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The Black Death and Its Effects on the Manorial System in Western Europe

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Abstract

The Black Death was one of the most catastrophic epidemics in human history as the casualty rate was overwhelmingly high. Following the epidemic, there were improvements in technology and the standard living of European people. This study investigates the extent to which the plague affected the manorial system. By looking at the pre and post-plague economic circumstances, we can see the fundamental difference that crucially yields us the reason to why there was a socioeconomic change. We further research to see if the plague was the main socioeconomic factor, which it was not. The change was accumulative with various factors, for example, the growing grievances of the peasants under the manorial system, the advancement of technology, etc. Therefore, our conclusion is that the Black Death significantly contributed to demographic change, which led to the rebellion, inducing evolutionary instructional change to happen sooner than if the Black Death did not happen at all, which brought great benefits to the European economy.

Purpose of the Study

Among many causes of death, such as warfare and natural disasters, diseases are arguably the most severe one of them all. Pandemics are capable of bringing an end to everyone's doorstep regardless of ethnicity, religions, and social class. They are generally unexpected and unavoidable. Thus, the ability to control the situation is crucial in society.

The spread of the Black Death in the 14th century Western Europe is worth-speculating. The plague emerged several centuries after the demise of the prosperous Roman Empire. After the fall of the empire, major on sea and land trade routes were destroyed. Forms of cities and the government also immensely changed. This long period of low economic activities and international interaction is generally called the "Dark Age". It is commonly known that the appearance of diseases can stop the growth of a region, and the recovering process takes a long time later on. The emergence of Black Death in the Dark Age accelerated the downturn of Western Europe massively. Just only in a few years at the beginning of the pandemic, the plague took millions of lives away. The disease was highly infectious under the cold, humid, and dirty environment of the region, especially when taking a bath was believed to be unhealthy at that time. It resulted in a large economic shock due to the sharp drop in the population. The government

and society were also badly shaken. Consequently, a series of deterioration followed for decades after in every aspect: political, social, and economic.

However, there are always two sides of a coin. The dismal consequences of the Black Death are well-known. On the contrary to the mainstream belief, this research aims to analyse and speculate the nature and characteristics of Western Europe before and after the pandemic to see if the plague results in any good outcome to the society of Western Europe. The Black Death might not only leave an ugly, painful, dark stain on human history but might also set a new base of the society that led Western Europe to become more prosperous during the Mercantilist Era soon after. Overmore, the disappearance of the plague and the long-lasting social system so-called feudalism were not distant. The relationship between these two events should be carefully examined.

Introduction

I. Manorial System in Western Europe

The manorial system or seignorial system was an essential element of feudal society and was the organizing principle of rural economy that originated in the villa system of the Late Roman Empire. Manorialism is the economic and political system that developed in Europe during the Middle Ages.

After the collapse of Roman Empire, a development of politics and economics changed the life of people. Everything seemed far from easy. People's daily lives were affected. Their life became unsecured and difficult to survive for living. Working harder to have enough food. On top of that, they needed to protect themselves from conquering by raiding barbarians and seizing the neighboring kingdom. Consequently, people were classified as roles and relationships with each other. This relationship is called feudalism or manorialism.

The Early Middle Ages in Europe, the group of people which were not controlled by the Roman Empire were called barbarians because this group did not follow Roman ways. When Rome fell to invading barbarians, Europe had no central government. Throughout Western Europe, many invading groups set up the kingdoms. The most powerful set up the rules to govern the land and had the greatest warrior. One of the most rulers of the early Middle Ages was a man named Clovis in 481 C.E.. He was an ambiguous young warrior and became leader of a powerful group named Franks. Franks had many differences from

before because they developed a new style of warfare. The warriors who fought on horseback achieved and held power. The knights were rewarded land and privileges in return for their loyalty. During Clovis' reign, he converted to Christianity. He was the first Germanic king to accept the Catholic religion. After he became a Christian, he achieved the support from the Pope and the other church. All the citizens in Clovis' kingdom practiced in the same region and spoke the same language, French. He extended his rule over France and Western Europe.

In 768 C.E. Charlemagne, Charles the Great, took over as king of the Franks after his father, Pepin, died. He continued the Frank tradition, the reward of warfare by rewarding knights with land and privileges in return for their loyalty and service. He wanted all of western Europe to become Christian. He had created a large empire by conducting a series of wars. Finally, he became the most powerful leader in western Europe. He was associated with church and the government. Both Charles and Pope wanted a new Christian Roman Empire in western Europe. The church was the central part of society during this time. In education, most people could neither read nor write. Therefore, he encouraged education and scholarship. He supported to establish the school and found his scholar named Alcuin. Under Charlemagne, the arts began to bloom again. The talents of painters, sculptors and metalworkers were developed to build palaces and churches around the city. Charlemagne's empire survived many sectors. However, after he died the rulers were much weaker than Charlemagne. Still these kings paved the way for the system of feudalism.

