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# Bacteriology as conspiracy

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Lukas Engelmann

The case of Dr. Kinyoun and the 1900 Plague in San Francisco, in which he became a threatening foreign regime - a tragic hero in the historical drama of American public health.



A few months after bubonic plague had *allegedly* arrived in San Francisco and thus finally reached the Americas for the very first time, the popular local newspaper *San Francisco Call* arrived at its own diagnosis. What had plagued the city, the bay area and the minds of the people therein was not plague, but a disease called "Kinyounism" it announced on June 22, 1900. The affliction was characterized by an autocratic federal power-ridden quarantine officer, who based his drastic and tremendously damaging quarantine measures against a suspected threat of bubonic plague solely on the strange and sometimes ridiculous procedures of a young, often mysterious and suspect science: bacteriology.



Fig 1 - The San Francisco Call, 10 March 1900. Fair use. For the *Call*, the Governor of California and a good number of local clinicians, plague had never arrived, but a 'plague craze' was made up by the federal quarantine officer J. J. Kinyoun. (Fig1) He was accused of conspiring against the State of California, the City of San Francisco, its people and their health. The person who had claimed to have found, isolated and proven plague in San Francisco and furthermore was responsible for safeguarding the city against infectious diseases had been ridiculed, dragged to court and was about to face threats to his life in the months that followed. The bacteriologist himself had become a disease, his scientific practice a threatening foreign regime.

History, of course, has turned the tables: Kinyoun did probably diagnose plague, and the conspirators were identified within the group of plague deniers, amplified by three powerful newspapers, the merchant's associations of San Francisco, the Governor of the Californian State and some of the noble doctors from the San Francisco Clinical Association. For them, *Kinyounism* symbolized a regime of public health that compromised local political, economic and social interest; they preferred traditional methods of hygiene and cleanliness to quarantine. Politically, they rejected federal interference in state business, undermining the federal responsibility to protect the United States against epidemic diseases. Medically,

they questioned the means of diagnosing plague bacteriologically, merging doubts about the emerging discipline with the uncertainty of what actually characterizes an outbreak of bubonic plague in the twentieth century.

The outbreak began with a suspicious case in San Francisco's Chinatown. On March 7 in 1900, Kinyoun left a detailed note in the Angel Island quarantine station's registry book:

“This morning the press announces that a suspicious case, probably bubonic plague had been observed in Chinatown, San Francisco, and that the whole of Chinatown had been quarantined by the Board of Health. In the afternoon I telephoned to Dr. Kellogg, the bacteriologist for the City Board of Health, who informed me that he had made an examination of specimens of gland tissue from a Chinese, which showed some very suspicious forms. He asked if he could come over to the station with some of the tissue and make an examination here. On his arrival, new preparations were made, which when examined showed a number of very suspicious forms, which suggested plague. I then suggested that animal inoculations be made with a small portion of the gland tissue. This was done, a rat, a guinea pig and a small monkey were inoculated.”

Two days later - due to the absence of new cases the quarantine was lifted - on March 9, the *San Francisco Call* dedicated a large caricature to the bacteriological procedures, mocking both the city authorities and the scientific measures carried out along the lines of Koch's postulates to prove the bacteria to be a causative agent in the disease in question. The caricature displays the before mentioned rat, Guinea pig and monkey as being happily fed and 'livin' easy.' (Fig. 2) Instead of having died to prove the presence of plague, they had remained alive, arguably happy and well fed. The quarantine had to be lifted, damage was done, associations and representatives were angry, but the annoying 'plague farce' seemed to be over.

# PRESIDENT MCKINLEY ANSWERS APPEAL OF STATE AND RAISES KINYOUN QUARANTINE

The Railway Executive Declines the Commission After Investigation That the Plague is Not in California and There is No Reason to Believe It Will Be.

**RECALIBER.** That the Board of Health no longer has the support and confidence of this Board of Supervisors, and for the best interests of the community at large we deem the removal of its members from their offices necessary, and the Mayor is earnestly requested to see that their offices are declared vacant forthwith.—Except from resolutions discussed yesterday by the Supervisors.

Mayor Phelan Called Upon to Reconstitute the Local Board of Health as an Irresponsible, Incompetent Body Dangerous to the City.

Independent Citizens, irrespective of Party or Policy, Insist That the Proprietors of the Disease Be Punished.



Quarantine Officer, Detained, Discouraged and Repulsed, Fights With United States Circuit Judge Who Now He Hears.

### CALIFORNIA SAVED BY THE PRESIDENT

...the President has decided to comply with the wishes of the State and to raise the quarantine...

