



What can the black death tell us about the global economic consequences of a pandemic?

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A New World Post COVID-19

Lessons for Business, the Finance Industry and Policy Makers

edited by Monica Billio and Simone Varotto

What Can the Black Death Tell Us About the Global Economic Consequences of a Pandemic?

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Abstract The COVID-19 pandemic and global lockdown have led to academics and media outlets looking for historical parallels to draw lessons from. Whilst great care needs to be taken when trying to relate events many centuries apart, this chapter reviews the Black Death (1348-1351) and particularly focuses upon its economic impact on England. We will contextualise the pandemic and illustrate both the immediate and longer term outcomes of this devastating event. Whilst we can direct the reader to implications for our current situation, we will also discuss the many differences of these two global events.

Keywords Pandemic. Black Death. Economic History. Recovery.

Summary 1 The Economic Shock of Pandemics. – 2 ‘Anger, Antagonism, Creativity’. – 3 Lessons for Today.



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1 The Economic Shock of Pandemics

Concerns over the spread of the novel coronavirus in March 2020 translated into an immediate economic slowdown. Stock markets were hit: the UK's FTSE 100 seeing its worst days of trading for many years (This is Money 2020)¹ and additionally the Dow Jones and S&P500 in the US. Money had to go somewhere and the price of gold – seen as a stable commodity during extreme events – reached a seven-year high.²

The real economic impacts became more evident as globally we saw a country by country lockdown of normal activities. In the UK this translated into a Government bailout of a scale never previously seen or imagined.³ Soon economists were predicting a 'Greatest recession', as governments struggled with their exit plans and attempting to reconcile levels of debt never seen in peacetime, alongside the prospect of mass unemployment – perhaps at levels that would take economies back to the 1980s (or worse).⁴

Whilst it was perhaps immediately clear (to economic commentators rather than governments) that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns were going to have a long term downwards effect on the world economy, it became more and more tricky to link events to historical pandemics. The main differentiating factor is the ability of current governments to lockdown their citizens for long periods of time, a feat that would have been beyond the means of medieval rulers (who, in any case, would have had fewer qualms about sending out the labourers to work during a pandemic).

So whilst acknowledging the challenges, a look back at history can help us consider the economic effects of public health emergencies and how best to manage them. In doing so, however, it is important to remember that past pandemics were far more deadly than coronavirus, which has a relatively low death rate (Parker 2020). Without modern medicine and institutions like the World Health Organization, past populations were more vulnerable. It is estimated that

This is an expanded version of an original article in the Conversation by the same authors (Bell, Lacey, Prescott 2020).

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1 <https://www.thisismoney.co.uk/wmoney/markets/article-8055045/FTSE-LIVE-Shares-deep-red-market-panic-continues.html>.

2 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-51612520>.

3 <https://www.henley.ac.uk/news/2020/when-is-a-bailout-not-a-bailout>.

4 <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/coronavirus-greater-great-depression-by-nouriel-roubini-2020-03>.

the Justinian plague of 541 AD killed 25 million and the Spanish flu of 1918 around 50 million.⁵

By far the worst death rate in history was inflicted by the Black Death. Caused by several forms of bubonic plague, it lasted from 1346 to 1353, killing anywhere between 75 million and 200 million people worldwide and perhaps one half of the population of England (Benedictow 2005). As we will describe, the economic consequences were also profound.

2 ‘Anger, Antagonism, Creativity’

It might sound counter-factual – and this should not minimise the contemporary psychological and emotional turmoil caused by the Black Death – but the majority of those who survived went on to enjoy improved standards of living. Prior to the Black Death, England had suffered from severe overpopulation.

Following the pandemic, the shortage of manpower led to a rise in the daily wages of labourers, as they were able to market themselves to the highest bidder. The diets of labourers also improved and included more meat, fresh fish, white bread and ale (Dyer 1989, 158-60). Although landlords struggled to find tenants for their lands, changes in forms of tenure improved estate incomes and reduced their demands. But the period after the Black Death was also, according to economic historian Christopher Dyer (2005, 429), a time of “agitation, excitement, anger, antagonism and creativity”.

Across Europe, the reaction of many governments was to try to hold back the tide of supply-and-demand economics (Cohn 2007). In France, King John II passed detailed regulations for northern France controlling work practices, wages and prices. Similar regulations had been enacted in southern France in 1348. In Spain, legislation in Castile stipulated that lords could specify the place and time of work of rural labourers, while in Aragon, work was made obligatory for all except the ill, the old and children under 12. Italian city states also attempted to control wages and prices. The most well-known labour legislation is however the various ordinances and statutes passed by the English government from 1349.

