



The Black Death as a case study

Posted by [Stuart Staniford](#) on February 1, 2006 - 12:08am

Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

Tags: [black death](#), [dieoff](#), [hubbert peak](#), [peak oil](#) [[list all tags](#)]

[editor's note, by Stuart Staniford] This is a guest post from [Southsider1](#) who is a recovering historian. He made some comments to me once about the Black Death as an analogy for peak oil. I don't personally think peak oil is likely to be nearly as bad as the Black Death, but I thought his general insights on what happened then were very interesting.

I'm wary of the more extreme doom-and-gloom predictions about life on the downward side of the peak. When folks like [Jan Lundberg write](#),

It is becoming clear to more and more energy analysts that the United States of America as we know it will not endure for long.

I say, how does he know, and how can anyone know in what way a nation or a civilization will respond to a catastrophe?

One of the nice things about studying history is that you get to look at a good number of specific examples of how people, individually and in groups, have responded to challenges. What history shows us is that societies do not necessarily respond to horrible catastrophes by collapsing, nor do they always transform themselves overnight. What is remarkable is that they often retain as much of the established order as possible. To further explore the question of what might happen in our own future, Stuart asked me to post a discussion of what happened to medieval society when it was hit by the plague known as the Black Death.

Wikipedia has a [good overview](#) of the Black Death. First striking in 1348, the epidemics returned in 1360, 1369 and 1375. The overall population of Europe, which has been [estimated](#) to be around 75 million in 1340, declined to 50 million in 1450. England possesses the richest sources of medieval documentary evidence, making it relatively easier to estimate population loss there. Here are estimates for the percentage of the total population killed by plague in England:

First epidemic (1348)	25%
Second epidemic (1360)	23%
Third epidemic (1369)	13%
Fourth epidemic (1375)	13%

English population in 1347 was at least 3.7 million (some estimates are higher). By 1377 it had declined by around 40%.

Cities were harder hit than the countryside because of poor sanitation and crowding - ideal for spreading disease amongst large numbers of people. For instance, here is a famous source for Siena, Italy, [Agnolo di Tura](#):

The mortality began in Siena in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing. . . . There was no one who wept for any dead, for all awaited death. And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world. . . . This situation continued until September. . . . in the city and suburbs of Siena 80,000 persons died. At this time Siena and its suburbs had more than 30,000 men, and there remained in Siena less than 10,000 men.

I think the staunchest proponent of a die-off scenario would agree that the Black Death was a true die-off.

The Black Death has long been seen as a major event in world history, as important as peak oil will be. So, what happened in Europe? Was there social anarchy? Did kingdoms and empires fall? Was the Catholic Church and the world-view it fostered overturned? Were there widespread revolts and dramatic revolutions? Did the world change over night? In brief: no.

In Spain, for instance, the economic pattern of agricultural and industrial work was not modified. While the plague caused considerable disturbance, there were no fundamental changes in the character of any political, social or economic institution. England did experience peasant revolts later in the 14th century, but these rebellions achieved nothing. In Italy, in cities hit by the plague, disorganization paralyzed political life for a short time, but the influence of the plague on political structures was [quite minimal](#) in the long run.

In general, post-plague price shocks, disruption of commerce and labor shortages often led to economic stagnation or decline, but not to fundamental change in the social order. Despite the fact that population was diminished both qualitatively and quantitatively, institutions remained intact. The overall lesson according to historian [Philippe Wolff](#):

...we must not exaggerate the social consequences of the disaster. It does not seem to have overturned the social system.

The psychological shock, however, was immense. Fear of the plague and the sight of disease and corpses aroused constant thought of death. Public morals declined, as another well-known source, [Jean de Venette](#), describes:

For men were more avaricious and grasping than before, even though they had far greater possessions. They were more covetous and disturbed each other more frequently with suits, brawls, disputes, and pleas.... Charity began to cool, and iniquity with ignorance and sin to abound.

Of course, the plague set in motion major long-term changes, much as peak oil will. Structural revolutions did occur, but they did so slowly. In Germany, for example, rural settlements and agricultural lands were abandoned. Prices for food declined and for manufactured goods rose, favoring urban over rural economies. Urban wealth became more concentrated, and people moved from the country into the cities. The landed nobility declined in relation to the urban world, and the state began to exercise real power.

This growth in the power of the state is seen clearly in England too, [where](#),

...in order to preserve the status quo as far as possible, the upper orders of English society drew together into a more cohesive government to facilitate or coerce the members of the upper orders to stand to their obligations, at the same time they were coercing the lower orders more punitively to stand by theirs.

One can imagine much of the same happening after peak oil. Existing governments, institutions and organizations will remain largely intact. There will be a certain amount of disorganization and even chaos at first, but in the face of the crisis, the government's coercive powers will increase in order to maintain established order and put down rebellion. Public morals in general will decline, as the magnitude of personal losses will lead to increased crime and lower social cohesion. The economy will, slowly at first, undergo a fundamental transformation, probably along the lines [suggested by Kunstler](#): suburbs will be abandoned, large numbers of people will begin working in agriculture, passenger railroads will be rebuilt, life will become much more local. Perhaps significant numbers will die.

But that is a long way from [Olduvai](#). As in the Black Death, there is no reason to believe that we will inevitably lose our basic institutions. Governments, corporations, universities, churches, and the whole panoply of civil society can endure - in fact, might even grow stronger. For me, this is a source of hope.



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