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BOOK REVIEW

"THE UNEXPECTED STOP" EXPERIENCE OF ISOLATION IN QUARANTINES, 1700S-1900S[1]

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Abstract: *The mechanisms of anxiety, protection, and surveillance have a long and complex history. They are also evident in the functioning of quarantine, an instrument that has proven capable of shaping both human behaviour and political attitudes towards trade, culture, and medicine. Considered necessary by some but feared and misunderstood by others, quarantine materialises the paradoxical temporality of waiting: waiting for isolation, for signs of illness, for news from beyond the walls, and, finally, for the affairs of liberation. Chosen with inspiration and meticulousness, the fragments drawn from diaries, correspondence, and memoirs imbue quarantine with characteristics that can contribute to its understanding from a human perspective, placing it within the universes of intellectual history, the history of medicine, and the history of travel.*

Keywords: *Quarantine, health, memory, confession, experience, diary.*

Rezumat: „Neașteptata oprire". Experiența izolării în carantinele anilor 1700-1900. *Mecanismele anxietății, protecției și supravegherii au o istorie lungă și complexă. Ele se regăsesc și în modul de funcționare a carantinei, un instrument care s-a dovedit în stare să modeleze atât comportamente umane, cât și atitudini politice față de comerț, cultură și medicină. Considerată necesară de unii, dar și temută și neînțeleasă de alții, ea a materializat*

[1] John Booker, *Forty Days: Quarantine and the Traveller, c. 1700–1900*, London-New York, Routledge, 2022, XVI+215 p.

temporalitatea paradoxală a așteptării: așteptarea izolării, a semnelor de boală, a veștilor dincolo de ziduri, în fine, a eliberării și reîntoarcerii la treburile cotidiene. Alese cu inspirație și minuțiozitate, fragmentele extrase din jurnale, corespondență, memorialistică conferă carantinei caracteristici care pot contribui la înțelegerea ei din perspectivă umană, plasând-o în universul istoriei intelectuale, al istoriei medicinei și al istoriei călătoriilor.

Two years ago, while examining the operation of four sanitary stations on the Imperial Bukovina border – established to monitor the spread of deadly diseases without disrupting Austria's trade with the Levant – I explored the intricate system of 'sanitary cordons' and quarantine stations that functioned as both epidemiological barriers and mechanisms of governance and control,[2] discovering that the development of quarantine systems reflected the interplay between public health concerns and strategies of state power.

Although the history of quarantine is well documented, it has been examined primarily from institutional, medical, or political-administrative perspectives. In the past decade, new scholarship has begun to study quarantine as a key site where health and border policies converge.[3] As a thematic 'recurrence,'[4] John Booker's volume Forty Days: Quarantine and the Traveller, c. 1700–1900, stands out as one of the most comprehensive and carefully documented social histories of quarantine practices in pre-modern and early modern times. Unlike other works, Booker places the analysis in a different register; he adopts the perspective of the traveller, of the one forced to cross the restrictive space of the lazaret. Perhaps for this reason, the narrative has, simultaneously, the granularity of intimate detail and the breadth of a Mediterranean panorama. Using an impressive corpus of hundreds of testimonies – diaries, letters, accounts belonging to aristocrats, merchants, doctors, missionaries, politicians, or simply 'tourists' – the author builds a broad investigation into the way in which quarantine shaped mentalities,

[2] Harieta Mareci-Sabol, Silvia Ginghină, *„Necesara carantină". Reguli, etică și medici în Bucovina (1780-1860)* ["The Necessary Quarantine". Rules, Ethics and Doctors in Bukovina (1780-1860)], „Analele Bucovinei", 2024, nr. 1, pp. 63-78.

[3] Alison Bashford (Ed.), *Quarantine: Local and Global Histories*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, 344 p.; John Chircop, Francisco Javier-Martínez (Eds.), *Mediterranean Quarantines, 1750–1914. Space, identity and power*, Manchester University Press, 2018, 336 p.; Alex Chase-Levenson, *The Yellow Flag: Quarantine and the British Mediterranean World, 1780–1860*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 320 p.; Nicola Twilley, Geoff Manaugh, *Until Proven Safe: The History and Future of Quarantine*, New York, MCD, 2021, 416 p.

