

# Study: Epidemics are often followed by unrest

7 September 2020



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If you have not been hearing much of the French Gilets Jaunes or of the Italian Sardines in the last few months, it's because "the social and psychological unrest arising from the epidemic tends to crowd out the conflicts of the pre-epidemic period, but at the same time, it constitutes the fertile ground on which global protest may return more aggressively once the epidemic is over," writes Massimo Morelli, Professor of Political Science at Bocconi, in a paper recently published in *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*.

Professor Morelli and Roberto Censolo (University of Ferrara) argue that the possible effects of COVID-19 on protest and future social unrest can be illuminated by the great plagues of the past. They analyzed 57 [epidemic](#) episodes between the black death (1346-1353) and the Spanish flu (1919-1920). They state that while the epidemic lasts, the status quo and incumbent governments tend to consolidate, but warn that a sharp increase in social instability in the aftermath of the epidemic should be expected.

Revolts not evidently connected with the disease

are infrequent within an epidemic period, but epidemics can sow other seeds of conflict. Groups may blame government conspiracy, "the filth of the poor," foreigners and immigrants as the cause of an epidemic. "Overall, the historical evidence shows that the epidemics display a potential disarranging effect on [civil society](#) along three dimensions," the authors write. "First, the policy measures tend to conflict with the interests of people, generating a dangerous friction between society and institutions. Second, to the extent that an epidemic impacts differently on society in terms of mortality and economic welfare, it may exacerbate inequality. Third, the psychological shock can induce irrational narratives on the causes and the spread of the disease, which may result in social or racial discrimination and even xenophobia."

Focusing on five cholera epidemics, Morelli and Censolo count 39 rebellions in the 10 years preceding an epidemic and 71 rebellions in the 10 years following it. On the other hand, the authors note that in the short-term, the necessary restrictions of freedom during an epidemic may be strategically exploited by governments to reinforce power.

**More information:** Roberto Censolo et al, COVID-19 and the Potential Consequences for Social Stability, *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* (2020). [DOI: 10.1515/peps-2020-0045](#)

Provided by Bocconi University

APA citation: Study: Epidemics are often followed by unrest (2020, September 7) retrieved 31 October 2020 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-09-epidemics-unrest.html>

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