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Economic Implication of the Black Plague

Abstract

Britain and Europe, during the early ages were economically strong. With the growth of industries, job opportunities rose and there were jobs for all people in that region. However, this was short-lived as the Black Plague caused considerable damage to lives and economy. The Black Plague almost wiped out the whole of civilization and this period was one of the darkest periods in Europe's history.

Keywords: Black Plague, Europe, labor, environment, upheaval, industry

ECONOMIC IMPLICATION OF THE BLACK PLAGUE

Abstract

"The plague had large scale social and economic effects, many of which are recorded in the introduction of the Decameron," according to Courie (1972). It was a time when civilization faced its darkest moments as people lay dying on the streets and friends and family fled cities to escape the satanic damnation. With so many bodies lying to be disposed, funeral rites became perfunctory or stopped altogether, and there were no workers to run machines. People began to lose faith in God as their prayers went unanswered. Religious fervor decreased as the plague took its toll on the young, the old, the strong, the weak and clergy and those who survived relinquished their faith as their prayers to prevent sickness and death went unanswered.

The Economy

“ In 1622, when the only more or less reliable population count was made in Holland in the first half of the 17th century, Delft numbered 22, 769 inhabitants,” says Dillen (1940). It was the fourth most populous town of Holland, and in the first quarter of the 17th century, Delft was widely regarded as the richest city of the Province of Holland when it paid more taxes than any other city, said Eisler (1923). “ But a fire in 1536 destroyed a large part of the city led to the city’s decline, as its beer-brewing and textile industries, and the lack of innovative spirit and enterprise of its bourgeoisie caused Delft to fall behind other Dutch cities both in wealth and population,” said Montias (n. d). However, Delft was well known in the 17th century for its outstanding embroidery and the weaving of flue cloth, brocaded satin and velvet textiles. This was just a part of the larger European continent that was to become engulfed by darkness as it faced the Black Plague.

The Black Plague

“ The Black Death, as the Black Plague of the fourteenth century, sent epidemic aftershocks of equal intensity throughout Europe for the next three hundred years,” says Gilman (2010). It virtually disappeared from Western Europe, although as late as 1722, there were fears that another outbreak in Marseille would happen. “ In the seventeenth century, England witnessed three major bubonic outbreaks in 1603, 1625, and 1665, each taking between a quarter and a third of the population of London,” says Gilman (2010). The economy took a beating and inflation grew to alarming heights. Since production stopped it was difficult to buy goods through trade or buy from local sources as prices of both goods produced locally and those

imported skyrocketed. As the plague took lives by the thousands, illness and death was conspicuous by the wailing of men, women and children in the streets. Production stopped as there were little healthy workers around, and even peasants felt the effects of the new rise in wages come as a pleasant surprise to them. There was demand for workers from all sides and the demand for people to work the land was so high that it threatened the manorial holdings. Braginsky (2007), reports that " In the mid-14th century, Europe was struck by the most terrible epidemic of all time when it killed approximately a third of the total population while causing widespread disarray among the surviving population. The Bubonic Plague, as it was called, had a severe and lasting effect on the economy. The drop in population caused a lot of turmoil as industries shut due to lack of workers and peasants benefitted as the demand for farm hands grew.

Braginsky (2007) says that " one of the immediate effects of the Black Death was that several changes occurred in the prices of grain and other food products." People were frightened to step out into the streets in fear that they could come into contact with people who had the epidemic and also because the streets were littered with dying people. Therefore, they would try and stock as much food as possible to keep them from starving. However, the epidemic could not be controlled as there was no medication available to control the spread of the epidemic and so, even those who stayed indoors, were caught in the vicious circle of fate and doomed to die. Soon, the number of people who were alive was much less than those who died or were dying that " the prices of food and other products decreased as the demand for them became less," said Byrne (2004). This view was also

expressed by Kelly (2005), in Braginsky (2007). However, this trend didn't stay for long as, with time, "supplies fell and the cost of supplying grain rose because of widespread labor shortage," Byrne (2004).

In trying to understand the serious implication of the Black Plague that rocked England during the seventeenth century, Hackenbracht (2011), in *The Plague of 1625-26, Apocalyptic Anticipation, and Milton's Elegy III*, tries to authenticate the effect of the Plague using Milton's *Elegy III*. According to Hackenbracht, "Milton wrote 'Elegia Tertia in Obitu Praesulis Wintoniensis' during his first term at Christ's College in the fall or winter of 1626. In the preceding year, London was wracked by one of the most severe outbreaks of plague in the seventeenth century that witnessed a final death toll of 35,417 in London and 68,596 nationwide." Milton at that time was studying at Cambridge, just sixty miles away from the epicenter of the epidemic, and he was aware of the devastation that the plague caused in the city and the country. Milton was blind, and he would have been well-informed by people around him of the catastrophe.

