

## THE AFTERMATH OF THE BLACK DEATH AND THE AFTERMATH OF THE GREAT WAR

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JAMES WESTFALL THOMPSON  
University of Chicago

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Ever since the Great War terminated and the world lapsed into the condition—physical, moral, economic, social—in which it now finds itself, historians and students of social pathology have been searching if possibly they might discover a precedent in the past for the present order (or rather disorder) of things. The years immediately following the close of the Napoleonic Wars have been the favorite epoch for examination. But the conditions of the period after Waterloo have been found to bear little resemblance to conditions today. The differences in degree between things as they were then and things as they now are is so great that analogies fail. The old maxims, “We understand the present by the past,” and “History is philosophy teaching by example,” are broken shibboleths. There seems to have been nothing in the past comparable or applicable to the present.

And yet, though it is true that history never repeats itself, there is one epoch of the past the study of which casts remarkable light upon things as they are today; whose conditions afford phenomenal parallels in many particulars to present conditions; which furnishes not merely analogies but real identities with existing economic, social, and moral circumstances. That period is the years immediately succeeding the Great Plague or the Black Death of 1348–49 in Europe. The turmoil of the world today serves to visualize for us what the state of Europe was in the middle of the fourteenth century far more distinctly than ever was perceived before. It is surprising to see how similar are the complaints then and now: economic chaos, social unrest, high prices, profiteering, depravation of morals, lack of production, industrial indolence, frenetic gaiety, wild expenditure, luxury, debauchery, social and religious hysteria, greed, avarice, maladministration, decay of manners.

Let us consider the first and most immediate effect—the loss of man-power owing to the great mortality. While it is true that the population of Europe is much greater now than in the fourteenth century, and the mortality far higher then than in the past five years, nevertheless, as everyone knows, the working efficiency of Europe has been seriously reduced owing to the death of large numbers of men in battle or of disease, to which must be added some millions of the civilian population from starvation, privation, and disease. And many of those who survive are shaken in body or in mind. The nerves of these people are so shattered that it will be a long time before they can go back to work; many of them never will. The same was true of the people of Europe in 1349, when the Black Death had passed. The psycho-physical shock to them had been so great that restoration of their former vitality and initiative was impossible, or very slow.

The economic effect of the Black Death also was not unsimilar to the effect of the Great War, though the immediate results of the plague were very different. The moment the war began prices soared. This was not so in 1349. The immediate effect of the Black Death was to lower prices and to glut the market with commodities. The reason is not far to seek. Every civilized society possesses a certain accumulated surplus of goods or produce, enough to last it for some months at least, even if production cease. Now the mortality due to the Black Death was very high, at least 35 per cent of the population. The consequence was that when the plague had spent its force the surviving population found itself in possession of these accumulated stores, produce, goods, in addition to movable and real property which had once belonged to those now dead.

Men woke up to find themselves rich who had formerly been poor, inasmuch as they were the only surviving heirs. Land, houses, furniture, goods, farm products, cattle, horses, sheep, were without owners, and most of it was immediately appropriated by the survivors. Everything movable or which could be driven away on four feet was seized; even landed property was occupied since there was no one to protest and the very courts of law were stopped. "There were small prices for everything," records

Henry Knighton, the medieval chronicler. "A man could have a horse, which before was worth 40s. for 6s. 8*d.*; a fat ox for 4*s.*; a cow for 12*d.*; a heifer for 2*d.*; a big pig for 5*d.*; a fat wether for 4*d.*; a sheep for 3*d.*; a lamb for 2*d.*; a stone of wool for 9*d.* Sheep and cattle went wandering over fields and through crops, and there was no one to go and drive or gather them."

The direct result of all this suddenly acquired wealth was a wild orgy of expenditure and debauchery on the part of many. Furs, silks, tapestries, rich furniture, expensive food, jewels, plate, fell within the purchasing power of the poor. Men spent lavishly, luxuriously, insanelly. Poor workmen and poorer cotters, living in wretched hovels, who formerly, like Margery Daw, had slept on straw, now lolled on beds of down and ate from plate that once had decorated the sideboards of nobles. Often, too, they removed from their ancient quarters into the vacant houses. The landlord class was hit hard by the plague. "Magnates and lesser lords of the realm who had tenants made abatements of rent in order to keep their tenantry; some half the rent, some more, some less, some for two years, some for three, some for one year, according as they could agree with them."

