

# Similarities and differences between 21st century living and the medieval ages



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Compare the assumptions and expectations of medieval society, especially those of the common people, with what contemporary American society expects from life today.

## Introduction

Are we better off than our ancestors? Many scholars have made attempts to identify how societies have changed in the 21st century compared to our ancestors. This essay will focus on finding out similarities and differences between the common man's expectations and assumption in the 21st century and the medieval age. It will then assess that the arguments concerning the similarities are stronger than the arguments concerning the differences with the use of various examples, namely, power dynamics of gender, race, ethnicity & religion, and prison and healthcare reform.

## Key views of similarities and differences

There are two views on the differences in the public's expectations and assumptions in the 21st century and the medieval period. Proponents of the traditional view that the events which occurred after the medieval age may have led to significant development and betterment of people, thus differentiating the expectations of the public from the medieval age. Authors like Boroda (Boroda, 2008) argue that the peasants were living in a worse condition during the medieval ages. This was because the peasants were living in poverty and had no rights. The feudal system was prominent in the medieval age, whereby only lords own lands while the landless, called the peasants, worked on the lands belonging to the lords (Sider and Smith, 1997). The lords would allow the peasants to live on the land and cultivate

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crops if the peasants paid taxes (Sider and Smith, 1997). The farm work is often relatively more labor-intensive and the taxes that the peasants had to pay made them poorer with the time (Sider and Smith, 1997). The social Marxist revolt which liberated peasants did not take place until the 19th century. Hence, laborers in the medieval age did not have rights as that in the 21st century and thus lived in worse conditions (Sider and Smith, 1997) (Boroda, 2008). The peasant's situation worsened due to the Black Death epidemic and the Hundred Years war, which increased poverty (Wuetherick, 2008). Even though agriculture was the main source of income, the epidemic and the war led 70 percent of peasants to search for jobs outside agriculture (Boroda, 2008). Ashton and Landen (Ashton, 1997) argue that it was only after the 17th-century industrial revolution that people started living a better life due to the rise of innovations and technologies.

On the contrary, authors like Becker and Linder (Becker, 1965) (Linder, 1970) rightfully argue that the progress in technology that has so-called led development in human society has created new problems. For example, even if high labor-intensive work has been replaced by automatization, people are becoming less joyful as their leisure time has taken over with the abundance of other available commodities (Becker, 1965) (Linder, 1970). Although slavery that became prominent in Vikings during the medieval age has been abolished, a new kind of slavery like in the form of wrongful imprisonment or detention is increasing in the modern era (Raffield, 2019). Some authors even suggest that a lot of new problems have been created in the 21st century which the people in the medieval ages didn't have to worry about, including but not limited to climate change, social media influences,

and fake news. The climate change in the 21st century is giving rise to new diseases and impacting farming everywhere, similar to the impact of Little ice age on agriculture in the 13th century (Boroda, 2008). Introduction of technology has improved daily lives of people in the 21st century, but at the same time oversharing due to social media has not only increased loneliness and depression among the youth (Sidani et al, 2016) but also increased racial, ethnic, and religious violence due to fake news.

Although the arguments that we are better off than our ancestors hold true since the materialistic expectations and assumptions of the public have changed since the medieval age, the basis of the latter view that the core of social expectations and assumptions of the public are the same in the medieval age and the 21st century holds true due to the following reasons.