The High Middle Ages, about 1000 CE, feudalism provided citizens with protection and safety by establishing stable social order. In western Europe it was flourishing in social structure. Under this system, all the land belonged to the monarch. The church also owned a large amount of land. The king was the head of all. The lord became vassal of the king when the lord acted in service of the king such as to supply the king with knights in time of war. A knight was an armed warrior. The empire needed the protection from the knights. The monarch gave the lord fiefs or a high position in return. The lords rented their land to the peasants to work for them as a serf. Serfdom was the status of peasants under feudalism. Serfs who occupied a plot of land were required to work for the lord of the manor who owned that land, and in return were entitled to receive food and to protection from hardship. Serfs could not leave the lord's land without permission and had to farm his fields in exchange for a small plot of their own. Serfs formed the lowest class of feudal society. Most lords and wealthier knights lived on manors. A manor included a castle or manor house, one or more villages, and the surrounding farmland. Manors were far from towns which required peasants to produce everything the people on the manor needed. Only a few goods came

from outside the manor, such as salt for preserving meat and iron for making tools. During this period, people were born into a social class for life. They had the same social position, and often the same job, as their parents.

II. Economy of Western Europe in Medieval Era

After the demise of the Roman Empire, the social system of Western Europe was adapted to be more resilient and flexible against invasions of the barbarians, for instance, the Vikings. A big and unified city, like one of the Roman Empire, was proven to be vulnerable. So, the manorial system appeared in Western Europe for the first time. Being decentralised by having many small social units scattering throughout the land decreased losses due to the raids. The owners of the manors: the lords, along with their officials, had to protect their peasants. In exchange for protection, they rightfully collected tax from the workers. However, not only did the system bring a new social structure to the table, but did it also shape the economy of Western Europe.

Humans before the Industrial Revolution lived in the same stage of nature to the animals, as the technological advancement was low. Thus, agriculture was the main economic activity. Unlike many previous civilisations such as Egypt or Ancient China, the agriculture of Medieval Europe, which was blessed by regular rainfalls, did not rely on a river. Accordingly, the central government, as generally needed for irrigation agriculture, was not necessary. On the other hand, local, small, and independent rulers were more suitable in the scene. Thus, the lords and their knights rose.

Another significant effect of the fall of the Roman Empire was the drastic decline in literacy rate in Medieval Europe. The church was responsible for maintaining the knowledge from the past. However, education did not flow to the lower classes. The lords did not interfere with the activities of the peasants, because the labours mainly farmed, and did not involve in any academic activities. Consequently, the farmers relatively had more freedom compared to the peasants from other older civilisations. They could decide to cultivate their crops, keeping their cattle, making their bread, and also improve their equipment, clothing, or cottages.

The surplus of the production, if not directly sent to the lords as taxation or work obligations, could be sold at a nearby market town. The town contained many craftsmen including tailors, blacksmiths, tinkers.

These craftsmen went through systematic training by a non-related expert of the same field. After being approved, successful practitioners were allowed to join the guilds, labour unions in the era of that occupation. However, any industrial activities apart from those that were closely related to agriculture were operated on a small scale. Mostly, they were produced just as needed.

Before the fall of the Roman Empire, trade on the sea was blooming as it was less costly compared to the one on land, mainly due to transportation of bulk goods. After the invasion, trade routes were devastated. The people depended on their self-sufficient manors and short-distance trade. However, by the end of the 12th century as a result of the Crusades, commerce, firstly proceeded by Muslim pilgrims then Italian merchants, had again thrived. Many cities such as Genoa, Venice, Cairo, and Syria became important trade hubs of the Mediterranean trade.

Trade also had a result in the rise of banking. In the beginning, it was performed by Jewish moneylenders who used their links in Jewish communities throughout the entire Europe, as the Christian Church considered interest sinful. The banking network tended to be based in Northern Italy as many international trade centres were located there. The Jewish and Italian bankers provided a crucial financial instrument that massively facilitated the growth of trade in the region.

These are the outlook for the economy of Western Europe in the Medieval Era. We can see that the demise of the Roman Empire affected the development and characteristics of the region massively.

