Course description. This course explores the role of epidemic disease in human history through an examination of selected episodes from plagues in antiquity to the Black Death, cholera, and smallpox, to AIDS, Ebola, malaria, bird flu, and Zika in our time. We will approach the problem of understanding the role of disease in history from two different, but interrelated, perspectives: an ecological/evolutionary perspective, making use of a combination of environmental, biological, and cultural factors to help explain the origin and spread of epidemics, and a cultural/social history perspective, emphasizing the interaction of cultural values, religious beliefs, scientific knowledge, medical practice, economics, and politics in shaping perceptions of the nature, causes, cures, and significance of various diseases. This is not a course on the history of medicine or on epidemiology as such, but we will of necessity make use of insights and examples from both of those fields. For practical reasons, the emphasis in this course will be on infectious disease, and not on cancer, heart disease, mental disorders, etc., although I fully realize that recent research sometimes blurs distinctions between these categories of disease. The format will be discussions based on assigned readings supplemented by brief, informal lectures and occasional films and videos.
Required texts. The following books have been ordered at the NYU Bookstore and are on two-hour reserve in the Bobst Library (reserve books are now at the circulation desk, first floor):

Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (Chicago, 1987)  
Sonia Shah, *The Fever: How Malaria has Ruled Humankind for 500,000 Years* (Picador, 2010)  

In addition, there will be a number of shorter supplementary reading selections, a mix of original sources and scholarly articles, as indicated on the schedule that follows. These will be made available on NYU Classes.

Learning goals: If all goes well my hope is that exposure to and serious reflection on this set of ideas, concepts, explanations, and interpretations will lead to:

1) insights into the interplay of science, practice, culture, politics, and economics in shaping perceptions of the nature, treatment, and prevention of infectious disease
2) a sense of some of the major epidemiological events that have influenced the history of our species
3) a sense of how human cultural traditions and practices have influenced and modified the trajectory of epidemic disease
4) a reasonable background against which to filter and interpret the seemingly endless barrage of media attention given to nearly every disease outbreak anywhere on the globe.

Course requirements

1) Attendance. Attendance is required. More than two unexcused absences will result in a reduction in your grade. Excused absences require written documentation, with the exception of observance of religious holidays. If you plan to be absent due to a religious holiday, please notify me ahead of time.

2) Reading and participation. I expect you to come to class each day having done the reading for that day and prepared to participate in discussions. Hint: it helps considerably to take notes as you read. Participation is a difficult thing to gauge. I fully understand that there is a wide range of differences in terms of how students participate. Some are very vocal, some quite reticent, and others somewhere in between. I will try to take these individual differences into consideration insofar as it is possible.

3) Weekly response papers. You are required to submit a response paper on the readings once each week, with the exception of the first and last weeks. These are not to be descriptions of the readings but thoughtful responses to the ideas, arguments, or explanations presented, and they can include your questions and/or criticisms. I will usually post ideas and questions for your response papers each week on our NYU Classes site. Each week you may choose to
submit your response paper on either Monday or Wednesday. The paper must deal with the reading for that day. It should be about a page in length and can be single spaced.

These papers will not be graded. They will collectively figure into the participation component of your overall grade. I will return them with comments at the following class period. You may either print out your paper and submit it in class or submit it as an email attachment (Word or pdf) no later than 12:00 p.m. on the day of class.

4) Formal essays. There will be two essays of about 5-7 pages based on the course readings, tentative due dates March 3 and April 14. I will hand out a description of the essay assignments with a choice of topics about two weeks before they are due.

5) Final paper/project. A final paper of 8-10 pages will be due during final exam week. You have three options:

An extended essay based on course readings as a kind of debriefing of the course. In this case you would follow some theme (or themes) through your choice of course readings (public health and the state, disease and religion, changing explanations of epidemics, disease and imperialism, etc.) and offer your analysis and critical assessment.

A research paper that combines course readings with outside sources. Either write on a particular disease episode at a particular time (the 1892 Hamburg cholera epidemic, cholera in 1990s Peru, TB in South Africa early 1900s, SARS in China 2003, etc.) or write on a particular theme (germ theory, government public health measures, scapegoating, vaccination, climate change, etc.) as it applies to select examples.

A combination 10-minute class presentation (performance, PowerPoint, video, etc.) and shorter paper (6-8 pages) on a topic of your choice, as long as it is in keeping with course themes. You may team with another student for this option, although each student must submit a separate paper. If there are students who choose this option, we will set aside time for presentations in one of our final classes.

Basis for evaluation. (1) regular attendance, punctuality, and participation, including response papers, 20%, (2) first short essay, 20%, second short essay, 25%, (3) final paper/project, 35%

Ground rules. I take attendance and expect you to attend every class, as mentioned earlier. Punctuality: the class begins promptly at 12:30. Please respect your classmates and arrive on time; late arrivals always disrupt the atmosphere of a classroom, as do mid-class exits and re-entries. Plan to stay for the full seventy-five minutes. The success of this class depends upon open discussions. Feel free to speak your mind, but also be prepared to listen and respect the opinions of others. Turn off cell phones and store them before coming to class. Laptops, iPads, tablets, etc. may be used ONLY for reading class materials and note taking. Late papers. Unless the paper is late due to documented illness or an emergency, it will be downgraded one grade (A- to B+, B- to C+, etc.) for each day late.
**Documentation and plagiarism.** Out of respect for yourself, your fellow classmates, your professor, and the academic enterprise, *do your own work* and always acknowledge the work of others with proper documentation. I will assume that all written work is your own and that you understand the basic rules for acknowledging your sources. If you don’t, please ask; I’ll be more than happy to assist you. Also, please review the official Gallatin statement on academic integrity: [http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html)

**A Note on the Reading.** There is a fair amount of reading in this course. I try to keep it to a manageable level, but you should consult the syllabus regularly and plan ahead. For most weeks I will usually hand out a description of the readings in advance, along with questions for discussion and suggestions concerning which sections to emphasize.

**SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS**

Be prepared to discuss the readings listed for each given class period on the day indicated. A reading preceded by an asterisk (*) will be made available on NYU Classes. All videos listed will be shown in class.

- **M Jan 23** Introductions: *Disease, Civilization, and some vital statistics*
  - Hays, *The Burdens of Disease*, Introduction (read sometime this week)

- **W Jan 25** Virus ground zero: Ebola and Zika
  - *Preston, The Ebola Wars; O'Neil, Lessons from the Battlefront*
  - Video: *The Plague Fighters*

- **M Jan 30** African origins (of people and infectious disease)
  - *Webb, Early Tropical Africa; Shah, The Fever*, chaps. 1 & 2

- **W Feb 1** Disease and health in the ancient world 1
  - *Thucydides, The Plague; The Hippocratic Writings, pp. 67-86 (The Oath, The Canon, Tradition in Medicine)*

- **M Feb 6** Disease and health in the ancient world 2

- **W Feb 8** Disease and health in the ancient world 3

- **M Feb 13** Middle Ages: two responses: leprosy and plague
  - Hays, *Burdens of Disease*, chap. 2; *Dols, Plague in Early Islamic History; Porter, Medicine and Faith*

- **W Feb 15** The eponymous plague: the Black Death
  - *Boccaccio, Intro. to The Decameron; Hays, Burdens of Disease*, chap. 3
M Feb 20  Presidents’ Day  NO CLASS

W Feb 22  Plague: the cast of characters
*Wills, *Four Tales from The Decameron*
Video: *Epidemics: Products of Progress* (excerpt)

M Feb 27  Consequences: economic, cultural, political
*Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year* (excerpt); *Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (excerpt)

W Mar 1  Recurrence of plague: exonerating the rat?
*Cipolla, *Plague in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries;*
*The Second Plague Pandemic and its Recurrences in the Middle East;*
*Schmid, et al., *Climate-driven introduction of the Black Death and successive plague reintroductions into Europe*

F Mar 3  FIRST ESSAY DUE (not a class day)

M Mar 6  The now familiar story: transatlantic exchanges of people and microbes
Hays, *Burdens of Disease*, chap. 4; *Crosby, *"Conquistador y Pestilencia;" *Crosby, *Germs, Seeds, & Animals* (selections); Video: *Invisible Armies*  (excerpt)

W Mar 8  The ambiguous transformation of science and medicine: smallpox & yellow fever
Hays, *Burdens of Disease*, chaps. 5 & 6; *Jenner, *"An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccinae"*  (Note: focus on Hays, chap. 6, & Jenner)

Mar 13-19  SPRING RECESS

M Mar 20  Blaming the victim: poverty, morality, & cholera in 1830s New York

W Mar 22  The 1849 epidemic; new revelations, old beliefs
Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*, Part II (selections)

M Mar 27  The Metropolitan Board of Health
Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years*, Part III; *Snow, *"On the Mode of Communication of Cholera"
(excerpt)

W Mar 29  Sanitation, germ theory, and cholera; the case of Hamburg
Hays, *Burdens of Disease*, chap. 7

M Apr 3  The culture of tuberculosis: sanatoria, hygiene, and the gospel of germs
Hays, *Burdens of Disease*, chap. 8; *Koch, *"The Aetiology of Tuberculosis"
W Apr 5  Medicine and Western imperialism: Ïtool of empire?Ô
Hays, *Burdens of Disease*, chap. 9; *Sean Hsiang-lin Lei, ÏSovereignty and the MicroscopeÔ

M Apr 10  InfluenzaÔ 1918-19
*Crosby, ÏUnited States Begins to Take NoticeÔ and ÏSpanish Influenza Sweeps the CountryÔ;
*Influenza Virus, the Plague that May ReturnÔ

W Apr 12  Premature triumph?
Hays, chaps. 10 & 11; *Orwell, ÏHow the Poor DieÔ

F Apr 14  SECOND ESSAY DUE (not a class day)

M Apr 17  Hays, chap. 12; *Hanson, ÏConceptual Blindspots, Media Blindfolds: The Case of SARS and Traditional Chinese MedicineÔ

W Apr 19  HIV/AIDS: a return to the past?
Quammen, *The Chimp and the River*, chaps. 1-10 (pp. 17-65)

M Apr 24  The origins of AIDS revealed
Quammen, *The Chimp and the River*, chaps. 11-25 (pp. 65-139)

W Apr 26  The spread of malaria
Shah, *The Fever*, chaps. 3 & 4 (selections)

M May 1  SolutionsÔ or not?
Shah, *The Fever*, chaps. 5-7 (selections)

W May 3  The troubling persistence of an ancient disease
Shah, *The Fever*, chaps. 8-10 (selections)

M May 8  Biological warfare, climate change, and the future of plagues
TBA

F May 12  FINAL PAPER DUE (not a class day)