IF DR. KINYOUN IS TO COMPLY WITH ANY ORDERS SAID JUDGE MORRIS, HE IS TO COMPLY WITH THE ORDERS OF THIS COURT. I DEMAND TO STATE THAT NO AGREEMENT OF COUNSEL CAN REMOVE THE CASE FROM THIS CALIFORNIA. IT MUST REMAIN HERE TO BE DISPOSED OF, AND THE DEFENDANT MUST ANSWER WHETHER OR NOT HE HAS VIOLATED THE ORDER OF THIS COURT, AND IF HE HAS DONE SO HE MUST BE PUNISHED. NO CONTESTANCE WILL BE RECOGNIZED THAT CONTEMPLATES A DISPOSITION OF THE MATTER OUTSIDE SUCH TIME AS IT SHOULD BE SUPPOSED THE COURT WOULD OVERLOOK THE OFFENSE. THERE IS NO HIGHER POWER OR AUTHORITY IN THE WORLD, THERE IS NO APPEAL FROM IT."

### KINYOUN BEGS FOR MERCY IN COURT

...Kinyoun begged for mercy in court, stating that he was a doctor and not a criminal...

**Remnant Sale To-Day.**  
A great opportunity this day only. (Continued on Page 2.)  
Remnants of all kinds of 2000 Summer Garments at **One-Quarter Off.**  
Over Coats, Sweaters, Underwear, Ties, Hats, Suits, Trunks, etc., etc.  
"Stuttgarter" Underwear Sale.  
Men's Furnishing Goods.  
**THE EMPORIUM**  
Golden Gate Bazaar

**OREGON BORDER FREE TO TRAFFIC**  
**GRASS SLANDER ON WATSONVILLE**  
**NO MORE DREAD OF THE DENTAL CHAIR.**  
**CAPE NOME**

Fig 2 – The San Francisco Call 19 June 1900. Fair use As Philip.A. Kalisch was to put it, "The journalists spoke too soon". In a second note in Angel Island's registry on March 12, Kinyoun wrote: "The Guinea pig died sometime during the night of the 11th, the rat at 11 am, Mar 12, & the monkey was quite sick." The monkey died a few days later. For Kinyoun, after inspecting the corpses, sufficient proof was given to accept the existence of plague in the city. In his own words in a letter to his aunt and uncle: "It therefore became my duty, under the law, to report these facts immediately to Washington, together with any others which bear upon the subject." From here on, the city became the scenery for a dramatic battle between those agreeing on Kinyoun's diagnosis and those questioning and denying persistently the presence of bubonic plague in San Francisco. On the side of the federal bacteriologist, we find the city's Major Phelan, the city's Board of Health led by Dr. Williamson and a number of respectable doctors from the *San Francisco Medical Society*, publicly backed by just one newspaper, the *San Francisco Examiner*. The other side would constitute itself through the support of the Californian Governor William T. Gage, the Californian Board of Health, amplified through the strong voice of three large daily newspapers and equally supported by a number of respectable doctors from the *San Francisco Clinical Society*.

The story of this defining conflict of the US public health system has been told many times. It is usually presented as a classic case of political and economic interests trumping scientific rigour in order to prevent a drastic short-term damage to commerce and image while risking the long term effects of a dangerous epidemic. Governor Gage is often depicted as a leading figure in this conspiracy against science and health. Eager to protect the sanitary image of California from national and international isolation, he tried to influence doctors, politicians and political institutions to follow his direction.

Most of the newspapers of San Francisco acted accordingly to the enormous commercial interests of their owners, well connected to the merchant and commerce associations, while the collaborating doctors are often portrayed as compliant experts, compromising their medical and scientific values to consolidate the conspiracy of plague, orchestrated and plotted by the federal bacteriologist J. J. Kinyoun.

The sanitary officer would become a public target first in caricatures and public shaming, later on through a bounty on his head, needing a personal life guard throughout conducting his investigations throughout the bay area, before the director of the Marine Hospital Service, General Wyman gave in to political pressure and decided to deploy him elsewhere.

Kinyoun became a tragic hero in this historical drama of American public health. He himself titled the events unfolding in the aftermath of his plague diagnosis “Le miserable en Quarantaine”. Before he was brought down by the powerful opposition he had to face in San Francisco, the ‘forgotten indispensable’ man had a stunning career.

After finishing his studies in medicine, he began practicing medicine in 1882 in New York City and developed early on an outstanding interest in the emerging field of bacteriology. He entered the Marine Hospital Service and quickly associated himself with the Hygienic Laboratory, the first reference laboratory of the US. His exemplary 16 year career in the MHS corresponded with the rise and exponential growth of American microbiology. Highlights from his time as a director of the Hygienic Laboratory have been the first isolation of the cholera bacillus on American soil, his research visits in Berlin with Robert Koch, in Paris with Emile Roux and in Japan with Kitasato Shobasuburo.

This decorated career of a “real pasteurian” came to an abrupt end when in 1899 Kinyoun was suddenly sent to Angel Island in San Francisco to oversee a vigilant quarantine system to protect the United States against plague. Kinyoun dreaded his factual demotion, the “sickening weather” of the Bay Area and complained to his friend: “I have not been well since I came to San Francisco. I had four break-downs in the last year”. He had also received his “first baptism of newspaper fire.”

And indeed, the newspapers, mostly the *Call*, fired a broadside: After a series of accusations against the major, the city Board of Health and their officials, the focus narrowed down on Kinyoun. In the meantime, a few more cases had appeared, and Kinyoun had established a travel ban on Chinatown, which was lifted by the Court in June 1900. To prevent a spread of plague to the rest of the US, Kinyoun informed other state boards and quarantine stations of the immediate threat and was ordered by General Wyman to consequently widen the travel ban for everyone suspicious of having been

infected. This gave Kinyoun even more power: “just as I choose, so that I could deny the right of any one whom I knew or felt has been exposed to the infection of plague.” The *Call* reacted furiously:

“Dr. J.J. Kinyoun. Federal quarantine officer at this port, has struck a serious blow at the property of California. Abusing the autocratic powers of his position and without a care for the consequences of his extravagant action, he has placed the State under quarantine. He has paralyzed traffic, made the State an object of fear to the Union, jeopardizing every financial and industrial interest in California, and proclaimed to the world the dangerous falsehood that the most drastic measures are necessary to prevent the spread of the bubonic plague in this State. As far as any investigation can prove this action of Dr. Kinyoun is utterly without warrant. Every responsible investigator declares that if the bubonic plague ever was in San Francisco it is not here now.” (Call, 17/06/1900)

In the following weeks, the tone got rough. From insinuating that Kinyoun had in fact a “buboe on his brain”, to celebrating Kinyoun’s second failure in court when the travel ban was lifted ( see Fig 2), and asking to “Oust the bubonic board” - to finally arriving at the diagnosis of “Kinyounism”.

To protect the city from Kinyounism in the future the *Call* asked the City “to get rid of the indisputable foulness of Chinatown,” which gave Kinyoun and the Board “ a shadow of an excuse” to suspect plague where – as the *Call* repeated tirelessly – there never has been any trace of the dreaded epidemic. The seemingly obvious problems of hygiene, the necessity of cleaning what is perceived as ‘foulness’, resembles the racist stereotypes directed at the Chinese populations and their segregated quarters, which were usually perceived as dangerous, conspicuous and obfuscated spaces.

Kinyoun, on the other hand, was ready to inscribe himself into history. In his letter to his friend, he responded to the allegations of the *Call* with his own interpretation of the disease he has become:

“Kinyounism is meant to be that a man will carry out his orders irrespective of the wish of the local people; that he will tell the truth whether it is politics or not; that he cannot be bribed, coerced or jollied onto suppressing the truth, particularly to his superiors.”(Letter to Bailhache, 49)

Given the statement of the *Call*, the reaction of Kinyoun and the historical interpretation of who conspired against what, the story of commercial interest on one end and scientific rigour at the other prevails. But, as it remains to be shown, one should be careful in accepting this narrative all too easily. What Erwin Ackerknecht has argued for the anti-contagionist throughout the nineteenth century applies here as well:

“Still, to call the anticontagionists simply “mouthpieces of commercial interest” would be a regrettable oversimplification of the situation. To many of them, both slogans: freedom of commerce (no quarantines), and freedom of science (anticontagionism) were, together with others, like freedom of the individual (against any bureaucracy), the natural expression of the same fundamental attitude and social position.” (Ackerknecht 1948)

Because behind the dramatic scenes of political conspiracy and suspect science, one can indeed find a complex and often subtle medical debate, whose authors shared the same fundamental attitude, about how to arrive at a satisfying way to diagnose and define the nature of plague. Bacteriology was still a science in the making and its findings needed to be related to clinical histories, epidemiological patterns and pathological analysis. This was precisely the weak spot of bubonic plague at the time. The bacteria was defined and mostly agreed upon, but its vector and means of distribution, its ecology and epidemiology was not.

'Kinyounism' might be sorted out as just a polemical way of blaming the bacteriologist for his diagnosis. But historically, 'Kinyounism' could as well be understood as a symptom of failing to justify a particular public health regime based on quarantine, the laboratory and the microscope.

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