The Genesis of a Germ

The actions which the members of medieval society took against the Jews for their alleged role in spreading the plague followed a total transformation of their character: one which made them facile objects of genocide. Their elimination proceeded logically from this reconstitution in the sense that it had made them into creatures whose nature warranted the pogroms.

This redefinition of the Jews for their alleged role in spreading the plague made them specific to the plague: they became agents of its transmission. The Jews were thought of as responsible for the plague. Thus, the members of medieval society oriented to them as a plague: the actions which they took against Jews were virtually actions they took against the plague. The Jews became metaphors for affliction in much the same way that germs are conceptualized today.<sup>4</sup>

Germs are creatures that invade the body, multiply, and create havoc therein. An ascription of evil --- via the negative change they engender in the body --- is essential to their usage. This is captured by Craven and Marr's (1977) depiction of the physical state of a girl

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4. Of course, anti-Semitism has taken other forms

infected with the plague.

Her symptoms, e.g., lack of colour, perspiration, a cough, sore throat, chills, pain in the head, neck and lower abdomen, and burning in the groin, indicate the presence of an alien organism in her body (Cravens and Marr, 1977: 1, 2, 4, 5, 6). The authors characterize this as the source of her trouble,

Within her, something surged and flowed,  
at ease with itself, at war with her.

This refers to the bacillus, yersinia pestis, which must be identified in order to absolutely confirm the at various times in history and thereby served different purposes. The propositions that the Jews who were persecuted for spreading the plague were the victims of a medieval germ analogy is not a statement of fact. It is a theoretical insight which merely illuminates the feasibility of that phenomenon.

This mode of analysis I have used here is a form which is legitimated by the rigor of the logic employed to produce it. Thus, its methodology approaches that of phenomenological sociology. Blum and McHugh (1980) explain, "Whereas genuine discourse embodies an interest in orienting to its own exercise of authority as an influence that is good in itself, and so always shows an interest in discriminating genuine from spurious discourse, spurious discourse is indifferent to this need. The art of genuine theorizing must always strenuously resist the natural but spurious temptation to reject inquiry into the grounds of discourse as an impossible or foolish interest."

Thus, the notion that the Jews were metaphors for the affliction of plague stands to reason if we consider the major points which ground the argument: (1) A secular explanation for the plague was preferable to a sacred one. Medieval society used a secular explanation for its members in order to develop and exercise a sense of their own authority in accounting for the plague. (2) The Jews were embodied beings whose activities could be located, identified, and understood, as the origin of the plague. (3) The medieval population's orientation to them as transmitters of the plague required a total transformation of their character which was the result of a status degradation ceremony. This is discussed in the following section.

plague (Bahmanyar and Cavanaugh, 1976:14). Its presence within the girl elicits a particular response from her system:

...under attack, she had withdrawn all her energies from outer expression and turned them instead to the task of maintaining and defending her body.  
(Cravens and Marr, 1977:6, 10)

The invading organism had gotten beneath the girl's skin, and it had immediately lost some of its cells to her white blood cells. They carried it into her lymph system to the regional lymph nodes in her armpits and groin (Cravens and Marr, 1977:10).

In the abundant fields of tissue and the rich streams of blood, it feasted, letting its poisonous wastes drift where they would.  
(Cravens and Marr, 1977:11)

The girl's body met this attack by producing more white blood cells to encompass and stop the invader, but it "multiplied its cells more rapidly than the white cells could kill them." (Cravens and Marr, 1977:11)

Carried again by the white blood cells, the surviving foreign cells traveled through the small veins through the lymphatic system into the capillaries of the lungs. Her body clogged them in order to stop the alien cells' progress, but they managed to escape into the air sacs of the lungs.

At last it had broken into the air sacs. These pockets, womblike, warm, and lush with sugars and oxygen, were exactly what the invader needed to begin colonization.

It began to increase itself: every cell split in two, and those two split into four, and those four ...  
 (Cravens and Marr, 1977:11)

The girl's body struggled to rid itself of the invader which was a simple form of life in comparison to hers:

All it could do, in its million-headed singlemindedness, was release a few thousand molecules of various poisons ...The organism had only to exhaust and outlast her.  
 (Cravens and Marr, 1977:17).

The girl's body was trying to rid itself of all its occupied cells. As it did so, her lungs and chest cavity filled, making it impossible for her to breathe (Cravens and Marr, 1977:19). The authors describe her death as her body's election to yeild to the invasive cells:

The same self-aware nexus of energy that had told her to build herself from an egg into a baby, to drop into the birth canal, and to make her way out into the world of light and sound and breath now began telling her to unhook her awareness from the cells, the tissues, the organs, and the systems she had made while moving through time. She obeyed.  
 (Cravens and Marr, 1977:19-20)

The preceeding description of a girl's infection with plague shows that the bacillus engendered a change within her body which was debilitating. The bacillus began to turn her body into what it was, an instance of plague. The body was thereby reconstituted as less of a body. The body, infected with plague, faced the prospect of absolute loss of itself to the alien organism. Hence, its only possible defense was

the recovery of its original state, its return to life without the plague. The presence of a germ like plague in the body --- which is immediately and totally debilitating --- precipitates the body's struggle between recovery and loss, life and death. This elicits its recourse to defenses i.e., processes which are aimed at the body's restoration of itself as a body and which include the elimination of the offensive presence.

The members of medieval society who were beleaguered by the plague responded to their situation in the same capacity that their bodies would have reacted to invasive bacilli: that is, by eliminating the Jews. However, the members of medieval society were, unlike their bodies, social actors who initiated a course of action which was intended to destroy the Jews. Tuchman (1978:114) remarks, "The persecutions of the Black Death were not all spontaneous outbursts but action seriously discussed beforehand." Thus, the persecutions of medieval Jews were socially authorized and practicable actions which combined a brutal method with a rational purpose (to end the plague).

The members of medieval society oriented to the Jews as any technician would to the plague bacilli: that is, as non-differentiated members of a single organic body to be eradicated through the application of certain measures aimed at control (Bahmanyar and Cavanaugh, 1976:62). Thus, the

massacres of the European Jews, which were precipitated by the Black Death, followed the Christian populations' radical redefinition of their character: one which desocialized them and literally transformed them into "germs". This is discussed in the next section.

## Jewish Degradation in Medieval Society

If the persecution of medieval Jews for spreading the plague involved their social production as germs (embodiments of the plague), then it represents their reconstitution as asocial beings in medieval society. That involved a definition of them as creatures whose very nature warranted a pogrom. Garfinkel's (1956) elaboration of the conditions which are needed to produce a successful degradation ceremony are relevant to a discussion of how it was possible for the members of medieval society to vanquish the Jews.

Garfinkel (1956:420) defines a status degradation ceremony as the communicative work between actors which totally transforms one's identity into a lowly one "in the local scheme of social types." The new identity is "motivational" rather than "behavioristic". Garfinkel states that it must refer to what the denouncers construe as the ultimate grounds for the conduct of the one being denounced. The production of a successful degradation ceremony is contingent upon the relevant actors' fulfillment of the following conditions (Garfinkel, 1956:422-3):

1. Both the event and its perpetrator must be made to appear extraordinary.
2. Both must be treated as instances of a uniformity throughout the ceremony.

- B. The witnesses must recognize the characteristics of the typed person and event by referring them to a dialectical counterpart. If treason or betrayal were the issue, then loyalty would be emphasized in contrast to it.
3. The Judge must be both represented and regarded as acting in behalf of the community.
4. The Judge must make the fact that he is acting in behalf of the community clear to its members.
5. He must speak and act for their ultimate values.
6. The others must have authorized him to do so.
7. Both witnesses and denouncer must experience their distance from the recipient of the degradation.
8. The recipient must be viewed as occupying a space outside of the legitimate order.