#### Gender power dynamics

Power dynamics in society may affect the expectations and assumptions of people. Henceforth, understanding power dynamics in the medieval age and the 21st century will help in better understanding of the expectations and assumptions of the public to a certain extent. Firstly, understanding gender power dynamics in both periods may help us in identifying the expectations and assumptions of different genders. As Nelson and Rio (Nelson and Rio, 2013) define the medieval period as “ an age when private power was almost synonymous with public power”, patriarchy was evidently present except a few examples like Joan of Arc. A woman was always considered as not to be an own entity in herself but as a property of someone else, if married then belonging to the husband and if unmarried then belonging to

her father (McNamara and Wemple, 1973). To enforce this belonging and the system of dower and dowry, women were not given many property and inheritance rights (McNamara and Wemple, 1973). Although in the 21st-century most of the women do have property and inheritance rights, factors like unequal pay in the workforce and lower representation of women in government reflect the concept of private power being synonym to the public power enabled by the patriarchy (Thornley, 2006). Although in the medieval age, some countries did have a few women rights written in their laws, kings and aristocrats who generally constituted all men gave judgments on the cases without understanding the woman's side (McNamara and Wemple, 1973). Similarly, in the 21st century, politicians and corporate heads, which are represented mostly by men make decisions on women's issues (Thornley, 2006).

On the other spectrum of gender power dynamics, men who chose peace instead of war were branded as less manly than the ones who fought wars or were more aggressive (Stewart, 2017). Similarly, the men in the 21st century often face similar toxic masculinity which has increased suicide rates among men (Payne and Swamy, 2018).

### Racial, Religious, and Ethnic power dynamics

Another indicator of the power dynamic can be race and ethnicity. The impression of race, which is determined by the orientation of a person, was relatively much less obvious in the medieval age than the current situation in the US (Bartlett, 2001). While the impact of ethnicity is commonly seen in both the 21st century and medieval ages, religion had a greater impact on

medieval ages than race (Bartlett, 2001). In the 21st century, the impact of immigration in the US from Asia and Latin America has encouraged a social debate. In the medieval ages, the impact of ethnicity became profound due to long-lasting wars such as the Hundred Years war (Wuetherick, 2008). While terrorism has created religion-based atrocities in the 21st century America, the dominance of Crusaders representing the Catholics in medieval ages led to suppressing of other minority religions (Bartlett, 2001).

### Prison reforms and healthcare

Finally, the power dynamic represented through prison reform is a common social issue prominent in both the 21st century America and also in the medieval age. The justice system and the punishments in the medieval age were relatively harsher and cruel than in the 21st century (Winter, 2013). The prisons in the 21st century are generally more humane than the medieval age. However, the public from both periods was demanding prison reforms due to corrupt law enforcement systems (Campbell and Denov, 2004). In the 21st century, people are protesting for wrongful imprisonments due to racial power dynamic (Campbell and Denov, 2004). In the medieval age during the 13th century, the city's governor would detain anyone he merely thought to be guilty of a crime or whoever was a threat to his power even though the law at that time had prohibited such behavior (Winter, 2013).

Innovations in healthcare were next to none. Antibiotics and other procedure weren't present through the medieval age. Medicine manuals mostly content natural remedies (Connelly, 2018). That is why when the outbreak of plague

like the Black Fever occurred, it spread very quickly killing about 40 million people (Boroda, 2008). During this time, the inequality between the elite and the peasants grew since the elite could take measures and live in isolation to avoid getting sick while the peasants couldn't afford such isolation (Boroda, 2008). The income gap also increased due to the economic burden falling on the peasants (Boroda, 2008). Unlike the Black Death, the modern medicine and communication system has timely stagnated the outbreaks of epidemics such as Ebola. Even though the healthcare sector has seen some life-saving innovations, in the 21st century the burden of healthcare still falls on the poor (Stone, 2009).

## Conclusion

For finding out similarities and differences in the common man's expectations and assumptions in the 21st century compared to the medieval age, this essay has first discussed individually the arguments for and against the similarities being greater than the differences. It has then given examples of social power dynamics and shown that the living standards in both periods are different, but at the core of it, all the social issues remain somewhat similar. This, in turn, has shown that the similarities in expectations and assumptions are greater than the differences between the two periods.

In practice, to make the society better than our ancestors, we need to be aware of the profound impact that the medieval age has had on the issues and progressions of the 21st century which underlines the similarities in social issues.

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