

The Collapse of Beliefs in “Rois Thaumaturges” — The Black Death and the Transformation of French People’s Concepts

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Abstract

In the middle of the 14th century, a plague, the Black Death, broke out across Europe and spread to France in 1348, killing large numbers of people. The old social order gradually collapsed under the impact of the plague and, in the face of radical changes in society, the attitude of the French towards religious power, royalty and the relations of production experienced a major transformation. They no longer set their sights on the distant afterlife, but were more interested in the reality of their own happiness; they rose up against the decadent system under the rule of the old aristocracy; at the same time, they began to reflect anew on their own position in the relations of production. All this symbolized the gradual collapse of the “rois thaumaturges” (the royal touch) that represented the inherent collective belief.

Keywords: the Black Death, transformation of concepts, France in the Middle Ages

1. Introduction

In 1924, the famous French historian Marc Bloch published the book *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France (Les Rois Thaumaturges)* which focuses on the period between the XI and XVIII centuries, when the king’s touch was very popular in France and England for curing scrofula. It is obvious that neither scrofula nor any other disease can be cured by the royal touch, but in both countries, between the XI and XVIII centuries, people were convinced that the royal touch could bring about such a cure. The great significance of this book lies in the fact that the author demonstrates the mechanism through which the royalty exerted its control over people’s minds and spirits by examining a healing ritual which existed for eight centuries that “sanctified” royal authority and a collective state of mind or belief system closely associated with it (Zhang, 2014). This book offers a new perspective on historical research. This phenomenon was attributed to the conviction of the public in the supernatural power of the royal authority, which induced a “collective false consciousness” among them. The royal touch represented the inherent beliefs of the public, which have been dismantled throughout the course of history in the midst of major social transformations and debacles, such as the Black Death that swept through France in 1348, known as the Peste Noire, which resulted in the collapse of the royal miracle.

2. Shaken Faith and Mysticism

When looking back at the history of the outbreak of the Black Death in the 14th century, “the first thing that comes to mind is the separation of man from God, and thus the Black Death has been considered as an important factor in the Religious Reformation for quite a long time” (Zhao, 2004, p. 76). The disaster occurred six times in France between 1361 and 1426, the last of which claimed the lives of 5,000 Parisians (Boissonnade, 1985). The power of faith seemed meaningless against the succession of death. The Christians hoped to recover from the disease through prayer and charity. But when they realized that the plague was still raging and that death was unavoidable, they experienced a departure of their belief and emotion, which shook the foundations of the

omnipotence of God and impacted on the God-oriented concept of the French and European people during the Middle Ages. The people who have survived the disaster begin to reexamine the value of their own lives through the death of others, evoking their pursuit of well-being. The thought of humanism began to emerge during the period of the Black Death, “so that the pursuit of realistic pleasures at any time became the belief of the living people, and at the same time, the celebration of human life and the promotion of their rights became the new social concept” (Shen & Zhang, 1997, p. 423). Such a germ of the thought paved the way for the Renaissance and the Reformation in France over a century later. The transformation of the religious conception of the French was also represented by the rise of the spontaneous faith, which was the result of the combined effects of the Black Death and mysticism. During the outbreak of the Black Death, although the Church sent the clergy to help the suffering people and paid a great deal of sacrifice, many superiors refused the requests for confessions of the dying sufferers of the Black Death, which intensified the people’s antipathy towards the Church. Some churches even accepted donations during this period and made a fortune out of the plague, once again shaking the confidence of the public in the Church.