The Jews were massacred as the conditions of successful degradations were fulfilled. These were constitutive features of the transformation of their character which facilitated the atrocious treatment they received. At this point, I am interested in showing how the elements of degradation were diffused throughout medieval society and used by its members to form a general orientation to the Jews. This culminated in their near extermination when the rest of the population, confused and devitalized by the Black Death, acted upon their need to end their powerlessness by asserting themselves against the plague (which the Jews

had come to embody).

In the Middle Ages, the Jews were commonly pictured as anti-Christ (Ziegler, 1969:100-1). This characterization alone fulfilled a number of Garfinkel's criteria for the production of a successful degradation. First and foremost, it facilitated their total identification as motivational types. The Jews' association with Satan left no room for doubts about their character.<sup>5</sup> They could, like the devil, only do evil. Thus, a quality initially used to describe the Jews became a fixed point of reference for the public's decisions about their character. The Jews' propensity for evil was used to account for the behaviour of all Jews all the time.

Hence, the crime of well-poisoning with which they were charged for spreading the plague was, for their medieval accusers, merely an instance of their general tendency to do evil. This evaluation of the Jewish character dominated medieval life. For example, the courage which the Jews usually displayed at their executions was taken as indicative of their unflinching devotion to Satan (Nohl, 1961:125).

The Jews' identification with Satan excluded them from participating in the moral order which was constructed as a struggle against the forces of evil. They appeared extraordinary in the sense that they seemed to oppose the rationale

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5. Sartre (1956:39) indicates that this is also a feature of modern anti-Semitism.

which made medieval life sensible for its constituents. The Jews' different customs and religious beliefs intensified their separation from Christian society for the Jews did not exhibit any interest in conforming. Their failure to defer to the Christian moral code hindered their construction as "normal deviants": it precluded the possibility of their integration in Christian society. It was difficult for their accusers to be lenient with the Jews for their differences were so pronounced. They could never be considered bona fide members of medieval society as long as they remained Jews and were indifferent to Christian values. In true degradation ceremony style, the latter was used to justify the brutal treatment that the Jews received.

The Flagellants who instigated many attacks against the Jews portrayed themselves as representatives of Christian values which were the unifying element of medieval life. As they marched in procession they sang this song:

Our journey's done in the holy name  
 Christ Himself to Jerusalem came,  
 His cross He bore in His holy hand,  
 Help us, Saviour of all the land.  
 (Nohl, 1961:134)

Moreover, the Flagellants led the members of medieval society to believe they had their best interests at heart, as they chanted of their mission:

Now raise we all our hands,  
 That God may take away the plague  
 Now raise we all our arms  
 That God may have mercy on us.

(Backman, 1952:168)

Both the Flagellants' depictions of themselves as paragons of Christian virtue and divine intercessors worked to legitimate their role as denouncers of the Jews. As people followed their suggestions and massacred the Jews, they gave them the authority to act as agents of degradation.

The last two conditions for a successful degradation were fulfilled as the majority of the medieval population experienced a profound moral distance from the Jews. The very charge that they had poisoned the wells achieved this for it made the Jews into enemies of the community. Those who were portrayed as intent on its destruction could never be reconciled to membership since their alleged activity undermined the achievement of the common good.

Moreover, the charge itself gave impetus to the popular formulation of the Jews as metaphors for the plague. Their alleged infliction of the plague on medieval society made them responsible for it. As the agents of its transmission, the Jews were looked upon as the medium of the plague. This facilitated the conceptualization of them as embodiments of the plague. They were inextricably connected to the consequences of their activity (of transmission) which were manifested as the actual cases of plague.

The charge also indicates that the Jews were considered the mind of the plague. Their supposed unleashing

of it upon the population gave it an orientation. Thus, the medieval actors' definition of the Jews as agents of the plague enabled them to give intentionality to the idea of the plague. It helped them to socialize an otherwise impervious form of life: their ascription of motive to the plague facilitated their conceptualization of it as an organized activity. It was understandable as a human achievement, and, thus, a suitable target for the moral indignation of those who were plagued. It gave the plague an author who could be subject to their reprisals.

Finally, the preceding description of the interactions between Christians and Jews in the Middle Ages brings some interesting points about degradation ceremonies to light. A successful degradation ceremony requires the denouncers to be certain about the character of the accused so that they can assign guilt to them. This signifies the end of their willingness to engage them in discourse. Thus, the accused's loss of status as speakers in the community precedes its members' readiness to take punitive action against them. Their fate is sealed: the successful degradation ceremony results in a significant removal of the resource (speech) which the denounced persons need to change the minds of their denouncers, i.e. to convince them of their innocence. Thus, a successful degradation ceremony makes the accused superfluous: they become ones whose presence can no longer make a difference

to the community. A successful degradation ceremony succeeds the accused's exclusion from the community and renders them socially dead. It facilitates the other members' constitution of them as ones whose "socially relevant attributes cease to be operative as conditions for treating" them (Sudnow, 1967: 64). A successful degradation ceremony transforms the accused into germs which are insignificant forms of life who have no claim to just treatment within the community.

It is reasonable to suggest that genocide, i.e. the destruction of one ethnic or culture group by another (Scher, 1969:103) is possible only after the aggressive group has successfully degraded the other. The members must achieve a total transformation of the target group's character which make it inconsequential to the others' social organization. The recipients lose their authority. Their privilege of membership and social relevance is revoked. Thus, a successful degradation results in the manufacture of asocial enemies which the genocidal orientation requires. It precludes social interactions between the denouncers and the ones being denounced insofar as the former has ceased to be interested in the difference which the latter can make to community life. A successful degradation ceremony may initiate a purely external relation between its constituents and its recipients; one in which the former are only capable of relating to the inappropriateness of the latter's presence within the community.

Hence, a successful degradation ceremony may result in activity which is designed to eliminate the offensive presence of the enemy. The termination of the chronically strained relations between Christians and Jews in the Middle Ages is understandable as the outcome of many successful degradations. The implications of genocide, relative to the theory of deviance, are discussed in the following section.

## Genocide

In a previous section, we noted that germs are creatures that invade the body, that multiply and create havoc inside it. Canetti (1973:53) argues that they are a secularized version of small devils. The Jews in the Middle Ages were regarded by their Christian contemporaries in much the same way. They undermined the universal appeal of Catholicism, posed a threat of disorganization to the religious body and produced a blemish therein. Thus, the definition of a Jew for the medieval actor (or a germ for the technician) refers to an organism which impedes the achievement of social organization and which produces the need for its elimination (a pogrom).

This is a radical response to deviants. It fails to socialize them in the sense that it does not sustain the possibility of inclusion which always accompanies the exclusion of the normal deviant.<sup>6</sup> The actors who institute pogroms against members of an ostracized group only orient to them as totally transformed characters: that is, as creatures who have lost their authority within the community. Thus, genocide is intended to eliminate the threat which deviants pose to social organization. Genocide is an attempt to destroy

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6. Think of the supposedly rehabilitative functions of modern prisons.

disorder. The reconstitution of deviants includes a negative structuring of disorder which influences its authors' decision to eliminate them.

Genocide is thereby instituted at the point when its constituents are dissatisfied with the normal production of deviance which involves the actual exclusion and possible inclusion of non-conforming members. It follows from their decision that their sheer indifference to deviants, which is precipitated by their exclusive response, is not an adequate way to deal with anomaly, the threat to social organization which deviants represent (Scott, 1972:22). Thus, genocide is chosen when the threat which anomaly poses to the group is too critical to warrant its mere exclusion. This makes obliteration of deviants desirable.

Scott (1972:73) notes:

...social and historical forces often conspire to obscure the distinctiveness of a group's symbolic universe or to change the group so much that its boundary lines may actually be erased. When this happens we often find crime waves and witch hunts occurring during which some individuals who were previously accepted as part of the group now find themselves run out of it as heretics.

