Books

The positive outcomes of the Black Death

James Belich is interested in death. Not so much for its own sake; he does not dwell on how exactly *Yersinia pestis* kills. It is the consequences of all those deaths that take centre stage in the intensively researched and heavily detailed book *The world the plague made: the Black Death and the rise of Europe*. The Black Death first hit Europe in 1346. If half the continent's population was eradicated, which seems a reasonable estimate, then each survivor was presented with substantially increased resources. "Even when scarce labour prevented the working of two farms or two fishing boats, people chose the better of those available—bigger, newer, better sited, or more easily worked, a 'better half' principle", explains Belich. Productivity per worker rose, which in turn increased real wages, disposable incomes, and tax revenues, the consequences of which rippled through the global economy and transformed the course of history.

Belich, who is a professor of imperial and Commonwealth history at the University of Oxford, UK, argues that the 150 years or so after the advent of the Black Death represented a golden age in Europe. Archeological findings from England showed an abrupt rise in the number of utensils for cooking meat, such as frying pans and spits, in peasant households from 1350. "Most people ate and drank better as well as dressed better", writes Belich. But he does not overstate his case. "A few trinkets, a pound or two of meat a week, a larger hut, and sewing your clothes from purchased cloth, rather than also spinning and weaving it yourself, was an improvement, but not by much", he points out.

Moreover, the improvements came at quite a cost. Survivors of the Black Death had watched half the people they know die in agony. "This scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands", wrote Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), the Florentine author of the *Decameron*. "Even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them".

Still, as the recovery took hold, per capita consumption of dairy products, ale, and wine increased. A greater proportion of the population could afford to buy fustian, a mix of cotton and linen. Those further up the income pyramid responded to the widening purchasing power by regularly changing their style. Was this the birth of fashion?

Empire building is the major focus of *The world the plague made*. There are crisp descriptions of how city states such as Genoa came to exert oversized influence both locally and further afield, and how the imperial powers viewed race and whiteness. The author outlines the European 'expansion kit', at the forefront of which was readily deployable labour. After the Black Death, there was a shift away from using less productive land to grow crops. In Switzerland, for example, the uplands started herding livestock, leaving arable farming to those situated lower down. The surplus male labour took to soldiering. In Cheshire, in western England, the move from grain to cheese freed the men to become archers.

The extra bodies did more than swell the ranks of medieval armies. They worked ships and peopled colonies, they hunted for fur and toiled in mines, they became pirates and smugglers. Belich calls these individuals "crewmen". "Europe's crews were vital to its expansion. They were inured to risk because they had to be. They were also armed and dangerous", writes Belich. "They were literally at the cutting edge of European expansion, as disposable as razor blades".

Belich suggests that the memory of plague had left crewmen with a fatalistic attitude to life, and so they were willing to undertake risky missions. He further wonders whether nineteenth century emigration from European states to the Americas owed something to the collective memory of the golden age of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Those who fled the old world for the new, imagined their destination as a rich and plentiful terrain full of opportunity. "Peasant cultures have long 'social memories', and what other 'utopia', with such particular characteristics, might this wide range of European peasantries have had in common?", asks Belich. "During the post-plague 'golden age', peasants did have more meat and better treatment, and infringed more on lordly game laws in forests whose extents had suddenly doubled per capita".

Nonetheless, for the most part, Belich is reluctant to indulge in speculation. *The world the plague made* is securely anchored in statistics and an astonishing array of sources—the notes run to over 150 pages. Belich amply teases out the influence of the Black Death on the events of the subsequent centuries. His book is centred on Eurasia, with frequent and lengthy forays to the Muslim world and China, and a chapter devoted to the Russian experience. It is a fantastic display of scholarship.

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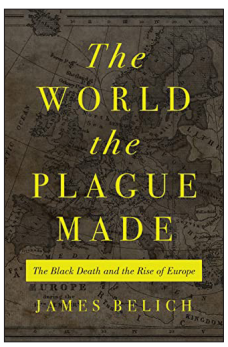

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