The manorial system in Western Europe provided protection and freedom to peasants to some extent. It also contributed to the economy, which would play a crucial role in economic development in Western Europe later on. However, the system also restrained some economic activities, and consequently, growth in the economy. The drawbacks are elaborated in the following paragraphs.

There are two characteristics of the manorial system that influence the first defect. The first one was the protection, which also came with its marginal cost, of the lords upon their peasants. The second one was the size of a manor. Purposely designed to be decentralised, each manor was considerably huge and far away from each other. Farmlands, where many peasants lived and farmed, were generally located far away from the castle. The increase in the population of peasants led to economies of scale in protection. However, it also enlarged the distance between the castle and the farmlands, which would eventually lead

to rising costs of the protection. Thus, the efficient size of a manor is where the marginal cost of providing protection equalled the lord's share of the marginal product of labour, which generally was a tax.

The free market has always been the most effective form of economic organisation as it automatically reflects the desired amount of goods and services exchanged in the economy. More importantly, it gives us the ability to know the appropriate rate of exchange: market price. However, the existence of a concentrated, thick market had not yet emerged in this era. It was more sensible and practical for the lords to directly take goods from labours, as an exchange of the protection, instead of employing other workers. Besides, there was no impartial third party to speculate the exchange. As a result, the action happened unfairly, and the surplus went straight to the ruling class without any kinds of proper allocation. In short, the system allowed the rulers to exploit the labours.

III. The Black Death

The Black Death is said to be the deadliest disease, out of all other diseases, to ever eradicate mankind, caused by the infection of a bacteria called "Yersinia pestis" with rodents and fleas as carriers. The disease spreads in the air through direct contact or by contaminated food or materials. In the past, there have been 3 outbreaks but, in this writing, we will focus on the second outbreak during the 14th century, as aforementioned, as well as the social response and measures.

In the 14th-century, the outbreak was known as the "Great Pestilence" or "Great Plague", which started in southern India and China, spreading throughout the Silk Road across Asia and brought to Crimea in 1346. Then, commercial ships travelled to Europe by ships carrying black rats from Crimea. Consequently, the spread of plague swept over Mediterranean and Europe; Chinese and Mongol were presumably the cause. Italy's epidemic in 1338 and 1351 resulted in two-thirds of its population to die, known as "Great Mortality". The Great Plague of London accounted for 70% of the population of 450,000, left with only 60,000. The epidemic continued until the 17th century, known as "Black Death," killing an estimated 25 million people.

The immediate social response was to flee. Areas where people evacuated to were isolated mountains since large urban areas had high population density so it was easier for the spread of plague to take place, especially in cities with poor hygiene, filled with parasitic insects such as ticks, fleas, rats. The fear of the plague severely led to the sudden collapse of family institutions. When one family member got infected,

other members jilted the sick so seeing a mother leave her infected child to fight on his own was not peculiar at the time. While some people were convinced that the disease was triggered by corrupted air caused by foul odor, which required city cleanup by water for religious belief. In addition, individuals acted in self-defence by carrying aromatic herbs around their neck or small bottles of vinegar in the belief to combat with the bad-smelling air. This belief was further incorporated in the development of the costume for doctors to prevent the transmission of plague when treating patients.

Officials or the Board of Health were given full legal authority to stop the spread of the plague and to contain it if there was already an outbreak. The measures in coping with the plague which BoH relied on were three major practices : quarantine, lazarettos and sanitary cordons.

Quarantine was the core of the public health measures, having two types which are the maritime quarantine and the land-based quarantine. The maritime quarantine aimed to protect the shore and contained the ongoing epidemic by directing ships that travelled from eastern Mediterranean to islands, controlled by BoH, instead of coming directly to the mainland. Ships were to be delicately cleansed with hygienic solution and passengers were taken to the mainland for quarantine lasting forty days before entering the cities; the period of forty days was actually chosen due to Christian belief and it was medically sufficient to identify the infected ones. Regarding the quarantine, passengers and crew were coerced to stay in lazarettos on islands under quarantine high naval security to halt any escape or undesired visit. Despite weak maritime quarantine in some areas, this measure was successful to a great extent. The second quarantine was land-based which aimed to cope with the existing outbreak. Motivated by fears, the communities decided to use force to violently pause any entry of people and goods. By no means, this required a high level of military supervision and that was how sanitary cordons originated. Sanitary cordons were simply an incredibly long line of barriers stretching from the Adriatic to the mountain of Transylvania. However, its excessively harsh practice shortened the period to which the measure was used.

