

CRISES AND CONSEQUENCES
Examining the Responses of France and England to the Black Death

The Black Death, a devastating pandemic that plagued all of Europe in the 14th century, forever altered the social, economic, and political landscapes of the continent. As the plague continued to ravage kingdoms, especially those of England and France, they faced unprecedented challenges mainly due to the decimation of their populations. The disruption of the feudal system, which had long governed their societies, began to unravel in the face of these crises, which practically forced leaders to abruptly implement various responses and address the countless problems that arose. This turmoil caused various issues, including labor shortages, economic instability, and mass social unrest, as each kingdom approached these challenges, it reflected their unique social and political landscapes. The aftermath of the Black Death not only challenged existing power structures but also raised questions about the state's role in how it managed social welfare and economic stability. Examining how England and France responded to the Black Death and the economic and societal challenges reveals that, while both kingdoms attempted to preserve traditional structures, England's failure to enforce labor regulations resulted in greater wage increases and autonomy for peasants. In contrast, France's more stringent—but equally unsuccessful—efforts to control wages and reinforce feudal authority shaped their respective paths toward emerging economies. England's response to the labor shortage involved a significant increase in the wages of the working class and far greater autonomy for peasants which contrasted sharply with France's efforts to regulate wages through the Statute of Laborers. Additionally, while England experienced a rise in both social mobility and peasant assertiveness, France, on the other hand, faced greater tensions between social classes that ultimately led to considerable unrest. Lastly, both nations saw noticeable shifts in their power dynamics, yet England's changes more so facilitated the decline of feudalism more rapidly compared to France's struggle to maintain feudal control. The different paths taken by various

societies and how they responded to the crisis of the Black Death illustrated their respective attempts to adapt to the plague's transformative impacts on their overall societal structures, especially those of England and France.

England's response to the labor shortage that followed the Black Death significantly altered its economic landscape that facilitated substantial wage increases and greater autonomy for the peasant class. The dramatic labor shortage brought on by the pandemic created an urgent need for employers to attract workers which resulted in widespread wage hikes. Wages doubled in England, and in some districts it increased even more.¹ This shift reflected a newfound assertiveness among the peasantry, as landlords and authorities could no longer rely heavily on traditional forceful methods—legal, religious, or otherwise—to control and extract surplus from them.² Consequently, many farmers experienced significant improvements in living conditions and gained newfound freedoms as the system of serfdom began to collapse. Peasants saw their obligations reduced and gained more job opportunities than ever before. For a brief period, the peasantry held a level of power unprecedented in European history which created what is sometimes referred to as a “golden age” for the working class.³ By contrast, France's efforts to control the labor shortage through the French Statute of 1351 reflected a more rigid attempt to enforce pre-pandemic norms.⁴ French authorities imposed strict regulations on both wages and prices, with the intent to limit the economic autonomy gained by peasants. Unlike England, where the Statute of Laborers failed to suppress wage increases and peasant independence, France took a more comprehensive approach where it regulated not only wages but also the

¹ Robbins, Helen. “A Comparison of the Effects of the Black Death on the Economic Organization of France and England.” *Journal of Political Economy* 36, no. 4 (1928): 447–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1822539>.

² Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu, “The Long Thirteenth Century: Structural Crisis, Conjunctural Catastrophe,” in *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (n.p.: Pluto Press, 2015), 79-80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183pb6f.8>.

³ Anievas and Nişancioğlu, “The Long Thirteenth Century,” 79-80.

