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Review of City of Plagues: Disease, Poverty and Deviance in San Francisco

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Medicine

997. **City of Plagues: Disease, Poverty, and Deviance in San Francisco**, by Susan Craddock. Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2000. 300p., illus., bibliog., index. [ISBN 0-8166-3047-X](https://www.isbn.org/0-8166-3047-X), 0-8166-3048-8pbk. \$34.95. LC Call no.: RA650.5.C73 2000. NLM Call no.: WF 11 Ac2 C884c 2000.

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Public health administration is supposed to operate above social prejudice, in the realm of scientific objectivity and truth for the benefit of the entirety of a population. At least this is the implicit assumption about public health services as they are connected to medical science. Susan Craddock's **City of Plagues**, a history of health policy in San Francisco during the 19th Century, demonstrates that health policies in response to outbreaks of smallpox, syphilis, plague, and tuberculosis were used as political tools of discrimination and disenfranchisement affecting marginalized populations. Craddock's purpose is to "disrupt the implicit location of public health outside social politics". During this era, the discriminatory rhetoric blaming the outbreak of contagious disease and the subsequent disciplinary measures taken were aimed at the Chinese population in San Francisco, even though they by no means the only population affected.

Drawing on Foucault's work examining medical discourse as a disciplinary function, Craddock traces the effects of epidemic disease beyond the biological devastation of life to the physical or emotional suffering caused by public health practices. In order to

stem the spread of disease, these policies and practices that disregarded civil rights or withheld basic welfare health care based on the quarantining or condemnation of non-white neighborhoods and non-white bodies. **City of Plagues**, draws a fascinating picture of San Francisco carved up into infected, quarantined and dangerous sections as opposed to safe areas along borders that corresponded to economic and racial boundaries. The interpretation of disease that Craddock links to the health officials is that the bodies most susceptible and therefore dangerous are connected to difference and/or threatening behaviors deviating from white boundaries of normalcy. One such instance reported, is that of vegetarianism being linked to the cause of disease. It was thought that the Chinese "rice eaters" did not have the hearty immune systems provided by a meat-centered diet.

With several years of hindsight on the early days of the AIDS epidemic, Craddock compares the 19th century health policies with contemporary policy operating within the social politics of fear, exclusion and labeling. Deemed a "gay cancer" and then relegated to gays, Haitians and intravenous drug users, she shows us how the rhetoric surrounding AIDS was seen in terms of groups which already held marginal status because of class race or behavior defined as deviant.

City of Plagues focuses on outbreaks of epidemic disease between 1860 and about 1940 with particular attention to smallpox and tuberculosis outbreaks in the 1870s and 1880s and the plague epidemics between 1900 and 1907. The book is organized chronologically, though this arrangement has less to do with uncovering a linear progression, or lack thereof, than it is a convenient way to introduce various points. The first chapters deal with San Francisco's urban infrastructure, the crowding and lack of sanitation that fostered the growth and transmission of disease. From this macro viewpoint the subject of analysis grows inward to efforts of urban containment of contagion in Chinatown. Subsequent sections deal with the categorization of pathologized groups, and tuberculosis sanatoriums, designed to discipline and control the diseased body.

Finally Craddock engages in the criticism of contemporary policies that continue to use demarcations of deviance and marginalized status as criteria for health campaigns. What these policies fail to recognize, she argues, is that by defining epidemics in terms of spatial metaphors, health policy can increase risk and/or deny care to those in need, the result of which is a form of punishment for deviance from the dominant cultural norms.

City of Plagues includes some statistical data in the form of table, charts and graphs, but on the whole is a cultural history rather than a medical science history. Libraries with an interest in sociocultural politics, Cultural Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies The History and Philosophy of Science, and related disciplines will find this book a valuable addition. The work is well documented with copious notes to each chapter, an extensive bibliography and index.

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