Scott suggests that movements which are potentially genocidal are instituted by a group that faces a crisis relative to its own identity. Its members' inability to define themselves becomes a problem with others. The threatened group gives others an identity that is stronger than its own as

it ascribes deviance to them. Hence, it produces the need for the obliteration of the others. Coser (1956:102, 105) articulates these points in the following way:

the close group...tends to produce scapegoating reactions. Not only does such a group define any actual dissent as 'enemy activity' but it tends in addition to "invent" both inside and outside enemies in order to strengthen its inner solidarity. Such a group searches incessantly for an enemy since its cohesion and its existence depend on him.

He adds:

...the group's search for enemies is aimed not at obtaining results for its members but merely at maintaining its own structure as an ongoing concern.

Coser's statements reveal the fragility of the in-group's identity: it would perish without the outgroup. Hence, its unity comes from a source which simultaneously attracts and repels it, which it both needs and is compelled to destroy. Its inability to sustain itself without an enemy references its inability to conceive of itself without a notion of what it is not. Its sense of the enemy (of what it is not) gives it a sense of what it is: it is what it is not. Thus, in obliterating the enemy, the genocidal group destroys the disorder which it apprehends as part of itself. Yet the group which practices genocide ultimately defeats itself for as it destroys its enemy, it destroys the source of its identity.

The impulse to destroy disorder which fosters the genocidal campaign is antithetical to philosophy. In Chapter Two we noted that philosophy is an organization of tension between the known and the unknown. Philosophy is a preparation for death. The social production of normal deviance is antipathetic to disorder, and genocide is overtly destructive to it, but philosophy generates a respect for disorder. It gives disorder a place in life: philosophy develops a positive relation to disorder. Philosophy integrates anomaly while it also preserves a sense of anomaly's natural resistance to cognition. The philosopher does not interpret this as a threat but as the invitation to relate to anomaly in a way which better fosters its conceptualization.

Philosophy does not socialize anomaly or make it understandable in purely human terms. It does not equate disorder to different ethnic or cultural groups, as the sheer conventionality of members do. Philosophy does not encourage the exclusion of deviants required by their normal production or their destruction instituted by genocidal campaigns. If anything, philosophy would educate those who produce deviance about their relation to anomaly. It would tend to undermine the immediacy of unreflexive responses to the unknown and thus deter the normal production of deviance and genocide.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described the anti-Semite's mode of orientation to the world. This was developed in light of contemporary theory (Sartre, 1956) and psychoanalytic research (Adorno et al, 1950; Ackerman and Jahoda, 1950) on the subject. These works tend to individuate the explanations for anti-Semitism; thus, they neglect its social aspect. I argued that, in the Middle Ages, anti-Semitism was a public orientation: it was an integral feature of its constituents' religious beliefs. Medieval anti-Semitism is thereby understandable as a form of deviance production: the work of Parsons (1951), Durkheim (1938), Erikson (1966), Scott (1972), and Mead (1964) suggest that it should have had a stabilizing, and even conservative influence, on that society. However, shortly after the plague struck Europe in 1348, the medieval actor's orientation to the Jew changed from accommodative to genocidal. I demonstrated how the near extermination of medieval Jews resulted from the popular need to account for the plague in a realistic way. Viewed in this light, the medieval actors' belief that the Jews had spread the plague is intelligible as a break with their traditional religious beliefs. This is illustrated by the Flagellants who defied the Church and dared to appeal directly to God for relief from the plague. The Flagellants also instigated many

attacks against the Jews.

The plague-specific pogroms were only possible after the Jews had been successfully degraded in medieval society. The Jews acquired a socially irrelevant status within the community: they became like germs. This reconstitution of their character is understandable as a negative structuring of anomaly which facilitated the genocidal orientation to them. It came into being as the production of normal deviance failed to satisfy the group's attempt to control disorder. In the last section I showed how the genocidal impulse is antithetical to philosophy which would actually undermine the former's destructive relation to disorder.

## CHAPTER V

### PLAGUE, THE BODY, AND THE MACABRE ART OF THE MIDDLE AGES

This chapter examines the relation between the plague and the macabre art of the Middle Ages. I demonstrate how the plague influenced the development of both early and late styles of macabre art. The former focused upon corporeal decay while the latter personified death as a grinning skeleton that took the living away with him. Both styles of macabre art incorporate certain aspects of the plague experience, notably the pernicious effect of the plague upon the body and the great extent to which it vested death upon medieval society.

While theorists like Huizinga (1954), Illich (1976) and Ariès (1974) interpret the macabre obsession with death and decay as symptomatic of the excessiveness of medieval society, I view it as a way in which its members resisted complete appropriation by death from the plague. I demonstrate how, relative to a theory of normal embodiment, art in the macabre tradition was an expression of renewed faith in the body, and may therefore be viewed as ultimately life-affirming.

## Macabre Art and the Plague

Tuchman (1978:124) describes two frescoes, one by Traini, the other by Orcanga, which "emerged from the plague years" (around 1350) and show the Triumph of the Dead. Both depict an old woman, dressed in black with "streaming hair and wild eyes" carrying a "murderous broad-bladed scythe. Her feet end in claws instead of toes." Tuchman (1978:124) notes that these frescoes "marked the start of the pervasive presence of Death in Art." Eventually, this developed into expressions and images of putrefaction and decay which dominated the art of the fifteenth century (Illich, 1976:181-3).

The word, macabre, was first coined in France in 1376 in the line of a poem by Jean Le Fevre, "Je fis de macabré la dance" (Huizinga, 1954:144). Boase (1972:104) notes that the Dance of Death appeared in a late poem of the thirteenth century, "Le Dit des Trois Morts at Trois Vifs", a subject which was carved on the facade of the Church of Innocents in Paris. Huizinga (1954:144-5) tells the story of three young noblemen who encountered three gruesome dead men in a forest. The dead men recounted stories of their former vain glory and warned the young men that their deaths were fast approaching. Their grisly example indicated the fate which awaited the proud young men.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Nohl (1961:148-9) relates a legend about the

It is not difficult to surmise that the Black Death influenced medieval society's institution of this "gruesome and dismal" (Huizinga, 1954:144) form of art. The plague made the bodies of those it infected vile (Tuchman, 1978:92); this is a point which almost every eye witness account of the plague mentioned. Ziegler (1969:20) writes:

Through almost every account breathes the revulsion as well as the fear which the plague inspired in all who encountered it. Disease rarely respects human dignity and beauty, but the Black Death seemed peculiarly well-equipped to humiliate its victims. Everything about it was disgusting so that the sick became objects more of detestation than pity: "...all the matter which exuded from their bodies let off an unbearable stench, sweat, excrement, spittle, breath so foetid as to be overpowering; urine turbid, thick, black or red..."

The plague, like the atomic bomb, produced a "monstrous alteration of the body substance" (Lifton, 1967:480). It changed the bodies of its victims. It was difficult for them to be considered normal for they had been taken over by the plague and changed into something ghastly and unfamiliar. The plague made the body an aesthetic horror.

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origin of the la danse macabre in France in the beginning of the fifteenth century. It was customary for medieval citizens to don ugly masques in order to scare away the evil spirits of diseases. In 1424, a Scotsman, Maccaber, who was purportedly half a skeleton and half a man had established residence in the old tower of a graveyard in Paris. He started a pantomime (ecclesiastic procession), the Maccaber dance, to which he invited men and women of all ages. The dance was repeated periodically and Maccaber gained notoriety as a supernatural figure.

Lifton's (1967:481) observation about the effect of the atomic bomb on the bodies of its victims offers us some insight about the plight of the medieval actor who was infected with the plague. He notes that, "After any such exposure, the survivor internalizes this grotesqueness...and feels it to be inseparable from his own body and mind."

