



2020

Preprint N°503

Diplomacy in the Time of Cholera

Maria Rentetzi, Flavio D'Abramo, Roberto Lalli

Diplomacy in the Time of Cholera*

Maria Rentetzi, Prof. FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg/Guest scholar, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Dept. I

Flavio D'Abramo, Dr. Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Dept. I

Roberto Lalli, Dr. Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Dept. I

Abstract:

Turning everyday ordinary happenings into struggling moments for existence—from breathing to socializing—is how the Covid-19 pandemic will mark history. What we ask here is not how the ordinary becomes abnormal but how it becomes political and diplomatic. We argue that the spread of the Covid-19 virus, which is measured through virologic and epidemiological models, overlaps with feverous diplomatic and political activities taking place among big geopolitical powers. Yet, this is not new in history of health. The first encounters between diplomats and health professionals were elicited by the social and economic challenges caused, on a global scale, by the cholera epidemics of the nineteenth century. Indeed, health sciences and diplomacy have been historically co-produced. Such a historical perspective on science and health diplomacy facilitates our understanding of international institutions such as the World Health Organization as highly political and diplomatic endeavors. The Diplomatic Studies of Science, a new interdisciplinary research field underpinned by a historical perspective on science diplomacy, sheds light on the multiple factors contributing to the worsening of the global COVID-19 crisis we are facing nowadays

Keywords: Health Diplomacy; World Health Organization; COVID-19; Diplomatic Studies of Science

* The paper will be published in *Sociology of Science and Technology*, March 2021(1) <http://sst.nw.ru/archive/>.

On February 6, 2018, a group of 30 world-renowned experts gathered on the outskirts of Geneva at the headquarters of the World Health Organization, in Avenue Appia. Their goal was to review the list of priority diseases. That is to say, the most dangerous viruses at present for which no effective diagnostic tests exist, nor vaccines or other treatments; those which have the highest potential to cause an epidemic. To assemble this list, the group compared facts, research data, number of outbreaks, possible responses, and more. At the end of their meeting, they had identified diseases like the Ebola virus disease, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (or MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (also known as SARS). New to the list was disease X, representing “a serious international epidemic [...] caused by a pathogen currently unknown.” (WHO 2020; Kahn 2020)

The Disease X variable was a breakthrough in the way the WHO produces knowledge. Expected to work as a heuristic tool, disease x could accelerate research and help in developing medical responses to a potential pandemic. Yet the 2020 global outbreak of COVID-19 could not be prevented, and the WHO has been scrutinized harshly for its handling of the pandemic. On July 7, 2020, the U.S. administration notified the United Nations that the country was going to withdraw from the WHO. If nothing else, the pandemic has proved that the issue of health is central in national foreign policies and that health can be used as a powerful diplomatic tool in international relations. As the WHO argued in 2014, “the role of diplomacy in health is vital. Global health needs global health diplomacy” (WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean 2014). But what could be the role of diplomacy in battling lethal diseases on a global scale? Moreover, how did the WHO become the key player in health diplomacy? Interestingly enough, the origins of a transnational organization for global health emerged in the shadow of a pandemic.

Whether smallpox or the plague, HIV, or even the flu, during the last centuries humans have experienced a series of pandemics with devastating health results. The cholera pandemic from 1817 is just one example. It was the first of six cholera outbreaks between 1817 and 1917 – just 100 years (Fidler 2001; Harrison 2013; Howard-Jones 1975; Huber 2006; McGrew 1960; Watts 1999; Hamlin 2003). It exploded in British India and spread through Russia, China, and the Middle East, across to West Africa. In India alone, it is estimated that one to two million people died. By 1832, during the 2nd pandemic, the disease had traveled across Russia to Western Europe and England, and had reached the Americas. The disease created and aggravated social issues. In Russia, the poor protested quarantine restrictions that hindered their ability to work

Between 1851 and 1938, a series of conferences known as the International Sanitary Conferences took place across Europe and the United States. Each country was represented by a diplomat and a physician. The goal was to standardize international quarantine regulations and negotiate preventive measures which eventually affected not only health policies, but reformed national economies and destabilized political systems (Watts 1999; Harrison 2013). While scientists continued their efforts to fully describe the disease, diplomats strengthened identification and documentation measures with visas, sanitary passports, and bills of health. These measures allowed border crossings by travelers and vehicles to be tracked (Howard-Jones 1975; Staples 2006, p. 123–129).

