

The black death: impact on society



The Black Death was the biggest disaster in European history. From its beginning in Italy in late 1347 through its movement across the continent to its fading out in the Russian hinterlands in 1353, this plague killed between seventeen and twenty eight million people. The gruesome symptoms and the deadliness, have fixed the Black Death in popular imagination. Discovering the disease's cultural, social, and economic impact, has occupied generations of scholars. Despite the growing understandings and wonders of the Black Death's effects, definitive assessment of its role as historical turning point continues to be a work in progress.

Like the plague's death toll, its economic impact resists incompetent measurement. The Black Death's timing made a superficial labeling of it as a turning point in European economic history nearly inevitable. It arrived near the close of the high Middle Ages (c. 1000 to c. 1300) in which urban life reemerged, long distance commerce revived, business and manufacturing innovated, agriculture matured, and population grew rapidly, doubling or tripling. The Black Death simultaneously proposed an economically stagnant, and a depressed late Middle Ages (c. 1300 to c. 1500). Even if this crude and somewhat misleading portrait of the medieval economy is accepted, isolating the Black Death's economic impact from diverse factors at play is a daunting challenge.

Aware of the differences between the high and the late Middle Ages, students of medieval economy have offered a wide variety of explanations, some mutually limited, others not, some favored the less dramatic, and the less visible, yet consistent factor as an agent of change rather than a disastrous demographic shift. For some, when the climate cooled it undercut

the agricultural productivity, a downturn that rippled throughout the primarily Agrarian economy. For others, exploitative political, social, and economic institutions enriched an idle elite and deprived working society of resources and incentive to be inventive and productive. Yet others associate trade and industry factors with the fourteenth and fifteenth century economic depression.

In the reconstruction of the Middle Ages, the population growth was hard-pressed against the society's ability to feed itself. The uprise in deficiency and contracting holdings compelled the peasant to develop inferior, low fertility land and to convert pasture to poor production and thereby reducing the numbers of livestock and making manure for fertilizer less available. Boosting gross productivity in the immediate term yet driving yields of grain downward in the long term to intensify the disproportion between population and food supply; redressing the imbalance became expected. This idea's supporters see signs of demographic correction from the mid thirteenth century onward, possibly arising in part from marriage practices that reduced fertility. A more potent correction came with subsistence crisis. Wretched weather in 1315 destroyed crops and the ensuing Great Famine (1315-22) . It reduced northern Europe's population by perhaps ten to fifteen percent.

The Black Death's impact on the economy's commercial division is a complex problem. The enthusiasm of the high medieval economy is generally conceded. When the first millennium gave way to the second, urban life revitalized, the trade and manufacturing flourished, merchant and craft guilds emerged, commercial and financial innovations thrive. The

integration of the high medieval economy reached its high point c. 1250 to c. 1325 with the rise of large companies with international interests, such as the Bonsignori of Siena and the Buonaccorsi of Florence and the materialization of so called “super companies” such as the Florentine Bardi, Peruzzi, and Acciaiuoli (Hunt and Murray, 1999).

The Black Death’s impact on business its full due, but emphasizes the variety of the plague’s impact from merchant to merchant, industry to industry, and city to city. Success or failure was equally possible after the Black Death and the game favored adaptability, creativity, nimbleness, opportunity, and foresight. Once the magna pestilencia had passed, the city had to get by with a labor supply even more greatly decimated than in the countryside, due to a generally higher urban death rate. The city, however, could reverse some of this damage by attracting, new workers from the countryside, an occurrence that deepened the crisis for the manorial lord and contributed to changes in rural settlement. A reappearance of the slave trade occurred in the Mediterranean, especially in Italy, where the female slaves from Asia or Africa entered domestic service in the city and the male slaves worked hard in the countryside. However, finding more labor was not a universal remedy. If peasant or slave could perform an unskilled task effectively, but could not necessarily replace a skilled laborer. The gross loss of talent due to the plague caused a decline in per capita productivity by skilled labor was remedied only by time and training (Hunt and Murray, 1999; Miskimin, 1975).

Another immediate consequence of the Black Death was displacement of the demand for goods. A suddenly and sharply smaller population ensured a

surplus of manufactured and trade goods, whose prices plummeted for a time. The businessman who successfully weathered this short term disproportion in supply and demand then had to reshape his business' output to fit a declining or at best sluggish pool of potential customers.

The Black Death had altered the structure of demand as well. The standard of living of the peasant improved, however, chronically low prices for grain and other agricultural products from the late fourteenth century deprived the peasant of the additional income to purchase enough manufactured or trade items to fill the hole in commercial demand. In the city the plague concentrated wealth, often considerable family fortunes, in fewer and often younger hands. When coupled with lower prices for grain, left greater per capita of disposable income. The plague's psychological impact, in addition, influenced how this windfall was used. Glumness and the specter of death spurred an individualistic pursuit of pleasure, a profligacy that manifested itself in the purchase of luxuries, especially in Italy. Even with the reduced population, the gross quantity of luxury goods manufactured and sold rose, a pattern of consumption that continued even after the extra income had been spent within a generation or so after the magna pestilencia.