Keeping these points about bodily degeneration in mind, it is reasonable to assume that both the victims and the survivors of the plague used their experience with it as a point of reference for their orientations to their bodies. The plague thus influenced their conceptualizations of their bodies. This was reflected in the ornamental art of the Middle Ages. Boase (1972:97) describes the tomb of the Duchess of Suffolk. She lies in peaceful repose, surrounded by a group of angels who were both comforting and protecting her. Yet, a decomposing corpse lies beneath her. Despite its inaccessibility to view, the corpse is carved in fine detail. Boase (1972:97-8) notes that the Duchess "had reason to think about the mutabilities of life." He continues:

More and more, the physical side of death was gripping men's imaginations. Beyond wars and violence, plague had always been the most dread adversary, but the Black Death of the fourteenth century had been unprecedented in the scale of mortality and an inescapable warning of how speedily men might be called to their account.

The artful rendering of bodily decay, which was typical

of the ornamental art of the fifteenth century shows the physically degenerative aspect of the plague. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:151, 154) note that the Black Death compelled the medieval actor

to absorb the sight and prospect of death in a particularly disturbing form --- death that was premature, death that seized one as though by an invisible hand, death that inflicted unbearable torment and turned one into an object repulsive both to himself and others until the final delirium.

They argue that the popular art and literature of the period captured the overwhelming fact of death. This alludes to the social function of art which is an inspired imitation of life. Fischer (1959:42) writes,

The artist's task was to expound the profound meaning of events to his fellow-men, to make plain to them the process, the necessity, and the rules of social and historical development, to solve for them the riddle of the essential relationships between man and nature and man and society. His duty was to enhance the self awareness and life awareness of the people of his city, his class, and his nation...

Going beyond this recognition of the general relation between art and society, one may ask, if the plague brought death to bear upon the members of medieval society in a more brutal and devastating form than that to which they were accustomed, why, then, did they choose to relive the experience by letting these macabre images of death and

decay dominate their art?

### Traditional Interpretations

Huizinga (1954:138-9) states that the medieval vision of death focused upon the perishable nature of all things. This was embodied by the image of the decomposing corpse which was graphically depicted in the ecclesiastical and popular art of the period. Huizinga (1954:140-1) comments, rather disdainfully, that the medieval vision of death was one-sided in the sense that it failed to consider the re-generation of life which follows naturally from decay. He (1954:141) criticizes macabre art for its excessive sensuality:

In exhibiting the horrors awaiting all human beauty, already lurking below the surface of corporeal charms, these preachers of contempt for the world express, indeed, a very materialistic sentiment, namely that all beauty and happiness are worthless because they are bound to end soon.

This macabre sentiment regarding the transient nature of life was articulated in this poem by Olivier de la Marche (quoted in Huizinga, 1954:142):

These sweet looks,  
these eyes made for pleasance,  
Remember, they will lose their lustre,  
Nose and eyelashes, the eloquent mouth  
Will putrefy...If you live your natural  
lifetime  
Of which sixty years is a great deal,  
Your beauty will change into ugliness  
Your health into obscure malady  
And you will only be in the way here below.  
If you have a daughter, you will be a  
shadow to her,  
She will be in request and asked for,  
And the mother will be abandoned by all.

Huizinga (1954:150) maintains that this macabre sentiment is "self-seeking and earthly." In his opinion, it exploited the symbols of degeneration and decay to portray individual death as the worst imaginable evil. Illich (1976:183) describes the macabre representation of death as "a constant awareness of the gaping grave", an image of one's rotting and aging self which made death a bodily process. One could familiarize one's self with its details and grow accustomed to them. There would therefore be no surprise left in death. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:156) observe that the medieval death system --- a major part of which was constituted by the macabre art of the period --- did not alleviate the medieval populations' fear of death or free its members from their preoccupation with the subject. They suggest that the fear, panic, and feverish imaginings which it fostered worked to intensify the deadliness of the plague and other diseases.

The critics of macabre art view it as an example of medieval society's excessiveness. It shows an obsession with death: thus, it consists of a sheer repetition of an image of death which offers its viewers little insight in regard to that experience. It merely reproduces the details of death and decay for the sake of familiarity. It prepares its viewers for an experience which they will all eventually have to face by exposing them to it in a symbolic way. This

is conveyed in the following poem by Villon (quoted in Huizinga, 1954:148):

Death makes him shudder and turn pale  
The nose to curve, the veins to swell  
The neck to inflate, the flesh to soften  
Joints and tendons to grow and swell.

O female body, which is so soft, smooth,  
suave and precious  
Do these evils await you?  
Yes, or you must go to heaven quite alive.

The critics of the macabre expression view it as having a naturalistic relation to its subject matter. That is, one which is dominated by the kind of death it depicts. The critics of macabre art interpret its use of death imagery as morbid. Thus, they take the conventionality of the image of death for granted: they do not take the imagery of death beyond its apparent meaning. In a sense they are guilty of the same use of naturalism with which they fault the macabre expression.

Macabre art grappled with the problem of corporeal decay. The notion of the "worms which devour cadavers" (Ariès, 1974:42) was thought of as emanating from the body's "natural liquors" (Ariès, 1974:42). Decay was thought to be internal rather than external to the body. Pierre de Nesson (quoted in Ariès, 1974:42) writes:

Each conduit (of the body)  
Constantly produces putrid matter  
Out of the body.

Huizinga (1954:141) also mentions the corruption "already lurking below the surface of corporeal charms."

Thus, corruption was a feature of the body. This indicates that the source of revulsion, a feature of the macabre obsession with decay, was the body itself.

O, Carrion, who art no longer man,  
 Who will hence keep thee company?  
 Whatever issues from thy liquors,  
 Worms engendered by the stench  
 Of thy vile carrion flesh.  
 (Nesson in Ariès, 1974:41)

This poem (and others like it) warns its readers not to be fooled by the body's seeming vitality in life for, in death, the body becomes what it always was: vile. Thus, one may speculate that macabre poetry brought the invisible quality of bodily corruption to light in order to ward off its authors' disappointment with the body's temporary and transient vitality. Ariès (1974:42-4) notes,

Decomposition is the sign of man's failure, and that is undoubtedly the underlying meaning of the macabre, which turns this failure into a new and original phenomenon.

The macabre poetry of the Middle Ages continuously reproduced occasions for beholding the body's failure i.e., death and decay. Yet, we must consider the nature of macabre relation to the body's failure, in order to surpass conventional understandings and criticisms of it. This is discussed in the following section.

### Embodiment

The macabre expression's relation to the body was strained in the sense that it used the imagery of death and decay to articulate apprehension and concern about the body's failure. In order to understand the implications of a seemingly negative (macabre) relation to the body, it is necessary to determine how a normal relation to the body is comprised. The latter will give us a sense of expectations to which the former (strained relation to the body) fails to conform.

To 'exist'...is to manifest oneself to the world as embodied in one's own body, and thus, it is to be exposed to the world, to its seasons, its elements, its courses and its influences. As embodied not only do I become able to engage myself in the world by means of bodily activities; I also and just because of that open myself to the world's actions on me.

(Marcel quoted in Zaner, 1964:41)

The body gives one's being presence in the world. It makes one's being accessible to one's self and others in a substantial way. One's body is an inextricable feature of one's history: it is a part of one's being from which one has never concretely been absent (Miller, 1978:14). Embodiment is achieved in a way that does not require any attention relative to the possibility of its being achieved at all. Embodiment is a routine matter. To borrow from

Garfinkel's (1967:116) characterization of sexuality, members are "naturally, originally, in the first place, in the beginning, all along and forever" embodied.

Embodiment is a state of being for which one never has to account. It is a dependent form of relation between one's self and one's body in the sense that it is never subject to inquiry. This dependency is further reinforced by the normative relation to the body which is functional in the sense that it facilitates an actor's achievement of the practices which comprise his life in society (Parsons, 1951: 443). The body is the medium of action. Embodiment is a constitutive process in the sense that members continually generate expectations for their bodies regarding what they want to do at the same time that they use their bodies to act upon these expectations. Zaner (1964:49) remarks:

...Embodiment is not an occurrence which is 'once done, forever done'. For it is always possible to become disembodied... this indicates that the fact of embodiment is descriptively one of animation: my body is not just a "body" but is rather an animate organism.

