
Black Death And Its Impact On Economic, Cultural And Social Structures Of European Society

Bring Out Your Dead

When products of today run their course, we throw them in the trash and the Waste Management truck picks it up later. In fourteenth century Europe, however, people were discarded in the same manner. Western civilization saw a glimpse of a true apocalypse during the 1300's and 1400's as half of Europe's population died horrendously due to a disease known throughout history as the Black Death. Affecting every aspect of society, the Black Death spawned remarkable changes that shook the foundation of European civilization. Throughout the plague's duration the cause was unknown until in the late nineteenth century physicians discovered it was transmitted by rodents and fleas. During the Late Middle Ages of 1300-1500, a myriad of theories about the cause of the Black Death spread throughout Europe to no avail. The clergy and other religious laypeople believed the plague was created by God to punish humanity for its sins. Others believed that the Jews may have poisoned the drinking water or that the alignment of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars caused a disturbance in the atmosphere. Alas, without the knowledge of the plague's cause, nothing could prevent or treat the devastating disease. The Black Death continued to decimate the European population for centuries mutating the economy, damaging authoritative power including the nobility's and the Church's, and disintegrating the traditional European social structure.

Diseases and epidemics have been common throughout human history, although none as devastating as the Black Death. Reactions were not uniform; some were even polar opposites. Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, illustrates how most dealt with the plague. Many abandoned their homes and lived in isolation avoiding contact with others and turning to music and delicate foods to divert their minds from the deadly environment around them. Contrarily, many resorted to a life of pleasure, singing and drinking their pains away in an effort to live life to its fullest in case tomorrow never comes. Indeed it was a desperate time, yet some managed to find a balance between the extremes and live as normally as they could often carrying flowers and perfumes to squelch the smell of death. God-fearing men resorted to self-mortification blaming their sins for the cause of the plague. Whatever the initial reaction, no one could escape the wrath of the most destructive plague ever to hit Europe—not even the economy.

The most obvious effect of the Black Death on the economy was labor shortages due to the massive population decline. Without enough workers, fields were abandoned and there became a surplus of food and goods. Subsequently, excess produce led to a sharp decline in the price

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

of goods; nonetheless, price reduction was not a sufficient incentive to aid the economy. Henry Knighton, an Englishman who experienced the pandemonium of fourteenth century Europe, expressed his concern for the economy as he described the lack of motivation of laypeople to pursue wealth and possessions in Knighton's Chronicle, a primary source of the Black Death. Knighton acknowledged that no one was buying anything; there was a high demand for laborers and high supply of goods. Why buy a new chair or stock up on grain for the winter if the person it's intended for might die before using it? Needless to say, chaos completely consumed the economic structure. Trade was even brought to a standstill due to the reluctance of merchants to come in contact with foreigners. The fear of attracting the plague was rampant among Europeans in every division of the economy causing a serious uncertainty about how to deal with the catastrophe. Black Death hysteria was especially devastating to Italian city-states whose economy depended on the thriving trade between other European countries. Furthermore, the high labor demand led to arguably the most consequential effect of the Black Death—higher wages. Confronted with a shortage of workers, landlords had no choice but to meet the demands of laborers who negotiated for substantially higher wages. Consequently, when landlords sought legislation to return wages to pre-plague salaries, peasants resisted instigating a decline in respect for authority.

Seeking to take advantage of the wage increases, kings began to impose new taxes on the peasants. Tensions grew as landlords also requested new laws against the peasants whose increased prosperity was short-lived. Knighton's first-hand account describes the decline in peasant obedience to the king's authority. As the price of goods continued to fall, the king demanded peasants not to accept higher wages and instituted fines for those who did. With nothing to lose in a time of frailty, peasant workers simply ignored the king's decrees. An action unheard of before the era of the Black Death due to the severe consequences, disobedience was common because the king did not have enough officials to enforce laws; and peasants, surrounded by death, stopped caring about punishments less dire than death. The king would attempt to arrest or fine laborers who accepted higher wages only to find them fleeing into the woods. As Boccaccio rationalizes, "every man was free to do what was right in his own eyes." Disobedience was as rampant as the plague itself.