⁴ Robbins, “A Comparison of the Effects of the Black Death,” 474-475.

goods sold and guild exclusivity. Rulers implemented these measures as part of a broader attempt to maintain feudal authority and prevent the breakdown of traditional structures. Despite these efforts, the statute faced resistance, and like England, enforcement proved weak. However, France's more oppressive stance led to greater tensions between social classes, evident by the increased unrest that culminated in events such as the Jacquerie, a peasant uprising in 1358. This unrest underscored the challenges France faced in keeping feudal power intact, whereas England's labor market proved more flexible and allowed peasants to negotiate for better terms. In both nations, the aftermath of the Black Death revealed deep fractures in feudal society, but England's response, with its failed wage controls and the subsequent rise of peasant autonomy, set it on a more rapid path toward the decline of feudalism. France similarly struggled with labor issues, took longer to abandon feudal structures, and clung more tightly to its traditional hierarchies. Ultimately, England's wage increases and shifts in power dynamics led to quicker economic transformation, while France's harsher regulatory approach delayed, but it could not stop, similar long-term changes. This notable rise in wages not only provided immediate economic relief to laborers that survived but also started to dismantle the rigid social hierarchy that had previously defined feudal society. As peasants began to receive higher wages, they experienced increased bargaining power which allowed them to negotiate for better terms that regarded their labor and the enhancement of their social mobility. In contrast, the English government's attempts to regulate wages through the Statute of Laborers failed to control this newfound autonomy among the working class effectively. King Edward III's Statute of Laborers stipulated that "Every man and woman of our realm of England, of what condition he be, free or bond... be bounden to serve him which so shall him require" for pre-plague wages.⁵ Edward III established the statute to require all able-bodied individuals under sixty years of age and to

⁵ Edward III of England, "Ordinance of Laborers Excerpt," 1349, Ancient and Medieval History.

ensure that employers paid them wages consistent with those in the area prior to the plague.⁶ In addition to this, to ensure workers followed this statute which made them unable to refuse work, if they did refuse they would be “proved by two true men before the sheriff or the constables of the town where the same shall happen to be done, he shall anon be taken by them or any of them, and committed to the next gaol, there to remain under strait keeping, till he find surety to serve in the form aforesaid.”⁷ This means that if anyone refuses work they would be held in jail until they agreed to serve as the statute required.⁸ Enforcement proved weak, however, and the statute faced widespread neglect as the population’s scarcity gave workers leverage over employers, which led to future peasant revolts and the reformation of the feudal system. This failure to enforce labor regulations illustrates how the pandemic’s upheaval empowered peasants rather than subjugated them, which further highlighted the reactions of England and France that contrasted each other to similar crises. Furthermore, the increase in wages led to widespread social unrest as peasants asserted their rights and challenged traditional feudal obligations. These revolts highlighted the discontent that grew among the lower classes and signified a broader shift away from the feudal system which paved the way for emerging economic structures. In summary, England’s strategy addressed the labor shortage through wage increases and peasant autonomy which contrasts starkly with the more oppressive measures seen in France. This juxtaposition underscores the fundamental differences in how each kingdom responded and adapted to the challenges of the Black Death, particularly in their attempts to control labor and maintain social order.

While the Black Death sparked greater social mobility and peasant assertiveness in England, it deepened class tensions in France which led to widespread unrest. In England, the labor shortage caused by the pandemic granted peasants newfound opportunities to demand

⁶ Edward III of England, "Ordinance of Laborers."

⁷ Edward III of England, "Ordinance of Laborers."

⁸ English Parliament, "Statute of Laborers," 1351, Ancient and Medieval History.

better wages, working conditions, and increased mobility. This newfound autonomy enabled many peasants to improve their social standing in ways previously unimaginable within the constraints of the feudal system.⁹ The decline of serfdom combined with rising wages enabled peasants to challenge traditional social hierarchies which led to enhanced economic and social freedoms. During this period, the lower classes grew more empowered and resisted feudal obligations through collective action and asserted their rights. A clear example of this growing social flexibility transpired in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, in which laborers organized to demand better conditions and even influenced national policy.¹⁰ Although the revolt ultimately faced suppression, it highlighted the growing strength and autonomy of England's working class. By contrast, France's response to the Black Death exacerbated the social divisions that existed which led to widespread unrest.¹¹ This oppressive approach worsened tensions between the lower and upper classes, as the aristocracy and the ruling elite sought to maintain their economic dominance through policies which suppressed peasant demands. In response, French peasants, frustrated by their lack of opportunity and harsh treatment, engaged in violent uprisings that reflected their desperation and anger. French authorities failed to address the needs of the peasantry which revealed a society fractured by class conflict.¹² Ultimately, while both England and France saw labor unrest in the wake of the Black Death, these uprisings reflected the fundamental differences in how each kingdom adapted to the changing social order.