Given this normative context of members' expectations for the body in regard to action, illness, or the body's failure to accede to these expectations, is viewed as dysfunctional. The next section examines the implications which disease holds for life and demonstrates how the plague influenced the macabre perception of the body.

## Illness and the Paradox of Embodiment

Parsons (1951:443) observes,

...for the "normal" person, illness, the more so the greater its severity, constitutes a frustration of expectancies of his normal life pattern. He is cut off from his normal spheres of activity and many of his normal enjoyments. He is often humiliated by his incapacity to function normally. His social relationships are disrupted to a greater or less degree. He may have to bear discomfort or pain which is hard to bear, and he may have to face serious alterations of his prospects for the future, in the extreme but by no means uncommon case the termination of his life.

Illness, as Parsons describes it, approximates a form of disembodiment insofar as it brings about a division between one's mind and one's body. The actor who is confined to the sick role experiences the paradoxical nature of his being in the sense that he is caught in a situation in which exigencies obfuscate his desires. He can not do what he wants to do because his body thwarts practices which are not commensurate to its debilitated condition. Illness, therefore, reverses the ascription of importance between one's body and one's will: for, in illness, the body, which was formerly the medium of action, begins to limit action, even to a point at which it may impede life. Hence, in a functional context, illness is understandable as the body's failure to conform to normative expectations which Parsons (1951:443)

claims constitute health. Illness is a problem which one has with one's body.

The popular beliefs about cancer take the relation between disease and the body out of a functional context. They put it into a context which makes the body responsible for the disease. One's fate is one's body in the sense that its state is the decisive factor relative to the outcome of one's life. This is similar to macabre sentiments regarding death and decay which are discussed in the remaining part of this section.

Cancer is a process which is like decay (Sontag, 1978:9). Unlike the macabre sense of degeneration, cancer is perceived to be a supergeneration which finally proves to be degenerative. The body is "invaded by alien cells" (Sontag, 1978:14) which "have shed the mechanism that restrains growth" (Sontag, 1978:63). They turn the body "into something hard" (Sontag, 1978:13). Cancer is an enigma: for no apparent reason, the body's cells begin to overproduce themselves and threaten the life of the being they comprise. Cancer is an excess of the body. It evokes an image of an unlimited body; that is, one which has gone wild and run away with itself.

Sontag (1978:18) characterizes cancer as the disease that is the body:

Cancer, as a disease that can strike anywhere, is a disease of the body...

it reveals that the body is, all too woefully, just the body.

Those who have had any experience with cancer or who have thought about it at all may form a notion that cancer is the body's secret insidiousness. Sontag (1978:40) observes, "The body's treachery is thought to have its own inner logic." The body becomes responsible for cancer in the sense that it alone is thought to account for the disease, i.e., the origin of cancer is the body.<sup>2</sup>

Disease, in general, reflects the body's failure to maintain its socially ascribed functionality to the extent that it may cease to be capable of supporting life. When disease or accident threatens one with death, then, the state of the body becomes the deciding factor, in secular terms, relative either to the continuation or end of life. The body can not be taken-for-granted once it seems to be decisive to one's survival. Hence, the body's failure to accede to normal social expectations for health may occasion a shock of recognition about the nature of the body. Illness reflects the essential ineffability of the body: that is, it includes that part of the body which cannot be controlled. It reveals that the body has a certain wild quality, which

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2. Whereas carcinogens are viewed as those agents that trigger a wild response in the body, they do not constitute cancer. Cancer is understood as the body's response to certain conditions (carcinogens) which impinge upon it. Although a number of people may be exposed to the same carcinogens, all of them will not develop cancer. Cancer is thus a problem of an individuated body.

is resistant to social ascriptions of value. The body has a being that is particular to itself, and, in a sense, indifferent and removed from the expectations which its constituents generate in relation to its social construction.

Becker (1973:26) has made this point:

Man is a worm and food for worms. This is a paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart pumping breath gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill marks to prove it. His body is a material fleshy casing that is alien to him in many ways --- the strongest and most repugnant way being that it aches and bleeds and will decay and die. Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that it sticks out of nature with a towering majesty and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order to blindly and dumbly rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to have to be in and to have to live with.

Becker captures the paradoxical nature of embodiment. Man's imagination enables him to leave his death behind by using his faculty for creativity and expression to break with death (silence). Man's powers are limitless in the sense that the possibilities for creation, represented by the imagination, are infinite; yet, they may be cut short by death which is a consequence of embodiment.

In one way, death informs humanity that its limitless powers (of imagination) are finite: they are limited by death. Those who make death the limit of their expression, a reason for silence, then, orient to their bodies as their

fate. They can not get beyond it intellectually to respond to it, thereby renewing their powers of creation. The people who can not imagine beyond their limit, then, limit themselves to death: their bodies are their fate.

The macabre expression, on the other hand, grappled with the paradoxical nature of embodiment and offered some alternatives to it. Thus, it attempted to replace the limit of the body (death) with one of its own creation. One example of this is in the following poem:

I am nothing but bones,  
 I seem a skeleton  
 Fleshless, muscleless, pulpless...  
 my body is diminishing  
 to the point where everything  
 becomes disjointed.  
 (Ronsard in Ariès, 1974:42)

The speaker in this poem is completely subject to his body: he is everything that it appears to be. He has no sense of himself as other than his body and he is lost to the ruin it has become. His life is degeneration. He has no prospects for recovery from this condition of his body which is fatal. We readers of the poem experience a sense of the body's consequentiality to life, and we can behold the macabre tendency to ridicule the body for its failure to accede to normative expectations. Foucault (1977:54-5) explains this medieval tendency to denigrate the body in the following way:

...the human body has neither the utility  
 nor the commercial value that are conferred

on them in an economy of an industrial type. Moreover, this "contempt" for the body is certainly related to a general attitude toward death; and in such an attitude one can detect not only the values proper to Christianity, but a demographical in a sense, biological situation: the ravages of disease and hunger, the periodic masses of epidemics, the formidable child mortality rate, the precariousness of bio-economic balances --- all these made death familiar and gave rise to rituals intended to integrate it, to make it acceptable and give a meaning to its permanent aggression.

Foucault indicates that the brutal use of the body in the Middle Ages was a way in which the population attempted to control the violence of death at the time. Hence, the macabre obsession with decay represents a constant return to the source of dread, a relentless attempt to examine the source of its fear in order to restrain its influence. Huizinga (1954:147) remarks upon the extent to which the members of medieval society were terrorized by death:

Nothing betrays more clearly the excessive fear of death felt in the Middle Ages than the popular belief, then widely spread, according to which Lazarus, after his resurrection, lived in continual misery and horror at the thought that he should have again to pass through the gate of death. If the just had so much to fear, how could the sinner soothe himself?

Although Ronsard's poem focuses upon the degenerative aspects of decay, it also depicts it as a form of life. Thus, it made it into a bodily process of which one could be conscious. The macabre use of decay is understandable as

a prolongation of life. Decay was an alternative to death, preferable because, however, ghastly, it was still animated. This corresponds to Hertz's (1960:47) elucidation of the primitive belief that

Death is fully consummated only when decomposition has ended: only then does the deceased cease to belong to this world so as to enter another life.

The macabre imagery and expressions of the fifteenth century took the medieval apprehension of death in hand and made it an image for all to behold. Thus, they indicated that it was good for their audience to face the insidious form of death which the plague had vested upon that society. Macabre art conforms to Douglas's (1966:178) analysis of a ritual which "embraces freely the symbols of death" and shows "the exercise of free rational choice in undergoing death."