But this condition of luxury soon passed. Those who survived found themselves personally richer than before; but Europe was immeasurably poorer, for production absolutely ceased for months, even a whole year, and when it was renewed the productive capacity of Europe was found to be much impaired, while the waste had been terrific. When all the accumulated surplus had been consumed or wasted, prices soared and the cost of living, both of commodities and of service, rose enormously. Farm laborers, guild workmen, domestic servants, clerks, even priests, struck for higher wages. "In the following autumn no one could get a reaper for less than 8*d.* with his food; a mower for less than 12*d.* with his food. Wherefore many crops perished in the fields for want of some one to garner them. But in the pestilence year there was such abundance of all kinds of corn that no one troubled about it. . . . A man could scarcely get a chaplain under ten pounds or ten marks to minister to a church. There was scarcely any one now who was willing to accept a vicarage for twenty pounds." Even rents

soon went up. Abandoned buildings lapsed into ruin, occupied buildings naturally deteriorated under wear and tear, and the wages of carpenters and other artisans were often so high as to prohibit repairs.

The high prices of staple commodities and the exorbitant demands of the wage-earning class soon reached a pinnacle under the stimulus of profiteering. Accordingly the governments had resort to maximum laws both for commodities and wages. France passed a Statute of Laborers in 1350, England a similar law in 1351.

The social effects of the Black Death were manifold. In the first place, then as now, there was enormous displacement of population. The plague had the effect of an invasion; it either killed or drove out the population. Thousands fled to other places. Infected districts were left deserted. In after-years one finds evidence of this in interesting ways. New place-names, new faces, even unfamiliar speech in various regions, attest it. One finds evidence of Italian colonies in south German and south French cities; French and Germans in north Italy; Flemings in Normandy; Normans in Picardy, etc. Under the stress of fear men were mad to get out of an infected region, and fled, often into another quite as dangerous. We find other evidence of this movement of population in the outcropping of technical industries and crafts, once peculiar to a certain country, in quite another place owing to the flight of workmen from the former to the latter locality.

The texture of society, too, was profoundly modified by the Black Death. In addition to a large class of *nouveaux riches*, the plague opened the door of opportunity to many to get into new lines of employment, or to establish themselves in new kinds of business. Clerks became merchants, former workmen became employers and contractors, farm laborers became gentlemen farmers. The old nobility of Europe, which derived its lineage from the Norman Conquest and the Crusades, largely passed away, leaving their titles and their lands to the kings who gave them out to new favorites, so that a new *noblesse* arose in Europe, a parvenu nobility without the accomplishment, the pride, or the manners of the old *noblesse*. The titles survived, but the blood of the peerage was new, not old; parvenu, not aristocratic. With the passing of

the aristocracy passed also the chivalry and courtesy that had distinguished it. The decay of manners in the last half of the fourteenth century is an astonishing fact. The old-fashioned gentility was gone; manners were uncouth, rough, brutal. Familiar speech became rude, lewd, even obscene. Every student of the literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has observed this. This explains the paradox that books on courtesy were so much in demand in these centuries. The new high society was ignorant of good manners and needed to know. Even fashions reflected the decadent conditions of the age. Refinement and decorum in dress, which marked the distinguished lady and gentleman in the thirteenth century, disappeared. The *nouveaux riches* had a passion for display, for garish colors, for excessive dress, for the wearing of many jewels. Dressmakers and milliners reaped a harvest from this class. The costumes were fabrications to wonder at, but not to admire.

Another characteristic of the late fourteenth century which strikes a familiar note is the protest against political corruption and administrative inefficiency. The cry for reform was widespread and not to be wondered at. The Black Death hit the governments of Europe hard. For two hundred years these governments had been slowly and painfully developing their administrative machinery and training up a skilled class of officials in their employ. Now of a sudden thousands of this technically trained class were cut down, so much so that the governments were crippled beyond what we may imagine; police protection, courts, law-making, the hundred and one everyday activities of an ordered society were arrested. The machinery of the governments nearly stopped. In this emergency two things happened: the offices had to be filled, the government kept running at all cost, so that thousands of ignorant, incompetent, dishonest men were hastily thrust into public offices; moreover, the thousands of vacant offices tempted the job-hunter, the placeman, the professional office-seeker, and this class swarmed into the vacancies with the selfish motive of feathering their own nests and plundering the public. The result was appalling waste, great maladministration, speculation, etc., with the natural protest of society against these abuses.