The shifts in power dynamics followed by the Black Death significantly shaped the futures of both England and France. In England, the Black Death weakened the feudal system by

⁹ Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu, "The Long Thirteenth Century: Structural Crisis, Conjunctural Catastrophe," in *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (n.p.: Pluto Press, 2015), 66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183pb6f.8>.

¹⁰ Ormrod, W. M. "The Peasants' Revolt and the Government of England." *Journal of British Studies* 29, no. 1 (1990): 1–30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175483>.

¹¹ Robbins, "A Comparison of the Effects of the Black Death," 462-463.

¹² Robbins, "A Comparison of the Effects of the Black Death," 462-463.

creating labor shortages that increased the bargaining power of workers. Labor shortages shifted power from the land-owning elite and contributed to the decline and eventual collapse of the rigid feudal structure.¹³ Meanwhile, the laborers largely ignored the monarchy's legal reforms such as the Ordinance of Laborers which further highlighted the diminishing nature of feudal control. In contrast, France's aristocracy proved to be more successful in maintaining feudal control, at least temporarily, as seen in their enforcement of laws that aimed to preserve traditional power structures. The French nobility and monarchy took further risk on feudal restrictions that followed the Black Death, and attempted to reassert control through statutes that regulated wages and labor.¹⁴ France's stronger aristocratic response revealed a kingdom unwilling to relinquish its reliance on feudal systems, and resulted in a slower transition away from serfdom. However, while France delayed the decline of feudalism, peasant uprisings continued to challenge the status quo. By the late fifteenth century, even in France, the signs of feudalism's decline became evident, although the process lagged behind England. While England's path toward a capitalist economy became accelerated by the Black Death, France clung to feudalism for as long as it could but still eventually fell along with England.¹⁵ This underscores the key difference between the two nations: England moved more swiftly toward the collapse of serfdom, while France's more rigid hierarchy prolonged the feudal system's hold on society. Thus, while both kingdoms saw shifts in power, England's break from feudalism occurred more swiftly and decisively and laid the groundwork for early capitalism, whereas France delayed such transformations until centuries later. This fundamental divergence in how

¹³ Hatcher, John. "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death." *Past & Present*, no. 144 (1994): 3–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/651142>.

¹⁴ Robbins, "A Comparison of the Effects of the Black Death," 462-463.

¹⁵ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, "The Long Thirteenth Century," 66, 77.

each kingdom responded to the Black Death would shape their respective political and economic paths for generations to come, particularly in the rise of capitalism in post-feudal Europe.

The complex aftermath of the Black Death initiated profound transformations in the social and economic landscapes of England and France, as each kingdom grappled with the repercussions of the pandemic. England's approach, characterized by significant wage increases and peasant autonomy, facilitated a more rapid decline of feudalism. In contrast, France's attempts to maintain control through the French Statute of 1351 resulted in heightened tensions and unrest among its populace. Furthermore, while England experienced a surge in social mobility and assertiveness among the lower classes, the oppressive measures in France deepened existing class divisions which led to violent uprisings. Lastly, the shifts in power dynamics that followed the plague significantly shaped the futures of both nations, with England transitioning more swiftly toward capitalism, while France struggled to relinquish its feudal structures. This divergence in responses not only underscores the contrasting fates of England and France but also highlights the broader implications for European society as a whole. The Black Death served as a catalyst for change and accelerated the decline of feudalism in England. This shift set the stage for the rise of capitalism, a transition that would echo through subsequent centuries. Conversely, France's reliance on feudal authority delayed similar economic transformations which ultimately influenced the trajectory of its own social and political evolution. This historical contrast provides insight into how crises can precipitate significant societal changes, illustrating that responses to disaster can shape the foundations of future economic systems and governmental structures.

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