The constituents of these rituals show their willingness to entertain the thought of their death. They take it in hand and transform it into an expression which facilitates their understanding of it. They redefine themselves in relation to the unknown. They violate the dumb grip of death upon human existence by breaking its silence. Hence, their use of ritual enables them to rediscover their powers insofar as it is a feature of their ability to organize a phenomenon which is essentially resistant to conceptualization. The macabre expression made death public, a spectacle.

It invited the members of its audience to participate in the creation of their deaths. Consider the following poem by Chastellain (quoted in Huizinga, 1954:148):

There is not a limb nor a form,  
 which does not smell of putrefaction  
 Before the soul is outside,  
 The heart which wants to burst in the body  
 Raises and lifts the chest  
 Which nearly touches the backbone.

The face is discolored and pale  
 And the eyes veiled in the head.  
 Speech fails him,  
 For the tongue cleaves to the palate.  
 The pulse trembles and he pants...  
 The bones are disjoined on all sides;  
 There is not a tendon which does not  
 stretch as to burst.

This poem makes death familiar and accessible via its detailed and explicit description of decay. It transforms death, which is mysterious, into an experience which is fathomable. This poem can be read as a defiant response to death: it fails to respect the finality with which death threatens man; instead, it makes death understandable in terms of life. Macabre poetry made death conscious: it became an interminable knowledge of corporeal decay rather than mere oblivion or cessation of life. The very element that made death objectionable, putrefaction, was absorbed by life. The macabre obsession with decay may be understood as its tendency to subject itself to the worst fate imaginable rather than to deny it. Perhaps macabre art was attempting to educate its audience about survival by showing

it the resilience of a life that dared to face the prospect of its demise and remain, what it, in some basic way, was. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:158) note: "Having exposed themselves to seeing and imagining the worst, the survivors could move with some confidence toward greater flexibility and ease."

### The Macabre Commitment to the Body

The plague threatened the medieval actor with the loss of everything that was familiar to him, "the temporalia" for which he felt "an unreasoning visceral love" (Ariès, 1974:45). Authors in the macabre tradition acknowledged this loss through their extensive use of morbid imagery. They portrayed the corruption to which the body was routinely subject, thereby acknowledging the loss of the body as the medium of life and an object of beauty.

Once I was beautiful above all women  
But by death I became like this,  
My flesh was very beautiful, fresh and soft,  
Now it is altogether turned to ashes.  
My body was very pleasing and very pretty,  
I used frequently to dress in silk,  
Now I must rightly be quite nude.  
I was dressed in gray fur and miniver,  
I lived in a great palace as I wished,  
Now I am lodged in this little coffin.  
My room was adorned with fine tapestry,  
Now my grave is enveloped by cobwebs.  
(An inscription to a painting in the  
monastery of the Celestines at Avignon,  
attributed to King René, quoted by  
Huizinga, 1954:141-2)

Despite its morbidity, there is something poignant about this poem: it is a medieval expression of mourning. Thus, this poem is understandable as a lament. A lament is always an expression of one's attachment to a particular: it conveys a sense of irrevocable loss of a beloved one (Becker in Ruitenbeek, 1969:201). A lament displays pathos

in the wake of its loss: the speaker attempts to show how he was touched by the other he has lost. A lament is erotic in the classical sense insofar as it is an expression of love: it is generated by the soul's need to behold beauty which is, according to Plato, the driving force of love (Simmel, 1971:236).

What, then did the macabre expression depict but the loss of beauty that was engendered by the plague's appropriation of the body? The art of the Middle Ages showed that, despite the ravages of the plague, the members of medieval society did not forsake their festering bodies, but chose instead to endure their suffering and to see their bodies through their worst hours. Macabre art did not break with the body when disease and death made it hideous: it accepted decay, illustrated it, and thereby showed a commitment to the body that was not shaken by its vulnerability to the diseases that attacked it. I find that Ariès' (1974:40) statement that "in this horror of death" he "sees...the sign of love of life" rings true to macabre sentiments.

The macabre obsession with decay, then may be read as the medieval actors' election to stay with the body, life's medium. The body was therefore recognized as a resource that was good insofar as it was tied to the ineffable source of animation. The medieval actors realized the importance of their bodies whether they were healthy or

diseased. To stay with the body in the macabre way was, as Ariès noted, to stay with the source of life.

The imagery of the macabre tradition shows that medieval actors did not forsake their festering bodies when they were in their death throes: its use also enabled medieval actors to affirm the difference between the plague and themselves. The plague was a lower form of life, a dumb microorganism which had no known faculty for thought or conversation. It was dependent upon the body in the sense that it required one for its survival, yet its relation to the body was always destructive and external. The plague lacked the capacity for reciprocity: it consumed the body to the point of its ruin, and then simply moved on to consume another body in the same way. It never returned the life that it had taken from the body: all bodies were the same to the plague in the sense that they were fodder for its insatiable appetite for life.

The medieval actor, on the other hand, opposed the promiscuity of the pestilence when he decided not to withhold support from the body. He acknowledged its place and remained appreciative of it insofar as it had made his life in society possible. The macabre art of the Middle Ages affirmed the body's importance to life. Its graphic and vivid depictions of corporeal decay showed its tendency to resist abstract denial of the plague. The artist's decision to nurture the body in the macabre way enabled him to symbolically restore

life to the body and thereby oppose the scourge of pestilence which only took life from the body.

### The Dance of Death

In the early sixteenth century, the figure of Death as a skeleton who summoned people in all walks of life to their graves replaced the grisly renditions of corporeal decay which had dominated the art of the fifteenth century (Illich, 1976: 185). Tuchman (1978:124) describes this motif:

Usually Death was personified as a skeleton with hourglass and scythe in a white shroud or bare boned, grinning at the irony of man's fate reflected in his image: that all men from beggar to emperor, from harlot to queen, from ragged clerk to Pope, must come to this. No matter what their power or poverty in life, all is vanity equalized by death.

The Dance of Death depicts a particular relation between the living and the dead. In all of the woodcuts by Holbein the Younger (1971) the skeletons are placed beside the living in a way that suggests that the dead are stalking the living. Grundersheimer (in Holbein the Younger, 1971: xii) observes that, "A stylized skeleton interrupts the activity of the person marked for death and tugs him away." The skeletons lived as men, they died, and then returned to life as the embodiments of death. Their mission has two purposes: they dance "to recover the joys of the living at the same time that they wish to draw the living into the ranks of the dancers and bring them closer to death"

(Backman, 1977:146, 147). They are, in effect, telling the living that they will die and return to life as those who are dead. Backman (1977:148) states that in the dance of death "there lies a threat to the living: what the dead are now the living will be."

The Dance of Death suggests a certain triumph of the Dead. The grinning skeletons are the very figures of mockery (Grundensheimer in Holbein the Younger, 1971:xii). Backman (1977:151) observes that "The Dance of Death seems also to be a dance of triumph; for the dancers, it seems a pleasure to force the living into death."

It is feasible that the innovative spirit of this art reflects a mastery of death which its predecessor made possible. The pervasive depiction of decay in the popular art of the fourteenth century enabled its viewers to familiarize themselves with the grotesque form of death which the plague had vested upon their society. This enabled them to express their fears about the horrible fate that awaited them. They made their anxiety public and confronted its source openly, thereby diminishing its hold on them. Lifton (1967:397) writes, "Artistic recreation of an overwhelming historical experience has much to do with mastery."

The plague had killed between one-fourth (Kastenbaum and Aisenberg, 1976:151) and one-third (Ziegler, 1969:238) of the population. It made death a regular feature of medieval life for the extent of its duration. The Dance of

Death showed the extent to which the prospect of death dominated the medieval imagination. Death was portrayed as an actuality to which everyone would have to yield.

