

Epidemics and Social Discipline: The Transylvanian Study-Case (1740 - 1830)

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Epidemics were, and still are, common within all past societies. Some of them, especially plague epidemics, were threatening and frightening scourges not only because of their economic and demographic aspects, but also because of the violence, virulence, frequency or endemic existence that they induced in some territories. Sometimes combined with other diseases – such as scurvy, goiter, anemia, typhus, malaria, yellow fevers, syphilis, small pox etc. - they had devastating psychological consequences. Paul Slack mentioned that past epidemics in all the continents and cultures, raised broad issues in the history of ideas because they supported and threw a particularly light on ideologies and mentalities of the societies they afflicted. The reactions to epidemics took different forms according to the nature of the disease involved and according to social, cultural and political context in which they manifested.¹ A common reaction was to combat them.

This paper is concerned with social discipline implemented by the Habsburg authorities as a solution to control the epidemics. Social control was a response to the dilemmas arising from the need to understand and prevent the huge demographic, economic and psychological impact of epidemics. Therefore, I will examine the way in which epidemic diseases influenced the construction of the social discipline during eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century in Habsburg Monarchy, especially by taking Transylvania as a study case.

Social discipline was studied mainly from the perspective of state formation and religious policies. Several historians argued that the absolutist regimes pursued social policies that aimed at increasing the states' welfare, population and army. They stressed out that such regimes, in order to achieve these goals, employed powerful measures of social control. G. Oestreich² affirmed that Sozialdisziplinierung was an important process in the early modern Europe, because it contributed to the formation of the national states.

¹ Paul Slack, "Introduction". In *Epidemics and ideas : essays on the historical perception of pestilence*; edited by Terence Ranger and Paul Slack. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.3.

² G. Oestreich, *Neostoicism and Early Modern State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Marc Raeff³ affirmed that these states developed a 'police' apparatus, which helped to shape the social behavior. Cultural theorists such as Norbert Elias⁴ and Michael Foucault⁵ emphasized the fact that absolutist regimes determined two types of discipline: an external one implemented with institutional help and self –discipline that regulated social behavior. Moreover, the theme of social discipline was brought forward by historians of confessionalization and it offers new interpretative models and a conceptual vocabulary with a great potential to generate new questions and insights.⁶

A close look at the disciplinary practices used by the Habsburgs in their Monarchy revealed that the social discipline was applied in a different environment of religion. In the field of sanitation and health the concept offers a new interpretative model in my research. The study – as part of a larger enterprise - was both qualitative and quantitative and analyzed several sanitary ordinances, sanitary laws, medical pamphlets and brochures, religious sermons and Episcopal letters, journal articles and satires and other types of documents. The attention given to the language employed by these primary sources and the nature of disciplinary measures lead me to argue that epidemics – mainly plague epidemics - induced discipline manifested on two levels: an external level and an internal one. I am also arguing that the attempts to preserve and improve the health of the subjects of the Habsburg Monarchy were successful due to a strict social control embedded in the sanitation policy pursued as a result of high mortality and depopulation that followed outbreaks of plague epidemics. Moreover, the psychological factors such as self-preservation, fear of diseases, panic caused by the epidemics, and developments in the medical science contributed to the 'success' of this project.

The external level was linked with state policy and with its top-down interventions in the life of the community and/or individual. It was characterized by the promotion of health reforms, and by the invention of a variety of institutions that implemented new preventive measures within the communities. The external level of

³ Marc Raeff, *The Well Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change Through Law in the Germanies and Russia 1600-1800*. New Haven, 1983.

⁴ Norbert Elias, *Civilizing process*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

⁵ Michel Foucault. *Discipline And Punish: The Birth of The Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977

⁶ Michael F. Graham, *The Uses of Reform. 'Godly Discipline' and Popular Behavior in Scotland and Beyond 1560-1610*. Brill Academic Publishers, 1996

discipline could be associated with plague, cholera, typhus, to certain extent small pox, diseases that had a brusque beginning and produced tremendous fear among people. They allowed the construction of preventive institution that could be applied in all moments of crisis.

