The Plague: An Agent of Social and Economic Change
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As Europe moved through the fourteenth century, a plague came ashore at Genoa, Italy and began to cut a wide swath throughout the land, leaving thousands upon thousands of dead in its wake, but carrying within it the seeds of new growth that are still bearing fruit today. Much has been written about this time, and a review of the material will inevitably lead to the realization that while the plague devastated all in its path, it is that very devastation that made continuing life in the old ways impossible and cleared the way for the formation of a new order.

Europe in the fourteenth century was enmeshed in a well-established social system that placed authority in the hands of the royals and aristocracy, who were in turn guided by the Church in much of their behavior. This hand-in-glove cooperation between the church and state had ensured that land, the primary measure of wealth in this time, stayed firmly within the control of these few, feeding an economic system that stood to enhance their position (Cantor 123-46). The people who worked the land owed an allegiance to the owners, and had grown accustomed to their role in this system, for the most part content in the knowledge that if they did their part, they would be looked after by the landowner. Though this method had worked for many years, difficulties had begun to emerge, particularly in England, as persistent drought reduced the amount of agricultural product these workers could generate (Thompson 380-84). This in turn began to undercut the flow of wealth the upper classes had long taken for granted, and the lower classes began to feel the pinch as those in power continued to take their share and ignored the needs of the people who had provided the labor. As the lower classes found themselves struggling just to survive, there began to be seen a vague sense of unrest, as yet without direction.

The Church also played a prominent role during the earlier days of plenty, actively supporting and encouraging the wealthy and fully participating in the benefits of this state of prosperity (Mullet 25-29). Since priests and religious were generally drawn from the upper classes, the Church had a vested interest in sustaining the existing system, and with a royalty that reigned as God’s own, ordained to the task, it was well within their role to be active participants in the formation of laws and decrees designed to maintain the status quo. For years, this somewhat duplicitous behavior on the part of the Church had been accepted without question, their moral authority seen as all the justification needed for whatever actions they may undertake on behalf of themselves and the reigning bodies (“Plague and Pestilence” 25-26). Only when the economic times began to shift did anyone think to ask questions, and even then they weren’t much more than whispers of discontent, because no one could remember a time when things were different.

Into these somewhat uncertain times came the plague, roaring through the countryside and undoing in one stroke years of inequality, as it killed rich and poor alike, leaving behind a thoroughly confused and disenchanted population. Those among the wealthy, who could, gathered their families and fled to the country or further, leaving behind vast estates with no one to manage them or look after their charges. The wealthy that stayed were devoured by the plague, with few from any family remaining, and generally no heirs to carry on when death took them at a later date (Herlihy 39-57). The poor of the cities were among the first to feel the weight of the plague,
cramped as they were into small hovels and completely without the means to escape. Before long, the plague extended its reach into the country, gathering victims from the estates with the same abandon it had shown in the cities, until it seemed there would be no one left to do the work anywhere in the realm.

This sudden removal of so many people had the expected impact of throwing the entire system into upheaval, and no sooner would things settle enough to begin an assessment of the damage than another wave of the plague would come through and increase the devastation, until at last the system had been damaged beyond recovery.

The survivors found themselves in a world totally unlike any they had experienced before. The plague had taken many lives, but once the dust settled, the realization came that it was time for a change, and with so many dead and so many estates left unattended, the opportunity for advancement became apparent to those who had heretofore never dreamed of owning anything. Abandoned estates were taken over by those who knew a good thing when they saw it, and in many cases there was no one left to challenge their actions. Merchants in the city didn't take long to realize that there was a new kind of market, one that demanded more and finer goods. People had once been fairly conservative in their spending, ever mindful of the Church's admonition against self-glorification, but the plague had challenged that concept. No longer were they willing to put aside money for the future, but instead were eager to spend their wealth to enjoy the present and revel in the good fortune of their survival, and the Church had little power to influence them, for it had failed them in their time of need.