In the time the US and countries in Europe made major health and sanitation reforms in their respective countries and struggled to deal with the resulting social agitation, cholera proved that nations had to collaborate on an international level if they were going to effectively address infectious disease. Thus, several international health organizations were established before the First World War. However, only after the end of the war, in 1922, the League of Nations was formed as the world's first intergovernmental organization with its own Health Committee and Health Section (Borowy 2009). To paraphrase Gabriel García Márquez, “diplomacy in the time of cholera” indeed demonstrated to have an astonishing power. This spirit of cooperation in health proved beneficial in the second half of the 20th century as well.

In 1948, the WHO was established as one of the earliest specialized agencies of the United Nations. The UN started with 55 Member states and today represents 194 states and two associate members. All member states belong to the WHO's General Assembly, which approves and supervises the organization's budget and also elects its director general. According to the WHO's Assembly, “the World Health Organization is by its nature a technical organization whose objective is the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health.” (WHO 1953) – in short, the WHO's goal is to ensure health for everybody and on a global level. The WHO presents itself as technical and apolitical: an organization that welcomes membership universally. Accordingly, staff members are considered, “international civil servants”, with no national responsibilities, and no national attachments (Farley 2009). A special focus of the organization is on epidemic diseases. Working on both regional and global levels, it helps to trace disease outbreaks, recommends preventive policies, and offers guidelines on medicines, diagnostic tests, and regimens.



Fig. 2. World Health Organization, founding assembly in Geneva, 1948 – Library of the World Health Organization.

During the Cold War, the organization attained a global leadership status in matters of health and disease. But it also suffered from Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. Throughout the postwar years, the WHO decisively shaped the dissemination of medical knowledge, practices, technologies, and materials across the globe. It standardized therapies for common diseases, procedures of drug approval, and health data collection processes. For example, the WHO has facilitated the international use of antibiotics and vaccines, and has tried to eradicate epidemics such as syphilis, small pox, and polio. Yet, it lacks an explicit authority to enforce its recommendations. Our point is that the WHO is far from being just an apolitical and technical organization. Instead, the WHO has been a product of the global political, social, and economic context throughout its history. The most influential member states push for their own interests and mobilize their diplomatic channels within the organization to achieve their goals (Cueto et al. 2019).

As was clearly stated in a 2011 WHO report, “WHO’s scientific and technical aspirations for global health are constantly conditioned by the multiplicity of views, needs, and preferences of its member states” (WHO 2011). In the same report, the WHO warned that the world was ill-prepared to respond to a pandemic. Politics and diplomacy strongly conditioned health policies and international actions. This is how Peter Daszak, one of the experts who created the new

priority list for dangerous diseases in 2018, explained this issue: “the problem is not that prevention was impossible. It is very possible. But we didn’t do it. Governments thought that it was too expensive. Pharmaceutical companies operate for profit” (Kahn 2020). In other terms, the WHO owns not enough power and funding to establish a global collaboration to prevent the emergence of new pandemics.

In 2020, COVID-19 spread across the whole globe. So far, it has infected more than 70 million people and lead to more than 1,6 million casualties. The pandemic’s impact on social and economic structures worldwide is ongoing and devastating. The international race for a vaccine reveals the blatant economic and political interests of individual countries. In addition to complex diplomatic negotiations over who is going to use it first there are enormous economic and scientific underpinnings at stake. The vaccine has become a diplomatic tool in the hands of individual states while they deploy it for strategic political gains. It is not then an exaggeration to speak about “vaccine diplomacy” (Strangio, 2020).