In the aspect of therapeutic measure, the doctors understood the disease and its effects to a good extent which resulted in two dominant treatments: depletive strategy and internal medicines. For the depletive strategy, they understood that the diseases caused the patients to release the poison through vomit, diarrhea and sweat, therefore the doctors suggested the intake of pills that stimulated the body expel the poison in a large amount. They also suggested the use of hot compresses onto the buboes so that they

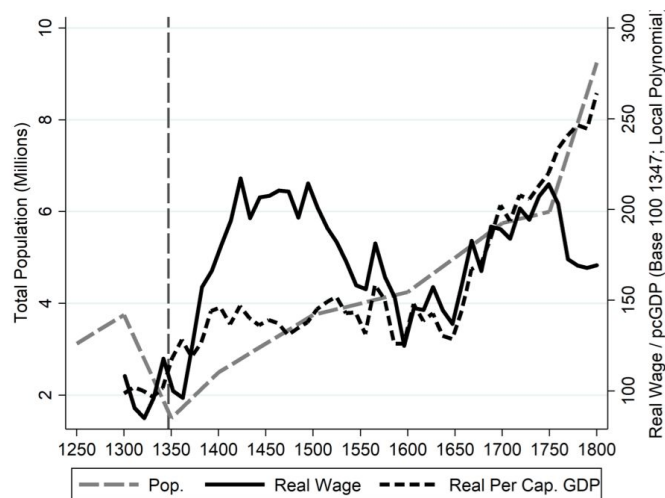
burst and poison would be expelled. Little did they know, both methods only worsened the condition of the patients.

On the other hand, theriac, an internal medicine, acted as an antidote to plague poison but the process of producing such medicine took a long time and the recipe was indeed complex. Thus, it could be seen that even though the medicines were discovered, they were not effective in saving lives. Along with the ineffectiveness of these medicines, hospitals and lazarettos also ran in short supply due to the overload of patients, therefore not all of the patients had an access to the medicine and the worst case scenario was that families were forced to quarantine with their ill members (the excess patients) at home without any further medical aid from the state.

IV. The Economic Impacts of the Black Death

The Black Death changed the economy of Western Europe immensely. It killed one-third of the European population. The result also significantly impacted the economy of the region, demonstrated by the examples and data of England, as being explained as follows.

(a) England



The plague destroyed the economy in the short run. The drop in population led to a series of shocks in the economy. Agricultural and industrial activities were left unoperated. Estimated per capita GDP of England decreased from 1348 to 1349 by 6%. The wage increase impacted the price of daily products, and eventually, caused inflation. In addition, as fewer labourers work for the raw materials, the costs of

the needed materials to produce increased. The English Parliament under King Edward III enacted the Statute of Labourers in 1351 regarding the labour shortage. The law prohibited a wage increase. The rate was set at the maximum level by the statute in the year 1346. They also tried to limit the movement of workers for better conditions. Besides, the English Parliament supplemented taxation that everyone over age 14 had to pay. The tax took the money from the majority of the population who was penniless. Many peasants had to sell their belongings to pay tax. It divided the society. The upper class gradually began to force the peasantry back into what they were. Also, the epidemic worsened trade and specialisation even more. During a hard time, people want to earn money more effortlessly. Thus, skilful and dedicated works were costly and undesirable.

On the other hand, Black Death boosted the economy of Western Europe in the long run. The situation followed the "Malthusian effect of population size on income". Meaning, when the population falls, but numbers of capitals and lands stay the same, income per capita would increase. The survivors got more resource share after the plague. Besides, in the 17th century, real wages and per capita GDP began to rise constantly due to revival in trade. Also, the drop in numbers of workers provided them with more bargaining power. They demanded higher wages and better conditions. They wanted to abolish impractical, old customs related to the relationship between the nobles and the peasants. The payment in kinds altered to payment in cash. As can be seen, the peasants were freer, and they had more property rights which caused a positive impact on the economy.

Apart from the efficiency of the economy, the trend of goods produced after the pandemic also changed. The lords, acting as a kind of entrepreneurs, wanted to reduce the cost of production. They realised that they had less authority to control their workers. Many lords began to change from harvesting to raising sheep instead due to the lower amount of workers required. Thus, the popularity of some goods provided after the plague also changed.