The myriad of characters in the woodcuts by Holbein the Younger (1971) appear to be proceeding with their lives in ways which make them forgetful of their deaths. They engage in practices which bolster their self-importance, and they fail to heed the possibility of their mortality. The skeletons mock the living for they cling to an illusion by pursuing life as if it were complete without Death. Death equalizes life insofar as it is the standard to which all forms of life are subject. The grinning skeletons imply that life is meaningless as it stands to be ended by death.

La danse macabre is satirical. The illustrations in the woodcuts subjected death to life by rendering it into a figure that danced. Death was a creature that still gravitated toward the realm from which it had been vanquished and to which it desired to bring others. This insinuated that, if given the opportunity, death would choose life. Hence, death could not bear the reality of what it was. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976:157) note:

Personification may have achieved a sort of "one-upmanship" over Death. The mighty conqueror was depicted as a most hideous, miserable-looking specimen. "You are the revolting death you bring," the artist seemed to be saying. "You are as wretched as you make us feel. We deny you beauty and glory. We grant you symbolic life, but merely as a caricature, a macabre."

Thus, Death was belittled and mocked at the very moment of his triumph. "You are no better than what you do to us!"

The illustrations in the woodcuts attempted to break the inexorable hold which death exerted upon their audience. They undermined the dumb grip of death's power by characterizing death as a capricious fool who wished to inflict his wretchedness upon others. Nietzsche (1968:144) makes a similar point:

But equally hateful to the fighter and victor is your grinning death which creeps up like a thief yet comes as the master.

Like Holbein the Younger, Nietzsche asks his readers to reexamine their relation to death. Death wields a secure power in the sense that it is never required to take a risk. Death is never subject to the standard of ultimate and final subordination to an exigency which it embodies. Death never has to account for itself: it is ultimately exempt from the struggle which organizes human life. Both Nietzsche and Holbein the Younger demonstrate how those who choose their deaths exercise their authority in relation to it.

Marcuse (in Feifel, 1959:73-4) argues that this type of an approach to death fosters a certain degree of conformity among individuals which perpetuates the social order. His rationale for a more scientific and less political approach to death fails to take the relation between death and identity into account. Humans can be conscious of the possibility of

their deaths and make it a meaningful part of their lives by exercising their will in relation to it. They have the ability to transform an exigency into a necessity: that is, to make something that is imposed from without a practice that is authorized by the self. This differentiates humanity from other forms of life which merely are the processes which compose them (Fischer, 1959:18).

The Dance of Death reaffirmed vitality in the face of death insofar as it attempted to show its viewers how they could be responsible for their deaths. It also satirized death by portraying it in terms of liveliness. As a figure that danced, death shared something with its victims. It could be conceived as an equal: the issue of death's accountability to life could therefore be raised. Death's grip on life would, at least, be loosened as its prospective victims produced a version of death which was subject to their authority.

### Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have analysed the macabre art of the Middle Ages in a way which is responsive to its particularity. This is feasible if one considers the plague's impact upon medieval society. It brought collective and hideous death to bear upon its members which was vividly depicted in the popular art of the period. It was an attempt to subdue their fears about the horrible fate that awaited them. The members of medieval society managed to resist complete appropriation by death from the plague by making death and decay into forms of life. Death and decay became processes which their audiences could accustom themselves to and fathom.

While macabre illustrations of corporeal decay seem morbid and devitalized, they may be viewed as expressions of a commitment to the body which was not shaken by the horrors of the plague. This is developed in light of a theory which emphasizes the importance of the body. Disease upsets the certainty of the body's functionality to life. It reflects the paradox of embodiment. This is understandable as the tension between the limited body and the unlimited imagination which both constitute human life. The macabre expression grappled with this problem, and, provided some alternatives to it.

The later style of macabre art which showed grinning skeletons leading people in all walks of life to their graves is a refinement of its predecessor. It dispensed with graphic depictions of physical decay in order to satirize death. It achieved a mastery of death. It portrayed death as a creature that danced and thus preferred the movement of life to the stillness of death.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS

Plague has struck humanity on a massive scale three times since 542 A.D. Each pandemic consisted in both the sudden and widespread transmission of the fatal disease as well as extraordinary and disorganized collective responses to it. This constitutes a point of reference for the sociologically interesting character of the plague which I have chosen to examine, analyse, and develop in this thesis.

I have interpreted the behaviours of those who faced the plague in light of Weber's definition of social action: that is, as behaviours that were sensible, oriented, public, and feasible in the contexts in which they were generated. This facilitated my formulation of those who faced the plague as rational actors, who were compelled to develop contemporary and appropriate modes of resistance to the plague.

This evaluation of the members' of medieval society's responses to the plague is feasible, first, if we recall Aristotle's statement (in the Ethics) that every deliberate action is undertaken for the attainment of some good, and second, if we consider the way in which disease forces living organisms to struggle against the prospect of their demise.

Thus, the various ways in which medieval actors resisted complete appropriation by death from the plague are understandable as attempts to recover a sense of purpose, which would ultimately affirm their lives.

The drama of the members' of medieval society's effort to perpetuate their social order against its impending obliteration is illustrated in Chapter Two. The brutal quality of life in the Middle Ages must have certainly been routinized by its constituents. However, their familiarity with starvation, death, disease, mutilation, and torture did not facilitate an enlightened response to the plague. The Black Death thrust sudden, violent, widespread, and collective death upon the medieval population with which it was ill-equipped to deal.

The tragic implications of premature death make sense in light of Socrates' insights concerning mortality in the *Phaedo*. The philosopher's orientation to the unknown is an integral feature of the practice in which he engages. Philosophy prepares him for death at the same time that death both comprises and culminates his life's work. Thus, philosophy gives the philosopher a way to exercise himself in relation to his death. It enables him to discover his powers; philosophy gives him a way to actualize his response to a condition (death) which would otherwise silence him.

The members of medieval society were unable to

approach their deaths philosophically. The plague compelled them to orient to a cataclysmic form of death immediately. This impinged upon the amount of time they would have needed to develop an insightful response to it. Thus, their reaction to the plague facilitated their construction of it as a premature death. In this reaction they failed to exercise themselves in relation to death. The Black Death, in this sense, contributed to the demise of the medieval actor's social order.

The extreme circumstances of the plague influenced the members' of medieval society's conservative responses to it, which were embodied by their death system. Whereas hysteria and an obsessive fascination with death and decay comprised the dominant mood of that epoch, they do not convey a sense of the ways in which some medieval actors resisted the prospect of social extinction which was conventionally ascribed to the plague.

One alternative to the futility of this situation was the plague chronicle. Those who wrote the history of the plague oriented to their primacy of their social order by describing their experience with the plague for their own sake and that of posterity. Thus, they showed their commitment to the sociality (understanding) of an event which had left many paralyzed and dumbfounded. The chroniclers of the plague subdued its impact as they discovered and invoked their

power to take exception to it. They regenerated a sense of community in a society which had become preoccupied with individual survival.

The structure of life in the city has always facilitated the spread of plague. Chapter Three is an examination of the ways in which both medieval and modern communities have responded to the plague. These are analysed in relation to the concepts of awareness contexts and boundary maintenance which are essential to social organization.

DeFoe's Journal of the Plague Year illustrates a community's relation to the plague which, roughly, consisted in the behaviours of denial, panic, and vigilance. Denial was contingent upon the members' oscillation between admission and negation of the presence of the disease in their community. Its eventual transformation into open awareness signified their recovery of their sociality: it involved their willingness to publicize news which they had previously found difficult to confront. The community's acknowledgment of the plague preceded its decision to define it as an epidemic and to assume responsibility for it.

The use of numbers to represent plague fatalities is a constitutive feature of epidemics. It enables the members of the community to behold the extent to which the plague has penetrated its boundaries and become a part of it. Both DeFoe and Camus have included this in their depictions of the

plague in urban settings. Yet, even when numbers may indicate that a community is infected by the plague, the number of deaths is not necessarily used as a resource for the definition of an epidemic. This occurred in San Francisco at the turn of the century. Certain citizens chose to maintain closed awareness of the plague despite evidence to the contrary.