After all, health is not a technical issue to be managed by allegedly apolitical institutions. It is a matter of political priority that demands publicly informed health diplomacy (Holzscheiter 2017). The recent pandemic made obvious that the spread of the Covid-19 virus might be measured through virologic and epidemiological models and controlled through quarantine. Most important, however, it overlaps with feverous diplomatic and political activities taking place among big and emerging geopolitical powers and directly influencing the functioning of the United Nations international organizations. As historian of science Maria Rentetzi has argued “a single most significant event for science diplomacy occurred with the development of the United Nations system of specialized agencies and organizations.” (Rentetzi, 2019). It was the moment that the entanglement of the political to the epistemic led to the understanding of science and, obviously health, as constitutive of diplomacy. Such a historical perspective on science and health diplomacy facilitates our understanding of international institutions, the World Health Organization among them, as highly political and diplomatic endeavors. The Diplomatic Studies of Science (Rentetzi, 2019), a new interdisciplinary research field underpinned by a historical perspective on science diplomacy, sheds light on the multiple factors contributing to the worsening of the global COVID-19 crisis we are facing nowadays (Adamson and Lalli forthcoming; Rentetzi 2017, 2019; Ito and Rentetzi forthcoming).

Funding

This project has received funding from Department I, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science and from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No No770548, HRP-IAEA).

References

- Adamson, M., & Lalli, R. (forthcoming). Global Perspectives on Science Diplomacy: Exploring the Diplomacy-Knowledge Nexus in Contemporary Histories of Science. *Centaurus*.
- Borowy, I. (2009). *Coming to Terms with World Health: The League of Nations Health Organisation 1921–1946*: Peter Lang.
- Commission sur le Choléra (1832). Rapport sur la Marche et les Effets du Choléra-Morbus dans Paris et les Communes Rurales du Département de la Seine. Paris: Ministre du Commerce et des Travaux.
- Cueto, M., Brown, T. M., & Fee, E. (2019). *The World Health Organization. A History*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- D'Abramo, F., & Neumeyer, S. (2020). A historical and political epistemology of microbes. *Centaurus*, 62(2), 321–330, doi:10.1111/1600-0498.12300.
- Farley, J. (2009). *Brock Chisholm, the World Health Organization, and the Cold War*: UBC Press.
- Fidler, D. P. (2001). The globalization of public health: the first 100 years of international health diplomacy. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 79(842–849).
- Hamlin, C. (2003). Politics and germ theories in Victorian Britain: the Metropolitan Water Commissions of 1867-9 and 1892-3. In R. MacLeod (Ed.), *Government and Expertise: Specialists, Administrators and Professionals, 1860-1919* (pp. 110–127). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harrison, M. (2013). *Contagion: How Commerce Has Spread Disease*: Yale University Press.
- Holzscheiter, A. (2017). Coping with Institutional Fragmentation? Competition and Convergence between Boundary Organizations in the Global Response to Polio. *Review of Policy Research*, 34(6), 767–789, doi:10.1111/ropr.12256.
- Howard-Jones, N. (1975). *The Scientific Background of the International Sanitary Conferences, 1851–1938*: World Health Organization.

- Huber, V. (2006). The unification of the globe by disease? The international sanitary conferences on cholera, 1851–1894. *The Historical Journal*, 49(2), 453–476, doi:10.17/S0018246X06005280.
- Ito, K., & Rentetzi, M. (forthcoming). The Co-production of Nuclear Science and Diplomacy: Towards a Transnational Understanding of Nuclear Things. *History and Technology*.
- Kahn, J. (2020). How Scientists Could Stop the Next Pandemic Before It Starts. *The New York Times*,
- McGrew, R. E. (1960). The First Cholera Epidemic and Social History. *Bulltin of the History of Medicine*, 34(1), 61–73.
- Pacini, F. (1854). *Osservazioni microscopiche e deduzioni patologiche sul cholera asiatico*. Florence: Tipografia Federico Bencini.
- Rentetzi, M. (2017). Living with Radiation or why we Need a Diplomatic Turn in History of Science. *KJEMI*, 6, 21–24.
- Rentetzi, M. (2019). Diplomatic Studies of Science: The Nuclear Diplomacies Workshop in Japan and Greece. *HSS Newsletter*, January.
- Staples, A. L. S. (2006). *The Birth of Development: How the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945–1965*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press.
- Strangio, Sebastian. (2020). “China’s Southeast Asian's 'Vaccine Diplomacy' Comes into Relief. *The Diplomat*, Nov. 5, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/chinas-southeast-asian-vaccine-diplomacy-comes-into-relief/>
- Watts, S. J. (1999). *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power, and Imperialism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- WHO (1953). Fifth report of the Committee on Administration, Finance and Legal Matters, adopted at the tenth plenary meeting. . Geneve: World Health Organization.
- WHO (2011). Report of the Review Committee on the Functioning of the International Health Regulations (2005) in relation to Pandemic (H1N1) 2009. Geneve: World Health Organization.
- WHO (2020). Prioritizing diseases for research and development in emergency contexts. <https://www.who.int/activities/prioritizing-diseases-for-research-and-development-in-emergency-contexts>. Accessed 2 October 2020 2020.
- WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterrean (2014). Global health needs global health diplomacy. <http://www.emro.who.int/health-topics/health-diplomacy/about-health-diplomacy.html>. Accessed 2 October 2020.