In fact, the Church had come upon hard times indeed, having lost its power on several fronts. First, they were held responsible for their failure in stemming the tide of the plague. Despite their early statements that the plague was a punishment visited upon sinners, or later lofty claims that those who were "chosen" by the plague would gain great rewards in heaven, plague survivors came to the conclusion that the plague had been indiscriminate in its choices, and that, regardless, the Church had proved to be of no help in protecting anyone from a vile, untimely death. Added to that was the fact that those who had medical training had received it through the Church and this training quickly proved to be helpless to deter the ravages of the plague (Giblin 35-38). The people were so completely dismayed by this lack of salvation that over time this proved to be a key factor in the dismantling of the Church's power, leaving it struggling for its very survival in a new world where religion was expected to know its place. Having lost its support among the privileged and unable to persuade the poor to continue to give it unquestioning homage, the Church slid into decline and deservedly so, as it's only real influence during the years of the plague was decidedly negative.

An example of the negative effects of blind religious beliefs can be seen in the case of the flagellants. This occurred rather early in the plague's movement, and generally only in the northern regions of Europe, where groups of individuals called flagellants roamed the streets publicly whipping themselves to atone for the sins of many. The flagellants were originally welcomed into the communities in the mistaken belief that their suffering could stave off the plague (Tuchman 114-15). This group, which operated outside the auspices of the Church, was actually instrumental in directing the wrath of a frightened public against the Jewish population, accusing them of bringing the plague upon them by the use of poison. Although this caused the persecution and death of hundreds of Jews, (and not coincidentally the availability of many businesses to enterprising survivors of the plague) the more significant result was that Jews gathered their families and began a determined exodus toward the East to Poland and adjoining regions, where they settled, only to find themselves the scapegoats once again hundreds of years later when hard times hit the region.

The initial popularity of the flagellants was partly due to an ignorance of the means of transmission of the plague, and this leads us to another issue, that of the health conditions prevalent during these years. Sanitation, as we know it, did not exist, while open sewers and garbage strewn streets were the norm. Even among those who were of a higher station, the idea of personal hygiene was essentially limited to the wearing of strong scents, and that not to enhance the individual but rather to mask the foul smells that emanated from their surroundings. It wasn’t until years after the plague that those who made a study of it determined that changes were necessary if there were to be any hope of preventing such a recurrence, and even then the changes instituted would be considered minor by our standards today. Nevertheless, the plague was instrumental in ushering in the earliest concepts of public health as an issue in Europe (Gottfried 54-68), and can ultimately be credited
with whatever progress has been made on this front to date.

Fast forward to today, and we can see that while the plague cost many lives it made possible many changes in the social systems of its time, and those changes were, in turn, the precursors of the societal structures that still exist in those countries. Not only that, but those same ideas were instrumental in creating an environment in which the later Reformation could occur, followed by the period of Enlightenment which produced the philosophers who developed many of the concepts upon which our country was founded. Would we have eventually found our way to the remarkable idea of democracy without the plague? Perhaps, but it is clear that the virulent plague served as a catalyst for change on many fronts, and that those changes have prevailed into modern times where they are, by and large, taken for granted by those of us who benefit from them.

Were it not for the many records kept from this time, and authors like Boccaccio, Chaucer and DeFoe who recorded, through their fictional works, this time of great disarray, we might remain unaware of the upheaval that took place. Their determination to present us with a window into their world has survived, precisely because they managed to convey to us the powerful effect these events had on the people, and to awaken in us a sense of recognition.

Hundreds of years have passed since The Black Death invaded Europe, and we would certainly like to think that such nightmares are a thing of the past in this modern world, with all of its medical advances. The unfortunate truth is that no matter how far we have come, we cannot count on immunity. Certainly we have learned that bubonic plague can be cured with antibiotics, as can many other diseases that once roamed the world leaving death as their witness, but nature is such that new strains and new diseases will always occur. In our time, the enemy has become HIV/AIDS. Its persistence in the face of major financial and medical resources aimed at its eradication demonstrates that we still have much to learn, and the lessons of the Black Death could prove useful as we work toward a practical way of dealing with this new threat; but will we heed them?