[4] John Booker, *Maritime quarantine: the British experience, c. 1650-1900*, London, Routledge, 2007, 644 p.

disciplined behaviours, and imposed itself as an inevitable rite of passage upon returning from the Levant.

In the I*ntroduction*, Booker formulates the paradox of quarantine: an institution built on a simple idea yet carrying profound meaning. It was – he notes – "known, expected by all but the most naive, and practically inevitable even for the aristocracy." This presumption of inevitability is the common thread running through the entire work. The text comprises macro-historical explanations – the evolution of ideas about contagion, the role of the state in health control, the diplomatic instrumentalisation of health measures – and micro-historical particularities, such as the boredom, anxiety, solidarity, or irritation expressed by those detained in the lazaret. In addition, the author proposes a methodological rebalancing, shifting the emphasis from health regulations to the voices of those affected by them.

The first chapter – *Reasons, regimes and routes* – presents the intellectual and institutional foundations of quarantine. Although brief, Booker's exposition of contagionism versus anticontagionism is substantial, emphasising the idea of contagion that dominated the European imagination from the Middle Ages until the 18th century. The author appropriately emphasises that the two perspectives were, to a certain extent, complementary: unsanitary environments did not generate the disease, but favoured or amplified its spread. The analysis then turns to the diplomatic and political instrumentalisation of quarantine. For example, John Bowring's accusation that quarantine facilities often served as "terrible instruments of diplomacy and state policy," allowing the interception of correspondence, the arrest of travellers, or the imposition of economic restrictions under the pretext of protecting public health, is cited. Such observations indicate the extent of sanitary control and how it masked or overlapped with the geopolitical intentions of some states. Russia, in particular, is portrayed through the eyes of 19th-century travellers as a power that used quarantine not only to restrict disease but also to control ideological currents—the "plague of knowledge", as noted by Charles Terry.

The second chapter – *Quarantine: the social leveller* – focuses on one of the book's central arguments. Regardless of class, title, or occupation, travellers from the East were subject to the same procedural routines, architectural constraints, and anxieties about prolonged detention. In Booker's interpretation, the lazaret becomes a space in which social hierarchies are not eliminated but temporarily suspended, as evidenced in the allocation of rooms, the inhabitants' access to goods, and their relations with their overseers. One of the strengths of Booker's approach is its emphasis on the diversity of those who experienced quarantine.

The author notes that The Grand Tour did not coincide with the quarantine period, as its routes avoided areas subject to sanitary restrictions. He also highlights the gender dimension of travel writing. Although women travelled extensively during the period studied, their accounts of quarantine are less well represented in the archive, either because the diaries were private or unpublished. Female perspectives on the restrictive spaces are more attuned to the domestic realities of the infirmary than those of their male counterparts.

Titled *First Impressions*, the third chapter examines the materiality of the institution of quarantine. From makeshift barracks on the banks of the Danube to elaborate complexes, such as those in Malta, Marseille, or Varignano, the lazarettos formed a vast and heterogeneous architectural landscape. The testimonies cited are suggestive: the 'acceptable' edifice in Barletta, the 'miserable' stone building in the Beirut area, where prisoners died of plague or dysentery, and the poorly ventilated structures of stations, such as that in Odessa. The quarantine was impressive at first glance: high walls, barred windows, long corridors, and a *parlatorio* through which dialogue took place at a distance, as in a rigorously choreographed scene. In this setting, the space itself becomes a disciplinary agent. The vigilance of the guards, the fear of prolonging detention, and even minor phobias – such as the episode told by Hans Christian Andersen about the lazaret in Orșova, in which a stray feather floating over the wall or an accidental step on a wire could lead to an extension of the quarantine.