The sanitary and legislation aimed at ‘modernizing’ health system, imposed new procedures in dealing with epidemics. Moreover, the reforms regulated the medical profession and introduced a professional discipline. In the 1770 *Generale Normativum In Re Sanitatis* it was stated that in the Habsburg Monarchy only physicians/surgeons that had a medical diploma from either a University or a Surgical School could have the right to practice and to be employed in the administrative structure of the state. By means of the increasingly complex and meticulous regulations of the medical practice, the activities performed by the physicians became routinized and professionalized. Medical personnel were strictly examined for their medical knowledge and morals. New norms of personal and public hygiene were imposed.

The institutional aspect of social discipline was manifested within the new administrative structure of the health care system, in the building of cordon sanitaire and quarantine stations along the borders of the Monarchy.⁷

The Habsburg authorities were deeply involved in promoting public health measures that will eradicate the contagious diseases. The institutions they used for social disciplining were the Sanitary Commission and cordon sanitaire composed of border regiments and quarantines.

The control was exercised by Sanitary Commission imposed brutal epidemic regulations met, most of the times, with hostile attitudes by the populations. The scale and the consistency of the top –down interventions in the life of the citizens was proportional with the severity of the epidemic and to the panic that it generated. The increasingly concerted action by state authorities to control epidemic led to a social and political discipline due to the increased centralization and bureaucratic interventions in the social relationships. The most pressing epidemic situation during the eighteenth

⁷ The pyramidal form of the protomedicat with the Viennese Sanitary Commission in the top, and with Sanitary Commissions (lead by a protomedicus) in every provinces of the Monarchy. The basis of this structure was composed of health departments (lead by *physicus* with a doctorate in medicine) in every district of the provinces.

century introduced medical and sanitary regulations building upon the notions and practices of German and Austrian medical police.

Another ‘instrument’ of external disciplinary practices were the border regiments which together with the quarantine stations composed the largest cordon sanitaire in Europe stretched from the Adriatic Sea up the Northern border of Transylvania. The regiments had also, the function of a ‘local medical police’ that inspects the region and health condition of the inhabitants. The introduction of passports and health certificates, allowed the authorities to control the movement of the people, to prevent illegal emigration, contraband activity and different forms of rebellion. They also controlled the correspondence and exchange of goods. It controlled the borders as the soldiers were part of the cordon sanitaire and also part of the permanent Habsburg army. Moreover, it entered their homes, intermingled with the religious and social practices, by regulating burials and other traditions. It also interfered with their basic knowledge and practices of home hygiene. They were summoned to lime paint the house walls, sweep the floors and keep organic foods away from living spaces.

These institutions represented a response to the political, social and medical circumstances of the province. Also they can be, to a certain extent qualified as ‘instruments’ and ‘agents’ by which Habsburgs tried to gain full political control over Transylvania, thereby ensuring their own hegemony. The cordon sanitaire turned from a preventive apparatus into one of social and political control.

Economic, political and humanitarian goals were involved in the social discipline that followed health regulations. The carriers of this social discipline were the medical personnel and the soldiers co-opted inside of the medical bureaucratic apparatus of the state. In the lack of bureaucratic agents, the clergy had the mission to ‘translate’ the orders on a language understood by all inhabitants. Moreover, the new type of religious devotion (pietism, Jansenism, etc.) that flourished in the eighteenth century, education and the development of the commercial societies realized a shift in the

technologies of social control. The locus of coercion was transferred from outside to inside of the individual.⁸

The internal level of social discipline was mainly characterized by two types of control: self-discipline and civic responsibility. The self-discipline and the civic responsibility was born out of a deep understanding of the measures taken to preserve the individual against the danger of diseases. The internal level of discipline could be seen from the perspective of new forms of sociability around learned societies. A broad cultural movement promoted by members of local intelligentsia developed a new ideology of improvement.