Like the manorial lord, the affluent urban bourgeois (a person belonging to the middle class) sometimes employed structural impediments to block the ambitious parvenu (a person who is newcomer to a socioeconomic class) from joining his ranks and becoming a competitor. A inclination toward limiting the status of gild master to the son or the son in law of a sitting master, is evident in the first half of the fourteenth century, gained further forward motion after the Black Death. The need for more laborers and

journeymen after the plague was conceded in the shortening of terms of apprenticeship, but the newly minted journeyman often discovered that his chance of breaking through the glass ceiling and becoming a master was virtually nothing without an entrée through kinship. Women were also being banished from the guilds, they were unwanted competition. The urban laborer had no access to urban structures of power, a potent source of frustration. While these measures may have permitted the bourgeois to hold his ground for a time, change was erupting in the city as well as the countryside and guild monopolies and guild restrictions were disputing by the close of the Middle Ages.

In the new climate created by the Black Death, the businessman did retain an advantage. The business judgment and techniques perfected during the high Middle Ages. This was critical in a contracting economy, in which gross productivity never attained its high medieval peak. A fluctuating economy demanded adaptability and the most successful businessman not merely weathered bad times, but found opportunities within adversity and exploited them. Post plague businessmen's had a preference for short term rather than long term ventures. They once believed a product of a depressing despondency caused by the plague and made worse by widespread violence, decay of traditional institutions, and nearly continuous warfare. It is now viewed as a judicious desire to leave open entrepreneurial options, to manage risk effectively, and to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise. The successful businessman observed markets closely and responded to them while exercising strict control over his concern, looking for greater efficiency, and trimming costs. (Hunt and Murray, 1999).

The Black Death may indeed have made its greatest contribution to popular revolution by expanding the peasant's perspectives and fueling a sense of criticism at the pace of change. The plague may also have undercut devotion to the notion of an exquisitely sanctioned, social order and pummeled a belief that preservation of manorial socioeconomic arrangements was essential to the survival of all. This in turn may have raised receptiveness to the apocalyptic socially revolutionary message of preachers like England's John Ball. After the Black Death, change was inevitable and apparent to all.

XXXXIn sum, the Black Death played some role in each uprising but, as with many medieval phenomena, it is difficult to gauge its importance relative to other causes. Perhaps the plague's greatest contribution to unrest lay in its fostering of a shrinking economy that for a time was less able to absorb socioeconomic tensions than had the growing high medieval economy. The rebellions in any event achieved little. Promises made to the rebels were invariably broken and brutal reprisals often followed. The lot of the lower socioeconomic strata was improved incrementally by the larger economic changes already at work. Viewed from this perspective, the Black Death may have had more influence in resolving the worker's grievances than in spurring revolt.

The European economy at the close of the Middle Ages (c. 1500) differed fundamentally from the pre-plague economy. In the countryside, a freer peasant derived greater material benefit from his toil. Fixed rents if not outright ownership of land had largely displaced customary dues and services and, despite low grain prices, the peasant more readily fed himself and his family from his own land and produced a surplus for the market.

Yields improved as reduced population permitted a greater focus on fertile lands and more frequent fallowing, a beneficial phenomenon for the peasant. More pronounced socioeconomic gradations developed among peasants as some, especially more prosperous ones, exploited the changed circumstances, especially the availability of land. The peasant's gain was the lord's loss. As the Middle Ages waned, the lord was commonly a pure renter whose income was subject to the depredations of inflation.

In trade and manufacturing, the relative ease of success during the high Middle Ages gave way to greater competition, which rewarded better business practices and leaner, meaner, and more efficient concerns. Greater sensitivity to the market and the cutting of costs ultimately rewarded the European consumer with a wider range of good at better prices.

In the long term, the restructuring caused by the Black Death perhaps fostered the possibility of new economic growth. The deadly disease returned Europe's population roughly its level c. 1100. As one scholar notes, the Black Death, unlike other catastrophes, destroyed people but not property and the very slim population was left with the whole of Europe's resources to exploit. The resources were far more substantial by 1347 than they had been two and a half centuries earlier, when they had been created from the ground up. In this environment, survivors also benefited from the technological and commercial skills developed during the course of the high Middle Ages. Viewed from another perspective, the Black Death was a cataclysmic event and reduction of expenditure was inevitable, but it ultimately diminished economic impediments and opened new opportunity.

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