As significant to the lived experience of quarantine as the threat of disease is the theme of the *Passing the time*, which also gives the fourth chapter its title. Although limited to a few weeks, time in the lazaretto took on the density of an oppressive duration. The travellers read, wrote, drew, walked in narrow courtyards, watched the life of the port, or conversed through the bars. Some fell into apathy; others invented strategies to enliven their days. Booker captures a variety of picturesque situations: from champagne picnics at sea to permits for 'socially important' travellers, to the rigid discipline imposed on the underprivileged. Such episodes illustrate how the rigidity of quarantine could be mitigated by social capital, personal charm, or officials' indulgence.

Chapter five – *Reckoning and departure* – traces the moment of release from quarantine and its bureaucratic and symbolic weight. The gain of freedom to reenter society marks the traveller's reintegration into the port's civic and commercial rhythms. Booker traces the evolution of quarantine durations in the nineteenth century, particularly the gradual reduction of isolation times as steamship routes accelerated travel and medical understanding improved. These changes reflect a broader recalibration of priorities. As commercial pressure increased and

passengers' expectations evolved, quarantine – once absolute – became negotiable. The author characterises this as an irony: Europe had long considered the Ottoman territories the cradle of the plague, but by the mid-19th century, it was the Ottoman authorities who proved reluctant to abandon quarantine, while European powers experimented with liberalisation and medical inspection. In Britain, the situation was idiosyncratic. Booker explains that quarantine was a royal prerogative, administered through the Privy Council, and marked by bureaucratic confusion. However, by 1896, quarantine in the archipelago had been replaced largely by medical inspection, signalling the decline of the old regime.

One of the most interesting and novel elements of Booker's book is the extensive Gazetteer of Quarantine Stations and Infirmaries, which spans almost a hundred pages. This section serves as both a reference tool and, one might say, a 'historical atlas,' documenting forty-nine sites in Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, often accompanied by travellers' observations, maps, and visual representations. For scholars of Mediterranean mobility, maritime infrastructure, or the material culture of public health, the Gazetteer can be a significant resource. The entries vary in detail, reflecting the unevenness of documentary survival. Some sites, such as Malta, Marseille, Ancona, Alexandria, Beirut, and Trieste, have rich historiographies; others, such as Barletta or Varignano, are more modestly represented.

Nevertheless, each entry is placed in a historical context and linked to the travellers' social experiences. These micro-histories coalesce into a cartography of health governance whose value extends beyond medical history, engaging with imperial networks, commercial geography, and the anthropology of liminal spaces. An extensive bibliography (grouped by source category) and a helpful Index complete Booker's work, which undoubtedly represents a substantial contribution to the social history of medicine and to studies of mobility in the Mediterranean.

From the point of view of a researcher interested in the history of Bukovina, a small province, at the extreme limit of the Austrian empire, I express my delight at having found references (even marginal) about it, in all this information regarding an extremely generous geographical space. Indeed, some aspects could have been discussed in greater nuance. For example, the unproblematic reproduction of Western descriptions of Ottoman lazarettos – perceived as 'unhygienic' or 'fatalistic' – could have been accompanied by the contextualisation of the era's prejudices. Also, although the author affirms the levelling character of quarantine, he notes, through the chosen texts, that differences in class and social status do not disappear even in the *lazaretto*; they manifest in the quality of accommodation, access to comfort, and the ability to negotiate with officials. Finally, the work only

touches, in passing, the transition from pre-microbial theories to bacteriology. This 'discretion' is likely because the manuscript was drafted more than a decade before the COVID-19 pandemic and was subsequently adapted.

In conclusion, I can say that, after a careful reading, *Forty Days: Quarantine and the Traveller, c. 1700–1900*, reveals to us more than a sanitary mechanism in quarantine. John Booker has the capacity, intuition, and talent to present it as a cultural, political, and psychological phenomenon that interfered with trade routes, the rhythms of empires, and the daily vulnerabilities of travellers. Through the richness of the documents, the meticulous reconstruction of the spaces, and the refinement of the narrative, the author restores a profoundly human dimension to the experience of waiting: waiting behind the walls, waiting for signs of illness, waiting for news, waiting for release. In other words, the book captures, with finesse, the paradoxical temporality of the quarantine – a suspended time but full of tension – and integrates it into a long, complex and essential history for understanding sanitary modernity.

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