CHAPTER SIXTEEN

COHN’S ALTERNATIVE THEORY

Cohn concludes with absolute certainty that the Black Death was not bubonic plague caused by *Yersinia pestis* but he is completely unable to identify any known disease that could have been the cause of the Black Death or later historical plague epidemics. Since he argues strongly both in his introduction and in his concluding chapter that survivors of the disease acquired good and lasting immunity, and that plague therefore soon took on the character of a child disease, he has clearly a viral disease in mind:

after several strikes, it became domesticated as a disease largely of children. By contrast, to repeat, modern *Yersinia pestis* is unusual: humans have no natural immunity to it and cannot acquire it.

He also has in mind a disease spread by cross-infection with high spread rates as emphasized on the first page and repeatedly later.

Considering that we are discussing an epidemic disease operating with great formative powers on European society over several centuries which wreaked havoc in over thirty large-scale waves across the Continent and in innumerable local outbreaks between these waves, and which therefore left much evidence of various kinds to posterity, much more evidence than any other disease, this may seem a rather puzzling outcome.

The bubonic plague theory represents a consensus based on ample material evidence and studies by numerous fine and outstanding scholars and researchers. It has been shown in Part 3 and elsewhere that rejection of this huge corpus of fine scholarly work requires comprehensive breaches of the ordinary methodological and source-critical principles of scholarly work and comprehensive negligence of the

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1 Cohn 2002: 1, 247.
2 Cohn 2002: 2–3, 249, 212, 238, 249. As shown above, *Yersinia pestis* produces, as usual for bacterial pathogens, only relatively weak and transient immunity in survivors, and re-infection of survivors in the same epidemic is quite usual. See chapter 6: 212–7.
3 Cohn 2002: 1–3, 138–9, 209; Cohn 2005: 1354–5. Cohn and Alfani 2005: 203, where the spread rates of historical plague is said to be similar to those of influenza.
primary research and standard works on bubonic and primary pneumonic plague. In order to clear the way for his own alternative theory, Cohn shows himself willing in his Part I to employ extraordinary means to disparage the work of all scholars in the field of historical and medical bubonic-plague research who have made valuable contributions and confirmed the bubonic-plague theory, which means almost every scholar in the field. The revealing character of these endeavours is reflected in the titles of the chapters “Scientists Square the Circle” and “Historians Square the Circle;” an accusation of prevailing incompetence and intellectual dishonesty which cannot be credible to anyone as characteristics of the dedicated work of historians and physicians on the subject. In fact it is only revealing of the sort of means his alternative theory requires. In Part 2, “How S.K. Cohn Makes Physicians and Historians Square the Circle” it is shown that his assertions and purported material points are untenable and invalid.

Cohn’s monograph is therefore primarily characterized by a furious attack on the bubonic plague theory of historical plague and only marginally by the development of an alternative theory, since he is unable to identify and present in a testable form an alternative disease known to modern microbiology or medicine. In this construction, his monograph differs sharply from the monographs of Twigg and Scott and Duncan and from Karlsson’s paper where the construction and establishment of an alternative theory stand squarely in focus. In these cases, the attacks on the bubonic-plague theory serve the legitimate purpose of being attempts at clearing the way for the alternative theories, although in the practical implementation they have been shown to be untenable and exhibit little respect for the limitations of the methodology of historical, medical, and social science. The various central aspects of Cohn’s frontal attack on the bubonic plague theory have also been thoroughly discussed in various chapters of this monograph and have been shown to be untenable for various methodological and material reasons.4

Cohn concludes that historical plague must have been a viral disease spread by cross-infection that since has disappeared, and that is all he will say about the central matter of his monograph.5 This reveals that

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