

THE FIGHT AGAINST PANDEMICS IN THE HISTORY OF VENICE

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The history of Venice offers lessons for contrasting pandemics in the future

A cycle of events at Fondazione Giorgio Cini

Five years have passed since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, one which profoundly affected the world, enveloping it in a global dimension of mourning and confusion. It challenged the resilience of healthcare systems, and it disrupted daily life, economies as well as the flow of people and goods, triggering the deepest recession in decades. In democracies, the pandemic also raised complex ethical issues: the search for a balance between the individual freedom to choose whether to be vaccinated and the collective need to minimise the risk of infection, and the balance between freedom of expression and the need to ensure scientifically sound information. The events of 2020–21 showed that a pandemic response calls for a collective effort on many fronts: that of health, science, industry, logistics and communication. Social cohesion and the credibility of institutions and scientists are vital. International cooperation is also crucial: in the exchange of health information, in the dissemination of vaccine research results as well as in the production and distribution of vaccines and other products necessary for the handling of the epidemic.

The recent pandemic reminded us that humanity remains very much exposed to the risk of epidemic events. Several forecasting studies show that this risk is significant. The intensity of the flow of people and goods and the speed of travel have greatly reduced the time it takes for infections to spread globally. The pandemic also underlined the close link between population health and economic activity, while the increase in the burden of services in developed economies compared to that of primary and industrial activities means that the importance of measures of precautionary isolation is even greater.

We must therefore work to prevent new global outbreaks and be prepared to manage their occurrence on all levels. The International Treaty on Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response, approved last month by the World Health Organization and now awaiting ratification by UN member states, is a major step in this direction. At a national level, we need efficient and flexible healthcare facilities, research and production capabilities, credible political authorities and forms of widespread consensus, which in turn require credible and authoritative communication.

It is around these reflections that the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice has developed a series of studies and events in 2025 around the theme of Democracy and Pandemics, involving its various institutes and research centres. In over seventy years, the Foundation has turned the island of San Giorgio into a laboratory of thought that has often pre-empted reflections on major scientific and humanistic issues. At the same time, the Foundation has enhanced the wealth of knowledge and archives accumulated over the centuries-long history of the Serenissima.

The work plan focuses primarily on the role of the Republic of Venice in dealing with epidemics. For centuries, Venice was plagued by contagious diseases: being a link between

East and West, its port welcomed not only people and goods but also infections of all kinds and, periodically, the bubonic plague. The latter repeatedly decimated the city's population, particularly in 1348, 1575–77, and 1630–31. Just as the Republic had intervened to ensure the survival of its environment by diverting rivers that threatened to flood the lagoon with silt, it systematically endeavoured also to stem the spread of contagion. Venice made up for the then dire lack of medical knowledge – compared to current standards – with a wide range of measures that remain a reference point for health policies to this day: from the systematic collection of information on infection to the isolation of carriers of the disease and social distancing, and from widespread controls to economic support for the poorest. This allowed it to remain immune to further contagion post-1631, although the plague remained endemic in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and continued to affect a number of Mediterranean ports throughout the eighteenth century.

The responsiveness that was developed over time made the Serenissima one of the most advanced state organisations of its day. As Prof. Egidio Ivetic, Director of the Foundation's Institute for the History of Venetian Society and State, points out, in Venice "the management of the city was entrusted to various magistrates according to a pragmatic rather than an ideological basis. Alongside the often impressive scope for institutional intervention, there was the widespread presence of confraternities and secular schools that permeated society, serving both as a means of assistance and as hubs of social life; it was social action from the bottom up."

Concerts, conferences, a volume of essays and the exhibition *Venezia e le epidemie* will be dedicated to the historical experience of the lagoon city. The latter will be open from 20 June to 19 December in the ancient Longhena Library and will present both historical documents and multimedia elaborations, using artificial intelligence tools to process a large amount of data and historical documents.

The current debate will also be the theme of a symposium in November, providing an opportunity for international reflection among experts from various disciplines: epidemiologists, specialists in international relations, philosophers, political scientists and economists. The aim is to bring to the fore an academic contribution ranging from the strictly epidemiological dimension to that of the organisation of health systems, from the problems and potential of international cooperation to the political dimension of pandemic management in terms of individual freedom, transparency of information and trust in institutions and science. The goal is to understand how a society can react, what resources it can mobilise, and what public policy governance it can activate. This is a contribution that the Fondazione Giorgio Cini offers to the world, just as it has done on other occasions throughout its long history.

The historical experience of Venice remains a key lesson. It confirms that a pandemic requires a comprehensive response from society as a whole. It calls for cohesion, solidarity and consensus, as well as detailed reflection on the principles underlying the political and technical choices to be implemented in an emergency.