Similarly, the Church experienced a decline in power as many believed God was the cause of the plague punishing sinners. Yet when prominent figures of the Church died suddenly from the plague, the Church was unable to explain the plague's wrath. Peasants saw the Church's inability to clarify God's intentions as a weakness thereby deteriorating the Church's authority. Moreover, the Church encountered difficult internal problems most notably being a shortage in priests. Laymen whose wives died or did not have a wife easily became priests much to the dismay of the traditional customs of the Church. The illegitimacy of priesthood during the Black Death greatly hindered the Church's ability to continue its powerful reign over society. Those who usually turned to the Church for answers and reassurance found themselves lost amongst

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

the dead and the dying. With the pungent aroma of death constantly in the air and the plague around every corner, Europeans underwent a collapse of traditional moral values and ethics.

Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio described in 1350 the breakdown of the traditional social structure of European society in *The Decameron*. Amid all the failed explanations and attempts to contain the Black Death, Europeans abandoned all morality and ethical conduct expected of civilized citizens. Self-preservation was the only goal. Sons abandoned their sick mothers, brothers deserted one another, and husbands were forsaken by their wives. Even mothers would neglect their children as if they were not theirs in an attempt to avoid the plague. It was a free-for-all. Funerals, which had been a common ceremony observed by all, were nonexistent as death was all too familiar to the daily lives of every European. The streets were littered with the dead to the extent that officials had to be assigned to collect corpses every day. A once thriving continent of prosperity and progress, Europe became a graveyard filled with dead people and dying morality.

Nevertheless, life must go on. Those fortunate enough to escape the grim grasp of the Black Death found themselves in a continent permeating with revolts. The population decline created a chain reaction that set off a series of peasant revolts that lasted well into the seventeenth century. Tensions grew as landlords attempted to restrict laborers' wage increases and kings began to establish new war taxes on the peasant population. Setting the example for later peasant revolts, the French Jacquerie revolt named after Jacques Bonnehomme, began instinctively as a result of the French government's new taxes on the peasantry. As seen in the images on page 298 of *Civilization in the West*, the peasants, not constrained by the chivalric code of the upper class, committed horrendous attacks against the nobility; however, in the end, the revolt was easily suppressed by organized, professional armies of the aristocracy. Likewise, the English peasant revolts known as the Great Rebellion, fought against the nobilities' attempt to return to pre-plague European society. Similar to the rural revolts of laborers in the fields, urban workers rioted against powerful guilds in order to weaken their control on manufacturing and production. Unprecedented, peasants all over Europe stood up for their desire to live a better life with decent wages and respect in society. According to Kishlansky on page 299, "[peasant revolts] did reflect the peasants' new belief that they could change their lives for the better through united action." Although peasants still were not able to climb the social class ladder, they did discover the ability to bring about social change through unity.

Drastically altering the economic, cultural, and social structures of European society, the Black Death most notably affected the lives of the peasants. While many reacted in extremely different manners, the peasantry was effective in making their plight as the lower class of poverty and despair not only recognized by the nobility but they also showed the nobility what they were capable of when unified. Using the labor shortages to their advantage, the peasants forced landlords to pay higher wages. When opposed by the king and the nobility, the peasants

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

disobeyed the king's laws and revolted against the nobility. Clearly, the peasants, while unsuccessful in raising their social status or dramatically improving their conditions, were taking a positive step forward toward initiating a better way of life. In fact, as a result of the Black Death some significant improvements were established. For example, specialized institutions categorized illnesses and separated them into different facilities to be cared for by physicians concentrating in that area. People with symptoms of the plague were isolated with other victims in penthouses to help prevent the spread of the disease. In addition, many towns began to restrict the activities of the urban poor by establishing public assistance to improve the poverty crisis. Ultimately, while the Black Death was one of the darkest eras of human history completely wiping out half of Europe's population, Europe still survived. There was life after Death.

gradesfixer.com

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP