

HI 290 Health and Healing in America

Discussion Questions for Willrich, *Pox*

Brandeis history professor Michael Willrich's book about smallpox traces the complex interactions between medicine, public health, government and politics in the Progressive Era (around 1900). We will read this book over a week, from March 18 to March 25. Please bring the book to class on the days we're discussing the assigned chapters.

Prologue and Chapter 1 (Mon, March 18)

- Consider the subtitle. How is this an “American history”? Is it, in some way, a history of America itself? Or of the era? Where does Willrich locate the story – in the sick people, or the researchers, or the law, or somewhere else? Why does he begin the story in 1900, when smallpox is already a very old disease?
- How do race and gender intersect with the story of smallpox outbreaks at the turn of the 20th century?
- One of Willrich's claims is that smallpox “sparked one of the most important civil liberties struggles of the twentieth century” (14). This is a surprising claim; why?
- Explain the difference between smallpox *variolation* and *vaccination*.
- Why didn't the US go the route of compulsory vaccination laws, as in other developed industrial nations at the time?

Chapters 2-3 (Mon, March 18)

- How did communities, states and the federal government respond to “mild type” smallpox? Was Middlesboro, Kentucky, typical? What cultural factors made fighting smallpox in the South more challenging in these years?
- Describe the work of health inspectors like Wertenbaker – what did they do, and not do? What kind of authority (moral, legal, jurisdictional) did they have?
- What can you learn from these chapters about IDEAS of health and sickness at the time?
- What do these chapters tell you about how the American health care system developed?

Chapters 4-5 Heroes and Villians (Wed, March 20)

- At the beginning of the 20th century, how was military and American imperial expansion related to the origins, development and transformation of the “sanitary campaigns” in places that the US military had occupied?
- What were some of the legacies or achievements of those campaigns; at what cost were they achieved?
- Of what causes did the majority of soldiers die during the War of 1898?

- (see p. 171) In the fall of 1901, vaccination regulation was controversial. Yet a few months later it was federal law. What happened?
- Describe the process of vaccine manufacture in the early 1900s under the direction of the state boards of health. (How does it compare with today, by the way?)
- What were some of the problems with this process then, and what were the effects of tainted vaccine?
- Why is the Biologics Control Act important?

Chapters 6-8 Speaking Law to Power (for Mon, March 25)

- Why were immigrants MORE likely than native-born Americans to be vaccinated at this time?
- (see p. 240) Which powers of the state were especially contested when it came to vaccination?
- Who was included under the anti-vaccinationist umbrella, and to what other causes and movements was the antivaccination movement connected?
- (see p. 271) What were the dueling concepts of liberty at odds in the struggle over vaccination?
- What lesson would you draw from the story of Immanuel Pfeiffer?
- What was radical, unexpected, or significant about the court case *Commonwealth v. Jacobson*? (see p. 299) What was the core legal question in the case?
- (see p. 308) How did the anti-vaccinationists understand compulsory vaccination as a fundamentally different public health measure?
- (see p. 334-335) What have been some of the uses of the *Jacobson* ruling in the years since?

General Questions

- How does this book illustrate or connect to some of the principles or themes of the Progressive Era that we discussed in class?
- What did you learn from this book about how “police power” and the judicial system are important in medical history?
- What contemporary issues in health care are relevant to the history in this book?