The changes in the religious perspective among the French are also reflected in the spontaneous emergence of belief, which was the product of the combined influence of the Black Death and mysticism. The shadow of mysticism can always be found in the social environment amid the outbreak of major crises. When contradictions defy reconciliation, it is inevitable that people turn to mysticism as a medium for direct communication with God. During the outbreak of the Black Death, the Church sent out many priests to help the patients and made great sacrifices. However, the common refusal of many senior priests to the requests of dying patients for confession deepened public resentment towards the Church. Some churches even profited from the epidemic through donations during this period, which once again undermined the public trust in the Church. What’s worse, the huge loss of life among priests also weakened religious power. The year 1348 witnessed the death of six bishops due to the Black Death, followed by the demise of nine in 1361. “In 1348, 93 officials and servants of the Pope’s entourage died of the Black Death; in 1361, 97 were demised” (Glénisson, 1968, p. 36). Only seven out of 140 monks of the Ordre Mendiant in Montpellier managed to survive, and all the monks in the monastery of Cordeliers in Marseille and Carcassonne died of the Black Death (Sessevalle, 1935, pp. 144-145). Twelve out of 20 monks in Saint-Seurin of Bordeaux passed away (Boutruche, 1947, pp. 199-200). As “the only educated people in rural areas and a relatively active part of the urban intellectual elite”, clergy served an important “function in the social and intellectual structure of an era” (Boutruche, 1947, p. 465). They undertook moral education and enlightenment. Therefore, despite a persistent commitment to religious beliefs among some people, they turned to mysticism amidst the absence of trust in the Church and the huge casualties among the clergy, which gave rise to spontaneous belief. Before the outbreak of the Black Death, there were many attempts made by sects in France to interpret doctrine in their own ways, such as the Waldensians in the 11th century and the Albigensians in the 12th century in the south of France. After the outbreak of the Black Death, a morbid collective panic struck the French people. As a result, there was the establishment of a large number of rural churches from 1350 to 1375. The Flagellants popular in 14th-century Western Europe believed that flagellation could redeem them and help them achieve perfection so as to be accepted into heaven after the apocalypse. Singing hymns, they traveled around, specially made long whips with metal attachments at the end in their hands, to openly whip patients for healing and redemption. Seeking divine mercy through violent bodily trauma was mostly spontaneous among the lower classes, which deepened public distrust of clergy, as believers opined that God’s spokespersons did not make more sacrifices than they made for human redemption. “In the decades after the epidemic, not only did the prestige and spiritual authority of the Church see a decline, but also the growth of religious enthusiasm was witnessed” (Jia, 2015, p. 139). In an era before the enlightenment of science, mysticism sects injected believers with a feeling that they would be endowed with supernatural abilities. They attracted and consolidated the group by exercising these supernatural abilities to heal believers from illness. In that era, such religious fervour of mysticism was often regarded as heresy, which took root in the soil of the lower social strata and began its steady growth, undoubtedly subverting the Christian faith in God.

3. The Awakening of Political Consciousness

The feudal system, upon which European aristocrats relied to maintain their rule over serfs, began to change in the 12th century but never completely collapsed. Before the outbreak of the Black Death, the land system in France was based on leasing. As landowners, lords rented out portions of land to peasants for cultivation, but the land was originally distributed to peasants. Peasants, in turn, were required to pay rent. In France, peasants had to deliver a certain amount of agricultural products to the lords every 3, 6, or 9 years, which varies from region to region (Xue, 1999, p. 101).

The outbreak of the Black Death resulted in a massive population loss. As a result, labor became a major social concern. At this time, peasants came to realize the potential for a change in the already unreasonable land system. Consequently, they asked noble lords to reduce land rents and increase labor wages. In order to maintain their own interests, the lords controlled wage amounts through regulations, which further stirred dissatisfaction among

the peasants and intensified class contradictions. The peasants' fight for their own interests clashed with the stubbornness of the noble lords. Their conflicts, along with the devastation of the Black Death in rural areas, inevitably increased the consciousness of resistance among peasants, who, previously acquiesced to the existing political system, now initiated uprisings. "According to historical records, this period saw an unprecedented number of riots" (Zhao, 2004, p. 77). The Paris Uprising of 1358 and the Jacquerie Uprising occurred against this backdrop, with the latter being one of the largest peasant uprisings in the Middle Ages. This uprising was a symbol of the awakening of political consciousness among the French people under the catalyst of the Black Death. Oppressed peasants stood up to feudal exploitation for their legitimate interests and basic subsistence.

Despite the failure of the peasant class in a series of uprisings, they nonetheless indicated the awakening of the peasant class and the shift in political consciousness under the oppression of disasters and a corrupt system. These ideas, although in their infancy, laid the groundwork for the future compromise of the noble lords and the eventual abolition of serfdom.