The hawk-faced masks of the fourteenth century have disappeared, only to be replaced today by clear plastic face shields worn by those who treat patients with the HIV/AIDS virus. Isolation and quarantine were the responses in plague-ridden Europe, but today we eschew such behavior, choosing instead to balance the rights of the individual against the rights of society. Today's mothers do not throw their infected infants out of windows, but infants infected with the virus at birth languish in hospitals and specialized long-term care facilities for lack of willing people who would take them into their homes. And who can ignore stories of parents who deny their grown children once they learn they have contracted the virus, condemning them for the lifestyle that led to the disease while refusing to allow them the warmth of their family at their greatest time of need? Relegated to languish in a hospice being cared for by strangers, or worse yet, condemned to suffer a gradual decline and death at the mercy of the streets, these new plague victims bear painful witness to how little some things change.

When HIV/AIDS first was recognized in the United States, the disease was labeled "gay cancer" and served as an excuse to revile those who engaged in that lifestyle (Brandt 91-110). Sermons on the wrath of God that claimed the disease was a biblical plague designed to rid the world of these sinners were brought to bear on those afflicted, and a smug sense of righteousness prevailed. Schools refused admission to those who were infected through transfusions, and whole communities rose up in anger and fear, forcing families to relocate and live a life of secrecy.

As the disease moved into the mainstream population, infecting heterosexual men as well as women, the railings about sinners morphed into a more generic paean against the loose sexual mores of our times, and more recently has subsided somewhat in the face of the reality that this disease has no specific target, being merely as opportunistic as any other virus.

Much to our credit, the government responded to this crisis of public health by allocating funds for research, supporting the right of infected individuals to be participating members of society, and pronouncing discrimination against them to be illegal. Somewhat less realistically, we still have not fully supported the education of young people on the use of preventive measures such as condoms, relying instead on an oft-repeated message of abstinence as the solution, and this has resulted in a rapidly escalating incidence of teenagers infected with the virus. This reluctance to face facts in this area seems to stem from a fear, by politicians, of alienating fundamentalist groups within our country and thereby losing their financial and voting support; a de facto intrusion of church into state affairs reminiscent of the
fourteenth century. As in the fourteenth century, such a denial of reality can only serve to extend the course of this most recent plague, allowing it full access to the unprepared.

The truth is that much of what is happening today in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic is vaguely familiar when compared with the time of the Black Death, the correlations inescapable. This plague, too, traveled from country to country courtesy of trade and immigration. As in the past, failure to admit our lack of knowledge and a willingness to pass judgment led to its rapid unchecked spread throughout communities both here and abroad; countries like China, India, and certain African nations continue to plead ignorance or resist the truth to this day. Certainly we have better sanitation, a proactive medical and public health community, and more willingness to abide side by side with those who are infected, but beyond that, old fears and superstitions continue, and as this newest plague wends its way around the globe, it too will bring about major changes in the social and economic structure of our world. Already the massive toll in Africa is reducing the workforce in the mines owned by multi-national corporations and significantly impacting their performance and revenues. Wars of opportunity waged against nations and groups weakened by the physical and financial ravages of this newest plague are inevitable, while shifting populations will lead to redistribution of land and wealth, and ultimately effect changes in the structure of those places suffering the greatest losses.

Here in the United States, we continue to avoid dealing with the huge expense of treating this disease, choosing to ignore the burden it creates on individuals and families, the cost in lives cut short. We seem unable to realize the ultimate cost to all of us in the benefits we lose as gifted individuals die before they can achieve their peak as contributors to our society, and one cannot help but wonder what modern wonders we will never see accomplished because of all the children who never grow to adulthood, all the young people who wither and die from this plague.

While the virus continues to spread, we and other nations seem frozen, unable or unwilling to take the steps necessary to ensure that this does not escalate into the worst pandemic in recorded history. There can be little doubt that the consequences of inaction will reek havoc the world over; history has shown us that nations can fail and governments be forever altered when a plague comes to town.

Once again, our world is faced with a plague against which we must rally our forces, yet we continue to watch and wait, seemingly hoping for some miraculous event that will bring us salvation. This is a call to arms of a kind we cannot afford to ignore; the question is, are we up to the challenge?

Works Cited