Grouped in learned societies such as the German *Societas Polihistorum*, the Hungarian *Transylvanian Society for Hungarian Language*, and also Romanian *Philosophic Society* members of the local intelligentsia were deeply involved in the cultural life of Transylvania, their motherland. The emergence of a deeply 'patriotic' discourse within this multi-ethnic and multi-denominational society brought about a variety of problems. They directed their attention towards spheres where their patriotic feelings could be expressed usefully.

The promotion of public good health through the improvement of manners and education and hygiene were reflected in the involvement of the Transylvanian intelligentsia in the translation and publication of books and pamphlets, satires and brochures related to all fields of life.

The Transylvanian literati placed a high importance on the polite learning as well as on the humanitarian values, such as religious toleration, moral and economic improvement. They discussed history, geography, church history, literature, ethics, and political and economic issues. The literary debates and the history of the heroic past of the motherland, contemporary political issues⁹, were vividly discussed. They were preoccupied to publish geographical description and mapping of the region. Out of a deep sense of responsibility for the 'citizens', they promoted ideas for the improvement of the environment. The interest for agriculture and the improved agricultural techniques were

⁸ James Van Horn Melton, *Absolutism and the Eighteenth-century Origins of Compulsory schooling in Prussia and Austria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.p. XIX.

⁹ They published in *Siebenbürgische Quartalschrift*, Vol. 4, 1794, issues related to the problem of *Supplex Libellus Vallachorum*, the requests for political rights made by Romanians in 1791.

combined with drainage of marshes in order to improve the land resources for agriculture, prevent famines and diseases favoured by the swampy regions.

They were physicians-chemists, preoccupied to study the qualities and composition of mineral waters and their benefits for health. They were also physicians specialized in geology and mineralogy able to study the mineral wealth of the province. The working conditions of the miners and occupational diseases were an important preoccupation in their tentative to improve health of the civic society. Moreover, the exchange of ideas going on in Hungarian and German learned societies made people aware of the importance and benefits of the new medical discoveries and treatments. Medical science and public health was on the central focus of the debates. Hygiene and dietetics gave many insights about medicine. New types of Mediterranean diet brought by the travellers in Italy were essential medical discoveries.¹⁰

All these debates had a strong impact on the shaping attitudes of the provincial elite due to their publication in the main journals of the province: *Siebenbürgische Quartalschrift* and *Siebenbürgische Provinzialblätter*.¹¹ These journals became a vehicle that shaped the public opinion, and mentalities.

The representatives of intelligentsia believed that the cultivation of morals and the popularization of science and medicine would develop an inner discipline. Many of them, out of civic responsibility, embarked into a program of translations and publication of 'how to' books, or 'books of advice'. Consequently, the internal type of social discipline - the civic responsibility- took into consideration both the society and the individual.

The informative material about health was broadly disseminated by printed press. The journals, pamphlets, and sanitary brochures were among the most important tools used by physicians to promote scientific/medical knowledge to the educated social strata. They informed readers about discoveries, nature, history, practical matters, and provided

¹⁰ The above-mentioned journals have several topics on these problems. They published reviews of the new medical books printed in the Habsburg Monarchy.

¹¹ The *Siebenbürgische Quartalschrift* was published between in 1790 and 1805. There are seven volumes available. Probably it was continued with *Siebenbürgische Provinzialblätter* after 1805. It was the edited by the members of the Saxon learned society, *Societas Polihistorum*

general medical advice. They created a public receptive to the issues of health and gave birth to self-discipline and to a civic responsibility towards their fellow citizens.

The carriers of these disciplinary actions were the intelligentsia and the clergy. They conducted an intense activity to shape behavior, by combining health teachings and Christian sermons.

The desire to improve both human resources and the health of the population together with their inner qualities of men was bound up with the need for social control and discipline. Whether it was a harsh top-down intervention, whether it applied the subtle influences of the science of man, education or morals, promoted by polite societies, all had practical ends. Science and medicine was central to, and in some cases, the driving force behind the intellectual and social changes, hence instrumental in shaping modernity in Transylvania and elsewhere in the Habsburg Monarchy