In addition, anti-Semitism during the epidemic was prevalent. René Baehrel referred to it as "class hatred in times of epidemic." The impoverished believed that the Black Death "picked up its victims only among the poor... They accused the rich, nobles, and bourgeoisie of their freedom from death in the epidemic and poisoning the poor" (Baehrel, 1952, p. 356). With the progress of the Flagellant movement, the religious fervor among the lower classes changed into massacres of Jews. They accused Jews of "poisoning the wells and other water sources" (Carpentier, 1962, p. 1067) and viewed them as the opposing class of speculators and usurers who defy tolerance. "Upon the outbreak of plague on February 14, 1349, 2,000 Jews were slaughtered in Strasbourg; similar massacre also occurred in every part of Alsace" (Carpentier, 1962, p. 1068). Long-standing religious conflicts and economic interests were unleashed in the times of the Black Death. The lower classes lived in fear of death and fantasized about a utopia without class distinctions or wealth gaps. This fantasy not only ended up in political turmoil but also the awakening of political consciousness.

4. Transformation of Economic Concepts and Industrial Adjustment

In the 14th century, extreme economic and social chaos spread throughout France and Europe under the influence of the Black Death. The Black Death ravaged both rural and urban areas. Cities were reduced to become major plague-hit areas due to poor sanitation and inadequate public facilities. "The death toll from the Black Death ranged from two-thirds to one-eighth of the total population, which varied from region to region" (Renouard, 1948, p. 463). A large number of urban residents saw their demise, and survivors escaped from their hometowns, which left devastating blows to urban development. However, destruction and rebuilding always coincide with each other, and the spread of the plague has never given a pause to the process of urban civilization. Instead, the outbreak of the Black Death marked a new opportunity for the development of urban civilization, which closely correlated to the transformation of public economic concepts.

From the outbreak of the Black Death until the second half of the 15th century, the price of grain in France had seen a steady decline, while from 1484 to 1485, that of rye in Strasbourg, France, was 75% lower than it was in 1481 (Abel, 1980, p. 67). A stark contrast was the surge in prices of handmade goods and luxury items in cities, where even demand exceeded supply because suddenly stricken by the Black Death, people were left unable to propose effective solutions and found nowhere to escape. Survivors began to reevaluate the value of life, and, therefore, began to pursue pleasure and luxury. This transformation of mindset directly resulted in the rapid development of the manufacturing industry. With this opportunity, wealth began to transfer from all parts of the country to urban areas.

Furthermore, the decrease in the number of craftsmen and agricultural workers contributed to the shortage of products and labors, an increase in labor prices and wages, as well as a drop in crop prices. Many landowners abandoned agriculture and turned their attention to the more lucrative sheep farming industry. The development of this industry further expedited the long-term growth of the textile and manufacturing industries in cities. "The wool industry, together with the pharmaceutical, fur, and banking industries, etc., makes up the lifeline of the urban economy. It drives the booming of the urban economy and serves as the pioneer of Europe's transition from the Middle Ages to modern society". Moreover, many lords and large landowners who died of the Black Death failed to leave behind any heirs or donate their property to the church. Consequently, there was a surge in the economic power of the church, nevertheless without the ability to at once manage the newly-acquired lands (Glénisson, 1968, p. 29). Farmers who no longer had a strong sense of attachment to the land migrated to areas where they were offered higher wages. As stated by Glénisson, "Old customs and disciplines have been broken" (29). The traditional agrarian economic mindset was changed by the rage of the Black Death, as there was a shift of focus to the development of emerging industries such as manufacturing and textiles, which not only promoted productivity but also urban civilization and early capital accumulation. It prepared France for the upcoming Renaissance and gave an impetus to the transition of France, and indeed all of Europe, from the Middle Ages to modern society.

5. Conclusion

The transformation and liberation of concepts often serve as major spiritual driving forces for social progress. Only when certain opportunities come can the shackles of thoughts be shattered. This opportunity can be a sweeping movement for intellectual liberation or, at times, a plague that wreaks havoc on the whole continent.

It is crucial to approach the incessant Black Death outbreaks in 14th-century Europe with a dialectical perspective. It is undeniable that, as a plague, the Black Death claimed so many lives and gave rise to short-term waste of land resources as well as massive economic paralysis, which exacerbated the already challenging lives of the lower classes. This is undeniable. However, from another perspective, the Black Death prompted a transformation of concepts of the people in France and across Europe. They never submitted to the will of the church and the oppression of feudal aristocrats. People with relatively better finances also began to direct their focus to other industries, which contributed to the advent and development of capitalism. The concepts and shackles represented by the “divine right of kings,” which had entrenched themselves in the hearts of the people, also came to be shattered by this plague. The liberation of thought is inevitable. The destruction brought by this plague also came with new vitality and opportunities.

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