It must be said that the great Plague not only wiped out most of the people in England, it also caused a lot of problems for those who survived it. Not only did it contribute to the escalation in food prices, it also increased the prices of goods and services of skilled laborers. "Since many of the craftsmen which included carpenters, stonemasons, brewers, artists, teachers and shoemakers died," says Braginsky (2007), there weren't enough hands around to support in allied activities which included construction, cooking, teaching and woodwork. This meant that there would be less number of hands available to teach, construct, cook, or build for the

present and future generations. As a result, those who did ultimately survive this crisis were fortunate enough to “demand higher wages to do their tasks,” says Byrne (2004). Also, as there was also the rising needs of the sick and the dead, “there was an increased demand for items such as coffins, candle wax, medicine, herbs, and shrouds; the services of physicians, barber-surgeons, notaries, gravediggers, and priests,” says Byrne (2004). This view is supported by Palmarocchi (1935) in Braginsky (2007), where he says that, “Marchionne di Coppo di Stefano Buonaiuti, a small land-owner in Florence, wrote that ‘the gravediggers who carried out [burying bodies] were so handsomely paid that many became rich the foodstuffs suitable for the sick, cakes and sugar, reached outrageous prices the shroud-cloth which used to cost three florins, rose in price to thirty florins” (Palmarocchi, 647-652).

What’s more, with industrialization came growth and prosperity, but when the plague came, “the high mortality rate caused by the Black Death killed a significant portion of the population; while the population had been growing before the Black Death, it now stopped growing and even diminished,” says Previt -Orton (1952), in Braginsky (2007). While many in the aristocracy died in the plague, the most number of those killed belonged to the lower strata of society which included masons, gravediggers, carpenters, the labor class and the peasants. The peasants who survived the Black Plague were fortunate enough to demand higher pays and could also leave their employer, guaranteed to be hired by another landlord in another place. In order to contain the growing power and influence of the peasants, various governments and landlords tried to take measures to contain the serfs.

Landlords intervened to stop any internal arguments in favor of the common cause against laborers. " In 1349 and in 1351, the Ordinance of Laborers and the Statute of Laborers, respectively, were issued by Edward III in an attempt to regulate the wages and preserve the social and economic situation," says Pirenne (1933), in Braginsky (2007). There had to be some order created to save the nation from exploitation by the weaker society and, according to historian R. C. Palmer, " the purpose of these decrees was to force people to work, to diminish competition, and to moderate demands for higher wages," says Byrne (2004). However, the decrees were far too weak to cause any kind of acceptance, and so, they did little to improve the economic situation. Despite moves to control the sagging economy from further turmoil, the government tried other forms of counter measures to check inflation, but they failed in their attempts. In what can be termed as an intrusion into one's personal life, a new set of laws were introduced in 1363 which sought to ban peasants from wearing various types of luxurious clothing, and in the late 1370s, poll tax meant to take away some of lower classes' excess income was introduced," said Kelly (2005). The government had no other option but to introduce these laws so that there was some form of normalcy restored in social classes. This did not go down well with the peasants who felt that such laws intruded into the freedom and with resentment, they rose in arms to challenge the government. This was the start of perhaps, the largest peasant's revolt in England in 1381 and in France in 1358, 1381, and 1382 (Kelly, 2005).

Henderson (1896) wrote that when Europe was reeling under the after-effects of the Black Plague, " European rulers tried to keep wages from

rising. The steps were so drastic that they wanted an English law in 1349 to force workers to accept the same wages they received in 1346, and another law; the Statute of Laborers, was issued in 1351 which mandated every healthy unemployed person less than 60 years to compulsorily work for anyone who wanted to hire him/her." Any person who violated the Statute of Laborers was fined and was put in stocks as punishment for disobeying the statute. The economic situation in England and Europe had become so bad that " in 1360, a law was enacted that punished any person who demanded higher wages would be sent to prison and, if they escaped, branded with the letter " F" (possibly for Fugitive) on their foreheads," ended Henderson (1896).

Conclusion

The Black plague started in the fourteenth century and it took almost three centuries for it to be eradicated from the continent. The Black Plague was perhaps the deadliest attack on civilization till date. Thousands and thousands of lives were lost as there was absolutely no cure to stop the spread of this epidemic. A flourishing continent was left scathed in misery. The paper followed the writings of a number of prominent scholars who traced the path of the Black Plague and the social and economic effects it had on the people of Europe and England. It was a time when civilization faced its darkest moments as people unable to escape its clutches, lay dying on the streets and friends and family fled for their lives. The sight of dying people on the streets was matched by the number of people lying in wait to be buried. However, while there was damnation all around, those who managed to survive; especially the lower section of society comprising of masons,

carpenters, peasants, cart-pullers and others, made merry as wages for them increased considerably. The government was even forced to bring in laws to curb the growing powers of the lower people of society. It was an age of damnation and it took centuries for Europe and England to free itself from its clutches.

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