Max Planck Institute for the History of Science

Preprints since 2014 (a full list can be found at our website)

- 454 Klaus Geus and Mark Geller (eds.) **Esoteric Knowledge in Antiquity** (TOPOI - Dahlem Seminar for the History of Ancient Sciences Vol. II)
- 455 Carola Sachse **Grundlagenforschung. Zur Historisierung eines wissenschaftspolitischen Ordnungsprinzips am Beispiel der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft (1945–1970)**
- 456 David E. Rowe and Robert Schulmann **General Relativity in the Context of Weimar Culture**
- 457 F. Jamil Ragep **From Tūn to Turun: The Twists and Turns of the Tūsi-Couple**
- 458 Pietro Daniel Omodeo **Efemeridi e critica all'astrologia tra filosofia naturale ed etica: La contesa tra Benedetti e Altavilla nel tardo Rinascimento torinese**
- 459 Simone Mammola **Il problema della grandezza della terra e dell'acqua negli scritti di Alessandro Piccolomini, Antonio Berga e G. B. Benedetti e la progressiva dissoluzione della cosmologia delle sfere elementari nel secondo '500**
- 460 Stefano Bordonì **Unexpected Convergence between Science and Philosophy: A debate on determinism in France around 1880**
- 461 Angelo Baracca **Subalternity vs. Hegemony – Cuba's Unique Way of Overcoming Subalternity through the Development of Science**
- 462 Eric Hounshell & Daniel Midena **"Historicizing Big Data" Conference, MPIWG, October 31 – November 2, 2013 (Report)**
- 463 Dieter Suisky **Emilie Du Châtelet und Leonhard Euler über die Rolle von Hypothesen. Zur nach-Newtonschen Entwicklung der Methodologie**
- 464 Irina Tupikova **Ptolemy's Circumference of the Earth** (TOPOI - Towards a Historical Epistemology of Space)
- 465 Irina Tupikova, Matthias Schemmel, Klaus Geus **Travelling along the Silk Road: A new interpretation of Ptolemy's coordinates**
- 466 Fernando Vidal and Nélia Dias **The Endangerment Sensibility**
- 467 Carl H. Meyer & Günter Schwarz **The Theory of Nuclear Explosives That Heisenberg Did not Present to the German Military**
- 468 William G. Boltz and Matthias Schemmel **Theoretical Reflections on Elementary Actions and Instrumental Practices: The Example of the Mohist Canon** (TOPOI - Towards a Historical Epistemology of Space)
- 469 Dominic Olariu **The Misfortune of Philippus de Lignamine's Herbal or New Research Perspectives in Herbal Illustrations From an Iconological Point of View**
- 470 Fidel Castro Díaz-Balart **On the Development of Nuclear Physics in Cuba**
- 471 Manfred D. Laubichler and Jürgen Renn **Extended Evolution**
- 472 John R. R. Christie **Chemistry through the 'Two Revolutions': Chemical Glasgow and its Chemical Entrepreneurs, 1760-1860**
- 473 Christoph Lehner, Helge Wendt **Mechanik in der Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes**
- 474 N. Bulatovic, B. Saquet, M. Schlender, D. Wintergrün, F. Sander **Digital Scrapbook – can we enable interlinked and recursive knowledge equilibrium?**
- 475 Dirk Wintergrün, Jürgen Renn, Roberto Lalli, Manfred Laubichler, Matteo Valleriani **Netzwerke als Wissensspeicher**
- 476 Wolfgang Lefèvre **„Das Ende der Naturgeschichte“ neu verhandelt**
- 477 Martin Fechner **Kommunikation von Wissenschaft in der Neuzeit: Vom Labor in die Öffentlichkeit**
- 478 Alexander Blum, Jürgen Renn, Matthias Schemmel **Experience and Representation in Modern Physics: The Reshaping of Space** (TOPOI - Towards a Historical Epistemology of Space)
- 479 Carola Sachse **Die Max-Planck-Gesellschaft und die Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs (1955–1984)**
- 480 Yvonne Fourès-Bruhat **Existence theorem for certain systems of nonlinear partial differential equations**
- 481 Thomas Morel, Giuditta Parolini, Cesare Pastorino (eds.) **The Making of Useful Knowledge**