The ‘problem of labour’ became a preoccupation of English parliaments and governments. Between 1349 and 1430, one third of the 77 parliaments which met passed legislation attempting to control wages, terms of service and prices (Given-Wilson 2000, 85). An initial Ordinance of Labourers in 1349 specified that every man or woman, free or unfree, aged sixty years or younger without income from land or

⁵ https://www.rwjf.org/en/blog/2013/12/the_five_deadliest.html.

trade must work for whoever required their labour. Wages were set at the levels that had been customary in 1346 and anyone receiving excessive wages forfeited the excess sum to the king. Victuallers were also obliged to sell their wares for 'reasonable' prices (Poos 1983, 29).

These provisions were elaborated and enshrined in statute in 1351.⁶ The 1351 Statute of Labourers incorporated a table of set wage rates for specific occupations. It stipulated that servants were obliged to serve for entire years, and not by the day (Poos 1983, 30). Subsequent legislation expanded and refined the national pay scales, with even pay rates for stipendiary chaplains being controlled in 1362. Enforcement was also progressively tightened. In 1361, monetary fines for breaches of labour legislation were replaced by branding of the letter F for Falsity on the forehead (although there is no evidence this punishment was ever inflicted [Cohn 2007, 476]). A 1388 statute required letters of authorisation for any worker travelling away from home (Bennett 2010, 12).

This was the first time an English government had attempted to micromanage the economy. However, the aim of the government in the 14th century was not to promote economic growth but rather to maintain the existing social order. In a world where social ranks were seen as God-given, governments thought there was a moral imperative to restrict excessive consumption or accumulation of wealth by those classes not entitled to it. These concerns also led to sumptuary legislation which for example specified which social groups could wear what type of clothes with poorer people "allowed to wear only blanket and russet wool" (Sponsier 1992, 275). Legislation such as this sought to preserve society as it was before the pandemic - just as furloughing sought to deep freeze the economy in 2020, only the medieval legislation was not temporary.

But this attempt to regulate the market did not work. Enforcement of the labour legislation led to evasion and protests. In the longer term, real wages rose as the population level stagnated with recurrent outbreaks of the plague. Landlords struggled to come to terms with the changes in the land market as a result of the loss in population. There was large-scale migration after the Black Death as people took advantage of opportunities to move to better land or pursue trade in the towns. Most landlords were forced to offer more attractive deals to ensure tenants farmed their lands. However, any suggestion that women benefitted, even temporarily, from the situation through increased job opportunities and incomes, seems to be a myth. Research has shown that women lost out by accepting permanent contracts and the perceived security they offered, despite the fact that casual work was better remunerated (Humphries, Weisdorf 2015).

6 <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/seth/statute-labourers.asp>.

The failure of the government's attempts to control the labour market is vividly illustrated in legal records. In Surrey, William Cothull found John Egger wandering and able to work. Cothull offered to employ Egger as a ploughman for a year. Egger refused, so Cothull had Egger arrested and put in the stocks until he agreed to work for him (Bennett 2010, 17). Others were more successful in evading the legislation. A common trick was to claim that you already worked for someone else: when Peter de Semere offered work to William atte Merre of Merrow in February 1350, William claimed he was unable to work for Peter because he was already a serf of the prior and convent of St Mary at Boxgrove on the priory's manor of Merrow, and the justices found in William's favour (Horrox 1994, 317). Others simply disappeared. John Carter a 'common labourer' took an oath before the constables of Apley in Lincolnshire in June 1373 to work in that village the following summer and autumn but vanished a week later (Poos 1983, 31).

The inequities of the labour legislation led to resistance. In 1350, two constables in the village of Preston in Suffolk tried to force Richard Digg, a common labourer, to work for various men in the village. The vicar objected and demanded to know by what authority Digg could be ordered to work. The vicar communicated the constables and, encouraged by the vicar, Digg refused to serve and instead earned his own living as a wage labourer (Bennett 2010, 22-3).

