I read a short article this week about the social history surrounding epidemics. Like much of history, it has eerie similarities to our current times. Is it a precautionary tale, or a random pattern we imbue with meaning as we try to connect the dots?

The historians looked back at many of our prior pandemics; you know the litany, the Black Death, numerous episodes of cholera, and the Spanish Flu. They identified 57 "significant" episodes and tried to correlate them with civil unrest, before and after the pandemic's appearance. For those with a quantitative bent, be forewarned; this is qualitative research, no p values, just some food for thought.

The researchers identified 110 rebellions during periods of an epidemic, and only four were unrelated to the epidemic itself. Roughly 70% occurred in the ten years following an epidemic. This pattern of significant civil unrest after rather than before held across the centuries. They went on to try and discern the dimensions, the seeds of such unrest; they identified three.

- "First, the policy measures tend to conflict with the interest of people, determining a dangerous attrition between society and institutions." Here, they point to the draconian governmental measures taken in the past, compulsory quarantines, confinements, and "ban
of public (especially religious) demonstrations.

- "Second, to the extent that an epidemic impacts differently on society in terms of mortality and economic welfare, it may exacerbate inequality." We need to look no further than the current discussions of healthcare inequality and the financial plight of small businesses and the gig economy to see this particular seed.

- "Third, the psychological shock may induce irrational narratives on the causes and the spread of the disease, which may result in social, racial discrimination, and even xenophobia." Contagion, by its very nature, raises disgust and fear of the "other." Rather than touch the third rail of today's politics, I will simply add another historical example.

"In Paris, during the second epidemic [cholera 1817-24], the poor associated cholera to a government plot, while to the elites it was a vehicle of social disorder — a situation that gave rise to severe episodes of popular violence. A similar example appears in Naples during the fifth cholera epidemic (1891–1896). Cholera struck especially in the poor districts of the city, and people thought that the disease was a government conspiracy to reduce the population of the poor."

They point out that the "necessary restrictions of freedom" during these episodes also provided cover for governmental power grabs. These historical events may give us all a better context to understand those arguing that "necessary restrictions" are, in fact, "unwarranted mandates and intrusions."

I have a bias. I am a big fan of the idea that some of our history is cyclic and generational [1]. Much as my generation, the Boomers, wrested control from the Greatest Generation, the Millennials are seizing our power. The changes brought by COVID-19 will not end with a vaccine. There is a shift underway fueled by the pandemic. But, if we are to believe history, this is not unique to us. At this juncture, one could insert that George Santayana quotation, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The real message is not so much to remember our past, which is vital in that it shows us we have been here before but to uncover ways to be resilient and work with the tides besetting us. COVID-19 is not our first pandemic rodeo; hopefully, we can build upon what we have learned from the past.

[1] The Fourth Turning is a great book detailing how four cycles of generations, across 80 years, have been endlessly cycling through our history. While they predicted a global confrontation between nations as the current fourth turning, COVID-19 fits the bill pretty well.