- 482 Wolfgang Gebhardt **Erich Kretschmann. The Life of a Theoretical Physicist in Difficult Times**
- 483 Elena Serrano **Spreading the Revolution: Guyton's Fumigating Machine in Spain. Politics, Technology, and Material Culture (1796–1808)**
- 484 Jenny Bangham, Judith Kaplan (eds.) **Invisibility and Labour in the Human Sciences**
- 485 Dieter Hoffman, Ingo Peschel (eds.) **Man möchte ja zu seinem Fach etwas beitragen**
- 486 Elisabeth Hsu, Chee Han Lim **Enskilment into the Environment: the *Yijin jing* Worlds of *Jin* and *Qi***
- 487 Jens Høyrup **Archimedes: Knowledge and Lore from Latin Antiquity to the Outgoing European Renaissance**
- 488 Jens Høyrup **Otto Neugebauer and the Exploration of Ancient Near Eastern Mathematics**
- 489 Matteo Valleriani, Yifat-Sara Pearl, Liron Ben Arzi (eds.) **Images Don't Lie(?)**
- 490 Frank W. Stahnisch (ed.) **Émigré Psychiatrists, Psychologists, and Cognitive Scientists in North America since the Second World War**
- 491 María Sánchez Colina, Angelo Baracca, Carlos Cabal Mirabal, Arbelio Pentón Madrigal, Jürgen Renn, Helge Wendt (eds.) **Historia de la física en Cuba (siglo XX)**
- 492 Matthias Schemmel **Everyday Language and Technical Terminology: Reflective Abstractions in the Long-term History of Spatial Terms**
- 493 Barbara Wolff „Derartige kolossale Opfer ...“ **Der Nobelpreis für Physik für das Jahr 1921 – was geschah mit dem Preisgeld?**
- 494 Thomas Horst **The Reception of Cosmography in Vienna: Georg von Peuerbach, Johannes Regiomontanus, and Sebastian Binderlius**
- 495 Markus Asper **Science Writing and Its Settings: Some Ancient Greek Modes**
- 496 Dagmar Schäfer, Zhao Lu, and Michael Lackner (eds.) **Accounting for Uncertainty: Prediction and Planning in Asian History**
- 497 Joachim Nettelbeck **Verwalten von Wissenschaft, eine Kunst**
- 498 Carla Rodrigues Almeida **Stellar equilibrium vs. gravitational collapse**
- 499 Victoria Beyer **How to Generate a Fingerprint**
- 500 Jens Høyrup **From Hesiod to Saussure, from Hippocrates to Jevons: An Introduction to the History of Scientific Thought between Iran and the Atlantic**
- 501 Noga Shlomi **The *Tacuinum sanitatis*: Practices of Collecting and Presenting Medical Knowledge Between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance**
- 502 Jens Høyrup **Reinventing or Borrowing Hot Water? Early Latin and Tuscan algebraic operations with two Unknowns**
- 503 Maria Rentetzi, Flavio D'Abramo, Roberto Lalli **Diplomacy in the Time of Cholera**