Along with the gradual changes in the society of Western Europe after the epidemic, there was also one correlation factor that sparked the fire and led the area to the new era. John Ball, an English priest, was one of the leaders of the peasants' revolt in England. He believed the inequality at that time was too severe. He became a travelling priest and gave sermons. He poured words against the rich by stating their sins. Influenced by Ball, several peasants, led by Watt Tyler, rebelled against tax collectors. The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 began in Essex and spread to Kent. He marched a group of rebels from Canterbury to London. The number of peasant revolts increased from his enthusiasm in their cause along with his

persuasive nature. Tyler tried to negotiate with King Richard II, demanding the peasants to have the same rights to nobles. However, it was a failure. The leaders, Watt Tyler and John Bell, were executed and their heads stuck on poles paraded around London. Even though the revolution failed, it still triggered an idea of having private properties and fundamental rights of the peasants. The increased economic power of the labourers could stop function profitability in the manorial system. The surviving peasants triumphed over the manorial system leading to the feudal system declined.

All in all, Black Death reformed Western Europe in many aspects including politics, economic, and social. The adjustment did not occur smoothly, but the sacrifices led Western Europe to a stronger economic system soon after.

Discussion

The Black Death arrived near the end of prosperous high Middle Ages (c. 1000 to c. 1300) in which manorial agriculture was at its maturity, manufacturing was on its growth and population spiked before the Black Death. From then on, in the late Middle Ages (c. 1300 to c. 1500), the economy dwindled, having Black Death as one of its prominent factors. However, we came to our conclusion, based on the qualitative change between the high and late Middle Ages, that even isolating Black Death as our variables, the end of the medieval economy would still come but would be much later.

The European economy near the end of the Middle Ages (c. 1500) was fundamentally different from the economy before the occurrence of plague. In the countryside, a freer peasant worked restlessly and material benefit was derived. The rent was fixed so the worry was somewhat lifted. Given the land, the peasants were able to feed their family as well as producing a surplus for the market. As population tremendously shrank, the improvement in yields of fertile lands was visible because the focus shifted to the condition of the lands. The peasants efficiently exploited the changed circumstances, given the availability of land. Therefore, the socioeconomic gradations were on its developing path. The peasant's gain was the lord's loss. As the Middle Ages faded, the lords' role greatly degraded, making them simply just a rentier.

The Black Death might further contribute to the rebellion in the sense that it provided freedom for the peasants to decide how they should live their lives. A belief that the manorial system was essential to the

survival of all was so corrupt that such unfairness could be easily depicted by peasants. Therefore, being under such oppression, the peasants were highly open to the revolutionary message of preachers like England's John Ball. Even though the rebellion achieved to a lesser extent, many economic changes were already in place. So the Black Death might not be the direct cause of the rebellion, nor its triumph. Indeed, it expanded the horizons of the peasants as well as their feeling of grievances.

Therefore, to conclude, the manorial system in its own self was just unproductive and unfair, which did not serve the new phase of economy after the Middle Age where trade and manufacturing kicked off. The new phase of economy required much leaner and more productive business practices. This is because the Black Death damaged the population but not the natural resources, meaning there were large amounts of resources to be exploited.

Along with the increase in technology and commercial skills in the high Middle Age, the survivors of plague might experience a rise in total productivity of both capital and labour. Therefore, looking from another perspective, Black Death, the deadliest phenomena, actually opened up new opportunities to both peasants and businessmen to be more productive and efficient so the socioeconomic reform was just inevitable, even without the Black Death, which accelerated the coming of demise of the old-fashioned system: the manorial system.

Other researches suggested that the Black Death, not necessarily the cause, had a contribution to the development of technology after the Middle Age. Some even argued that the Black Death was the grandfather of the Technical Revolution that resulted in miniaturization.

Post-plague technology actually inherited from pre-plague capital when manufacturing was growing. Since the resources were not destroyed by the plague as much, the supply side was able to quickly recover. The Near East was the case, having the technology level static and they continued relying on geographical advantage. With the same level of innovation as pre-plague, Europe had the capacity to build the three-masted ship and improved mining technology to revive exhausted silver mines. Europe further maximized the utility from the plow which made agriculture remarkably efficient.

The loss of population paved the way for agricultural advancements in both management and efficiency as the incentive to exploit the land was high. The European learned from this phenomena and became pliable. The attitude was upheld until the population rose again; the reason why they became richer than other cultures. The Black Death contributed to a better standard of living as the technology became less

labour intensive and led to the spread of wealth across Europe by granting new opportunities for many workers or ex-Serfs. As a result, a Middle Class was formed. Therefore, if we traced back the prosperity of European economy, it is surprising to see that the Black Death had somewhat a contribution to the European socioeconomic status.

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