The idea that labourers might not work according to the customary patterns and could earn their own living as wage labourers offended many. Wage labourers were often portrayed as idle and feckless, wasting their time in taverns and gaming (itself a sign that they had more disposable income). William Langland in his great moral poem *Piers Plowman* contrasted the honest virtuous figure of the ploughman with the wage labourers who were portrayed as rootless wasters unwilling to do an honest day's work, akin to fraudulent beggars (Dyer 2000). These themes were taken up by the gentry and merchants in parliament who complained about workers refusing to accept the statutory levels of pay and leaving before the end of their service:

For fear of such flights, the commons now dare not challenge or offend their servants, but give them whatever they wish to ask, in spite of the statutes and ordinances to the contrary - and this chiefly through fear they will be received elsewhere. (Dobson 1981, 73)

A new middle class of men (almost always men) emerged. These were people who were not born into the landed gentry but were able to make enough surplus wealth to purchase plots of land. Clement Paston (of the Norfolk family who bequeathed the famous medieval letter collection) took advantage of the Black Death to accumulate substantial landholding in the vicinity of Paston. It is possible that Clem-

ent started life as a peasant bondsman, but he accumulated enough wealth to have his son educated in the law and in two generations the family rose rapidly through the ranks of the gentry.⁷ Recent research has shown that property ownership opened up to market speculation (Bell, Brooks, Killick 2019a) and this market allowed investors to speculate and profit (Bell, Brooks, Killick 2019b).

Meanwhile, England was still at war with France and required large armies for its campaigns overseas. This had to be paid for, and in England led to more taxes on a diminished population. The parliament of a young Richard II came up with the innovative idea of punitive poll taxes in 1377, 1379 and 1380, leading directly to social unrest in the form of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.⁸ This revolt, the largest ever seen in England, came as a direct consequence of the recurring outbreaks of plague and government attempts to tighten control over the economy and pursue its international ambitions. When the rebels met the King at Mile End, they demanded that serfdom should be abolished and that all land should be held at a rent of four pence an acre. They also requested that the laws controlling when and for whom men and women should work should be abolished and that nobody should be forced to work against their will and without a written agreement (Dobson 1981, 161).

3 Lessons for Today

While the plague that caused the Black Death was very different to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are some important lessons here for future economic growth. First, governments must take great care to manage the economic fallout. Maintaining the status quo for vested interests can spark unrest and political volatility. Second, restricting freedom of movement can cause a violent reaction. We have already seen the tensions around lockdown as a result of COVID-19. At the time of writing, it is unclear how far further restrictions will be necessary, but it is worth noting that there were five further outbreaks of bubonic plague in Britain between 1360 and 1390 and these recurrences, combined with resentment against the restrictions on the labour market, contributed significantly to the tensions which led to the revolt in 1381.

In the wake of the Black Death schemes for government borrowing collapsed amidst accusations of corruption and misconduct. As an alternative, Edward III prioritised overseas trade and implement-

7 <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-52791;jsessionid=99CFE47439CC7396B9551FEF55548ABB>.

8 <https://www.1381.onLine>.

ed reforms to the wool markets (wool was England's most import export in the period). The government broke up the old cartels that had dominated the trade and these reforms were successful in generating a level of profit that was unsurpassed for the rest of the Middle Ages (Ormrod 2011, 369). As Boris Johnson conducts negotiations over the Brexit deal he would do well to bear in mind the importance of boosting overseas trade.

The pandemic of bubonic plague in the 14th century brought to the fore anxieties about social change and inequality. Attempts by the magnates and gentry over a period of decades to control these changes led to large-scale social unrest. Today, the slow reaction of governments to the disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 virus on BAME populations has fostered the unprecedented international protests by the Black Lives Matter movement following the killing of George Floyd. The 14th-century experience reinforces the need for government to act swiftly to address issues of social injustice at a time when pandemics have heightened social and cultural anxieties.

Plus, we should not underestimate the knee-jerk, psychological reaction. The Black Death saw an increase in xenophobic and antisemitic attacks.⁹ It unleashed waves of persecution: against beggars and priests in Narbonne, Carcassonne and Grasse; pilgrims in Catalonia; Catalans in Sicily; and most infamously Jews across German-speaking regions of Central Europe, through the Rhineland and thence into Spain, France and the Low Countries (Cohn 2018, 48-53). In England, resentment at the role of merchants from the Low Countries in the wool trade led to xenophobic massacres of Flemings during the 1381 revolt. Fear and suspicion of non-natives changed trading patterns.

There will be winners and losers economically as the current public health emergency plays out. In the context of the Black Death, elites attempted to entrench their power, but population change in the long term forced some rebalancing to the benefit of labourers, both in terms of wages and mobility and in opening up the market for land (the major source of wealth at the time) to new investors. Population decline also encouraged immigration, albeit to take up low skilled or low-paid jobs. All are lessons that reinforce the need for measured, carefully researched responses from current governments.

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/health/01plague.html>.

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