The church was no better off than the state in this particular. Every student of medieval history knows the outcry that arose in Europe in the last half of the fourteenth century against the abuses and corruption in the church. But the church is not to be blamed too severely for this condition. It, too, had to keep functioning, and to do so impressed into service all sorts and conditions of men; in the universal terror it could not be over-careful in those whom it selected. And again, church offices were lucrative and influential appointments, and many intruded themselves into church livings for the sake of the material nature of the preferment.

Complaints against political and administrative corruption, the prevalence and increase of crime, lightness of mind, and looseness of morals, high prices, profiteering, industrial and farm strikes, extravagance, indolence, or refusal to go to work are common and widespread today. So they were in the fourteenth century. The Black Death wrought a universal upheaval and transformation of society to which nothing else in history is comparable except the influence of the Great War.

Even in the field of psychology this analogy holds true. Not only those who actually fought in the late war, but the whole population is suffering from "shell shock," from frayed nerves. It is this condition which explains the semi-hysterical state of mind of millions in Europe, which accounts for their fevered or morbid emotionalism. The old barriers are down, the old inhibitions removed. The superficial yet fevered gaiety, the proneness to debauchery, the wild wave of extravagance, the flamboyant luxury, the gluttony in restaurant and café—all these phenomena are readily explicable by the student used to making psycho-social analyses. And as always at such seasons, the phenomena of the Freudian complex are vividly presented. A book could be written solely upon the strange, intense, morbid sex manifestations abroad in the world at present.

It was so after the Black Death. The so-called Flagellant movement was a mixture of religious morbidity and sex stimuli, so widespread in its influence that it reduced thousands to a state of frenzy. Not since the Crusades had Europe witnessed so tremendous a manifestation of mob psychology. In the lapse of all the

accustomed inhibitions of church, of state, of society, the thought and conduct of men went off on eccentric tangents. The failure of old authorities gave room for new and self-constituted authorities to establish themselves. Charlatans, mind-readers, sorcerers, witch-doctors, drug-vendors, sprang up like mushrooms, along with perfervid crossroads preachers and soap-box orators denouncing society and the wrongs around them, and offering each his panacea or remedy. A golden opportunity was afforded to the amateur preacher, the amateur reformer, the pseudo-scientist, the grafter.

The literature of the late Middle Ages is rich in the possession of this kind of psycho-social phenomena, which has not yet been studied. Few even know of it. It may surprise the reader to learn that probably the well-known legend about the Pied Piper of Hamelin is attached to the time of the Black Death. Grotesque and amusing as Browning's famous ballad is, there is yet a tragic pathos underneath the tale, which he failed to divine. Browning, as all his readers, regarded the story as a mere legend. But undeniably there is a basis of real history below the surface.

In the first place it is a well-known historical fact that the Black Death was accompanied by a great plague of rats in Europe. Now the rat has been a symbol of pestilence since remote antiquity. One need go no farther than the Old Testament for evidence of this, and the symbolism is attested by ancient art. What probably happened at Hamelin was this: the town was infested by rats; the Pied Piper made his appearance (whether a charlatan or a lunatic cannot be said) and offered to charm the rats away. The rats probably stayed, but the Piper's strange costume and stranger power which he declared that he possessed, united with the intense, even hysterical emotionalism of the people, working upon the natural curiosity of children at sight of such a wondrous spectacle as the Piper in their streets, lured the children after him and they were scattered, never to return. The poor children were swept away on a wave of crowd psychology, of emotional excitement, to the point of hysteria. They suffered the fate of those who went on the Children's Crusade, many of whom we know fell into the hands of professional kidnapers and slavers.

A book might be written upon these peculiar and eccentric effects of the Black Death, as many will write books in the near future upon the social psychology of Europe since the war. The parallel which I have made is not a perfect one, of course, but there is sufficient analogy between the aftermath of the Black Death and the aftermath of the Great War to enlist the serious consideration of the student of history.