

*Review of Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb's, Epidemic Empire. Colonialism, Contagion and Terror 1817-2020, The University of Chicago Press, 2021, pp.396. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-739496 (paperback).*

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The medical field and the imagery associated with it, have cultivated a fruitful relationship with political power, both as elements composing the various doctrines of sovereignty, and as fundamental articulations of the government's activity of management and control of populations.

Clearly, the porous relationship between health and administration is what determines the very status of power, in a continuous exchange between exception and normality: the emergence of illness, in fact, is what allows power to redefine its regulatory powers, to limit, neutralize and categorize it, thus making it governable (or to exorcise the spread of harmful effects). In the context of the colonial archive, much more intensely, the evocation of disease, as a medical and social issue, was the device used to mark the distance between the center and the peripheries of the empires, and to stimulate those specific pedagogical, or 'orthopedic' practices to civilize the colonized.

Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb's powerful and challenging study *Epidemic Empire* brings into focus the political, cultural and historical effects of this relationship. The book proposes an interesting re-reading of the Foucauldian concept of *biopolitics*, comparing the different gradations assumed by epidemiological and immune metaphors in specific colonial and imperial events and domains: British India, Algeria during the war of national liberation (thus with France as a counterpart), the United States and more generally the West after 9/11, within the folds of the global wars on terror and their effects. The metaphorical epidemiological code, according to Raza Kolb, enables to inscribe revolt and counterinsurgency movements in historical and cultural registers, as an excess with devastating effects in terms of stability and multi-

plication (14). The logistical dimension of mobility associated with epidemics and diseases, in these narrative patterns, is racialized, hence associated with a specific typology considered inferior in racial (and obviously class/gender) hierarchies; the effects of the spread of rebellions/diseases are the real objects of police or military operations, and disciplinary/humanitarian interventions. To look at the current situation, the catastrophic Covid-19 epidemic has 'militarized' public discourse on prophylaxis and prevention measures, accentuating the war dimension of the medical issue (Biden), or, as in Italy, entrusting the management of the emergency to an army officer. The central enjeux of the scholar's work, which runs throughout the book, is the association of the epidemiological code with a specific geographical location, the East, and a specific religious belief, Islam, constructed as elements capable of corroding the political structure and corrupting the cultural basis of Western culture.

The first section of the book (the first three chapters) deals with the construction of this device along the axis between the Indian Subcontinent and Britain, discussing the impact of the virality of radicalism and its material and discursive transformations along imperial routes. The first part of the analysis highlights the importance that media and political discourses attribute to the passivity of populations complicit with Islamic terrorism, depriving them of the disposition to act and portraying

them as prey to a contagion. Raza Kolb, through Guha's historical writings, underlines how the deprivation of the agency of the insurgent or revolutionary masses is one of the effects of the counter-insurgency prose, by which they are naturalized and therefore reduced to ordinary phenomena (38-42).

In this sense, the neutralization of the effects is symptomatic of the greater fear of contagion that they may unleash. This aspect is deepened through the examination of R. Kipling's 'Kim': in this story, with a linguistic register that the author considers fully inserted in the colonial order of discourse, the characters associate the peasant revolts with a Plague, to which Kim himself is exposed, but by virtue of his 'white' origin, he manages to escape and fight it.

The second part deals with the spread of cholera in nineteenth-century London, highlighting its ambivalent nature as a cultural construct and a health problem. In this case, the historical observation made in the eastern colonies is connected to the first medical-epidemiological analyses carried out in the metropolis (Kennedy's), and this leads to the logistical dimension, in this sense purely commercial and capitalist, of the disease. The origin of the disease, associated with Hindu and Muslim religious pilgrimages, spread through the movement of the faithful, and even touched the port hubs of capitalist circulation, so as to bring the disease to the heart of

the empire (64-70). The localization of the origin of the disease allowed scholars of the time to associate it with the increasing poverty of the indigenous populations and thus with the intrinsic poverty of the inferior races, with a twist in the language that could easily shift from the medical to the military register and vice versa. Thus, in the third part of the analysis, the literary construction of monstrosity in the Romantic era is connected to the ubiquity of danger, bringing to fruition what Raza Kolb calls 'circulatory logic'. Stoker's vampires, in fact, under the horror of existence, hide the fear of a shadowy and liquid enemy, invisible and therefore able to take possession of both the individual and the collective body, thus materializing social danger. Further, the capitalist dream of the transformation of every commodity into monetary abstraction culminates in the search for a sanitary and political immunology, transfigured through a clinical gaze attentive to catching the pathologies and preventing their spread (122). The anthropomorphization of danger in the figure of the vampire is characteristic of a particular social imagery for which the bite of the vampire is, at the same time, contact with absolute otherness (as in the classic Orientalist script), and the vector of transmission of possible infection.

The second section of the book is devoted to an analysis of Algeria and the struggles that pitted the Algerian population against the French army and the colonized. This series of events, spread over a handful of years,

in which the FLN- related groups did not hesitate to make use of armed struggle in the big cities and guerrilla warfare in the desert and mountains, were ideologically used by French official public discourse to organically link political struggle and religious faith. As a result, the desire for self-determination was interpreted as Islamic fanaticism, as evidence of a disease of civilization that had to be eradicated. Narrowing down the historical focus en passant, before delving into the author's analysis, it is useful to recall President Sarkozy's statements during the riots in the Parisian banlieues in 2006, when he called the protesters '*racaille*', raising the suspicion of a religious matrix of the uprisings. Raza Kolb initially tackles one of the most important philosophical literary works of existentialism, *La Plague* by Albert Camus, proposing an innovative reading. For her, in fact, between the lines of Camus' existential emptiness lies a deeper horror for the Algerian colonial dimension, his homeland, which the French author experiences as an ambiguous and suffered relationship. The plague is the metonymy of the disaster and catastrophe of the desire for independence, and not just a mere epidemic taxonomy (134-135). In fact, Raza Kolb underlines how the colonial dominions were the spaces in which the French administration experimented with the emergency management of mass health problems (P.Rabinow, in an important study, delved into the construction of colonial hygienism as the basis of French normativity). Oran, the city in which the novel is set, is a divided city, in which

the spread of the plague is a literary metaphor for the terror of the concrete manifestations of the Muslim population. Moreover, the inertia of the subjects represents the author's indifference to the condition of the colonial cities, and the ontological crisis as Camus' own inability to choose a side (150-155).

The metaphor of the infection, in fact, is easily displaced in the military jargon of the counter-guerrilla, and is reinforced by the derogatory term '*brown*', which alludes both to the color of the skin and to the dehumanization and destructiveness of the Plague (160). Camusian rejection of the violence of the colonized, according to the author, led him to turn a blind eye to the violence of the French army, and consequently to defend the superiority of colonial civilization.

Continuing the discourse in the second section, Raza Kolb starts with G. Pontecorvo's important film *The Battle of Algiers*, as a plastic representation of the molecular nature of the struggle, also involving women, and clearly showing, at same time, the physical dimension of the French army's reaction, with the scenes of torture of militants or citizens. These scenes, in fact, represent what was materially for the military the infected body, the pathology of a society in the grip of revolutionary fever, and the surgical need to remove it (173). This analytical frame is linked both to Fanon's writings on medicine and the colonial gaze, and to the true story of Djami-

la Boupacha, a woman tortured by the French army. Fanon's reflections, in fact, traced back to the gaze of the colonized the first form of recognition of the latter, in a negative form, which then becomes the psychological and material process of elimination of the colonizer. In this context, the medical gaze combines both the inferiorization of the observed body and the sexual desire to possess it, so as to justify the violation of female bodies. For the Martinican revolutionary, the refusal of Algerian women to remove their veils in the presence of the doctor becomes the symbolic representation of the irreducibility of the desire for liberation, contagious and collectively experienced (188-192). The story of Boupacha's violence, is symptomatic of the double violence of the colonial mentality - psychological and erotic/sexual - and treacherously hides the victimization of Muslim women, who, meta-historically, always need preventive salvation, and a cultural over-representation that paradoxically removes the reasons of their suffering (203).

The third part of the book is concerned with contextualizing epidemic metaphors within the contemporary emergencies of Islamic fundamentalism, jihad, and Western military and cultural responses in the name of freedom. This dualism has run parallel to the rise of neoliberal globalization, which, as some theorists point out, has structured itself through an imperial hierarchy that fuels the exploitation of former colonial domains, and those of the Global South. Primarily, Raza Kolb's

criticism is directed towards Salman Rushdie's fiction, interpreted as '*postnational allegory*'.

The Indian writer, victim of a fatwa by the religious authorities, uses the imaginary community of '*Selfistan*' in his novel *Shalimar the Clown* as a metaphor for the internal struggles of post-colonial states, whose fragility is represented by the ambivalence between being the sacrificial object of religious violence and, at the same time, being the subject who exercises violence (the situation of Kashmir is the object of Rushdie's analysis). In this sense, he interprets the Muslim religion as a metastasis capable of worsening existing tensions, radicalizing populations and driving them to violence against the infidel (211-213). Once again, the phenomena of social radicalism are represented in medical and religious form, as expressions of a Manichaeism functional to the description of human nature as 'cruel and unaccountable' (222). The metaphorical transfiguration of the terrorist tragedy, an element of a cancerous nature, is the simulacrum of this order of discourse. The viral dimension of the terrorist epidemic requires a securitarian cure, both in terms of social immunization and collective self-immunization, reinforcing the image of a cancer that assaults the social body globally, and the immunity of the singular body as a protection and limit to the disease (236). Clearly, the narrative imagination of this post-colonial geography necessitates the constant prevention of the violence of Islamic radicalism, and refers to the construction of a white and purely intellectual cosmopolitanism.

The last part analyses the Anglo-American reactions to the traumas of 9/11, highlighting how the different ghosts of biopolitics, from *immunization* to *thanatopolitics*, are actually reactions to the interpretation of Islamic terrorism as a virus and as an absolute enemy, which must be destroyed. The epidemic phenomenon, for the strategists of the preventive war, is, in fact, the most suitable to describe the trans-national diffusion of the Islamic militancy (259). In this sense, the accentuation of the medical and epidemiological dimension of the military intervention hides the physicality of the shock of the population, both the western population and the population being bombed, who are, in particular, completely deprived of the ability to express themselves. Even more than the crude images of Pontecorvo's film, the annihilation of Muslims, first moral, with the denial of their cultural and religious identity, and then physical, of which the photographs of Guantanamo were only the iceberg (not counting the black sites and extraordinary renditions), have made visible the costs of war operations in the name of global health. Against the imperial epidemiology and the cruelty of jihad, post-colonial writings, playing on the registers of rhetorical figures, try to disassemble the canons of both narratives, putting at the core both the subversion of bodies (as Raza Kolb partially acknowledges in *Rushdie*) and the positive circulation of minor and marginal languages.

To conclude, we must return once again to the present day. The hunt for *Islamogauchisme* in Europe, in fact, re-

inforces the critical power of this important study, and pushes readers and scholars to follow the path indicated by the author: opposing the political use of medical language, within a global catastrophe, means deconstructing the divisive and racializing categories of common sense. In this sense, the *Derridean* concept of *auto-immunity*, evoked in the book, is useful for manifesting the power of the '*openness*' of the living as a collective praxis, for attacking the different forms of immunization that permeate social formations.