PART TWO
HOW S.K. COHN MAKES PHYSICIANS AND HISTORIANS “SQUARE THE CIRCLE”
CHAPTER TWO

THE ETHICS OF SCHOLARLY WORK

Introduction

Scholars who argue for revolutionary new theories in academic fields where much consensual scholarly work has been performed by dedicated and highly competent researchers must reject a substantial body of previous work. Such rejection has the potential to lead modes of argument that do not fulfill usual academic and methodological standards.

Cohn's monograph is a case in point. He sets the scene in opening chapters titled “Scientists Square the Circle” and “Historians Square the Circle,” in which virtually all medical and historical scholars who have conducted serious research on historical plague epidemics and accepted them as bubonic plague are scathingly criticized. The use of the idiom “square the circle” has unfortunate connotations, implying that those concerned are either intellectually dishonest or incompetent or both. It is hard to imagine that competent scholars would handle their material and apply methodology in such a way as to be open to the severe criticism inherent in this phrase. Cohn also repeatedly strikes out at scholars on subjects that have no, or at best peripheral, relevance to his theory. His attack, for instance, on the Japanese medical researcher S. Kitasato who discovered the plague bacillus at about the same time as A. Yersin does not serve Cohn's theory, and its unfortunate line of argument is very different from the supportive and positive comments made by leading expert medical plague researchers, for instance L.F. Hirst and T. Butler.1

Cohn makes the most out of the confusion, uncertainties and great range of opinions and suggestions made by researchers in the early years of modern plague research around 1900, by using selective readings of that literature to cast doubt on the research processes and the validity of these early findings and, by implication, to strengthen his

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