Although it seems ridiculous, the initial denial of plague which occurs in most communities reflects their constituents' deeper interest in preserving life as a whole. Their denial of the plague is understandable as a concerted attempt to keep a sudden, gruesome, and dehumanizing form of death at bay. Whereas the personifications of the plague that appeared in folklore gave the people an indirect way of expressing their fears, their open acknowledgement of it would have been preferable insofar as it would have been an indication of their health. They would have begun to orient to their fate as they imagined themselves as parts of a whole (the plague) which they would have never chosen to be. This would have been a preliminary to their work of recovering the community to which they rightfully belonged.

In situations like those of plague, the use of open awareness includes the community's reorganization of its boundaries relative to death. Survivors often redefine themselves in morbid and devitalized ways. This contaminating affect of death appeared as the acknowledgement of plague

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In situations like those of plague, the use of open awareness includes the community's reorganization of its boundaries relative to death. Survivors often redefine themselves in morbid and devitalized ways. This contaminating affect of death appeared as the acknowledgement of plague

and panic. The institution of vigilant measures against plague imply that the community has recovered its social organization, regardless of its success relative to an actual death toll.

One of the most shocking features of the Black Death was the rabid execution of a majority of Western European Jews in 1348. In Chapter Four I analyse the relation between the plague and anti-Semitism. Although the latter has been the subject of exhaustive research and theorizing, much of the contemporary work tends to individualize anti-Semitism and to thereby neglect its social character.

Anti-Semitism is public in the sense that it has been authorized and instituted by large numbers of people throughout the course of history. It would neither be possible nor practical unless it related to some collective ideas about reality. I contend that medieval anti-Semitism was a product of its adherents' religious beliefs which dominated their lives. My discussion of Jewish life in the Middle Ages illuminates the religious origins of this prejudice.

Sociologically speaking, anti-Semitism is an example of the production of deviance; that is, a group's attempt to define and secure its identity by excluding those who belong to the other group from its boundaries. In light of contemporary theories of deviance, anti-Semitism should have had a stabilizing effect upon medieval society. Yet, the persecution of the Jews --- which followed the plague almost every-

where --- can hardly be viewed as a normative feature of the deviance process. Instead, it indicates the extent to which crisis was endemic to medieval society.

I have argued that the plague altered the members' of medieval society's normal production of deviance by intensifying their need to account for the plague in a realistic (rather than supernatural) way. The medieval actors' persecution of the Jews may thus be read as a break with their traditional religious faith. For example, the Flagellants who were responsible for many attacks against the Jews, defied the Church and appealed directly to God for relief from the plague.

The murder of Jews in Christian society was only possible after they had been successfully degraded. They were totally transformed into creatures whose sociality was negligible and who were only capable of doing evil. They became, like germs, metaphors for the affliction of plague. The extermination of Jews in the Middle Ages was warranted by the reconstitution of their character which was precipitated by the circumstances of the plague. It is understandable as Christian society's attempt to destroy the disorder which the Jew represented, and it proceeded from the former's negative definition of anomaly.

Such a response is antithetical to philosophy which is a cultivation of its constituents' relation to the unknown. Within the confines of this work, philosophy is invoked as an

alternative to the genocidal orientation to disorder.

Chapter Five is a discussion of the relation between the plague and the macabre art of the Middle Ages. The latter was dominated by images and expressions of disease, decomposing corpses, and leering skeletons who led all types of people to their graves. These motifs reflect the repulsive, degenerative, fatal, and collective aspects of the plague. The pervasive use of realism in the popular art of the Middle Ages raises a question for inquiry. If the plague brought death to bear upon the members of medieval society in an even more brutal fashion than that to which they were accustomed, why, then, did they choose to relive the experience by letting such macabre imagery dominate their art?

Unlike the critics of the macabre tradition who see it as morbid, devitalized, selfish, and excessively sensual, I contend that it exhibited a commitment to the body which was ultimately life-affirming. This is developed in light of a theory of embodiment. The body, which is life's medium, is taken-for-granted until disease interferes with its normal functionality and brings the paradoxical nature of embodiment to light. Disease leads one to experience the ineffectualness of one's will (to live) relative to the state of one's body. The latter becomes the deciding factor regarding either the continuation or end of one's life. Hence, one's fate is inextricably tied to one's body. The irony of embodiment

is this: a creature with infinite powers of imagination is ultimately and finally constrained by his vulnerable and fragile body.

The macabre poetry of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries not only articulated this dilemma: it also generated an alternative to it. It spoke the unspeakable: it gave its readers a way to conceptualize death and decay by transforming them both into forms of life. The later development in the art of that period (which showed grinning skeletons taking people in all walks of life to their graves) made death into a figure that danced. He was pictured as imitating the living: thus he emulated that very standard (of vitality) of which he had robbed them. Life triumphed over death as the figure of death was mocked in this way.

Macabre art exhibited an obsessive fascination with images and descriptions of death and decay which do not necessarily implicate the morbidity of its motivation. It may be viewed as an expression of renewed faith in the body which was fostered by its constituents' decision not to forsake life's medium in its worst hour: that is, when it was infected, suffering, and in danger of succumbing to the plague.

Some scholars have argued that the plague influenced the birth of modern man (Ziegler, 1969:210; Nohl, 1961:156-7; Tuchman, 1978:123). Tuchman (1978:123) explains that its

survivors had reason to doubt the beneficence of a God who was capable of inflicting such cruel and unusual punishment upon them. The plague stimulated the generation of a social order which valued individual judgement more highly than divine and ecclesiastical authority.

This dissertation is a demonstration of the way in which the production of a social order becomes essential to the survival of its members. It shows the degree to which medieval actors struggled to maintain their sociality when it was threatened by an exigency. It illuminates their attempts to resist compliant submission to premature and meaningless death. It documents their efforts not to let their experience with the plague be forgotten. It illustrates Shneidman's point:

To cease as though one had never been,  
to exit life with no hope of living on  
in the memory of another, to be obliterated,  
expunged from history's record --- that  
is a fate literally far worse than death.

I have surpassed Tuchman's (1978), Ziegler's (1969) and Nohl's (1961) conclusions that the plague influenced the birth of modern man. In various ways, I have demonstrated how the plague fostered the genesis of a society whose members became aware of their ability to exert some control over their lives.

Those who kept chronicles of the plague lessened the impact of premature death by approaching the plague as an

event that deserved their commentary. They showed how the natural conditions of the plague could be countered by an activity which kept a record of human survival and thereby preserved an interest in history.

The authorities who instituted prophylactic measures against the plague brought their intellectual powers into play against it. They subdued the power of the plague as they began to assume that it could be controlled. The community members who cooperated with them understood that their participation in these campaigns could have some effect on the plague.

The Flagellants dared to take matters into their own hands as they appealed directly to God for deliverance from the plague. They thereby loosened the hold which the church had upon the members of medieval society.

Those who persecuted the Jews for their alleged role in spreading the plague were committed to defining the plague as the work of worldly agents who could be eliminated and destroyed.

The artists and poets who worked within the macabre tradition found a way to resist complete appropriation by death from the pestilence by affirming the life of the decaying body. They mocked death by producing a caricature of it as a grinning skeleton which danced and thus, gravitated toward life. The medieval actors recovered their sociality as

they used their intellectual powers as resources and thereby differentiated themselves from the sheer brutality of a plague.

This gradual transformation in the relation between individual and society did not occur overnight. A new social actor was not standing on history's doorstep as soon as the plague had passed. However, ground had been broken for ones who were more conscious of their powers to define, evaluate and transform their experiences according to their sense of what was crucial to the survival of their society.

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