Elements of sociology of the Black Death
(1340-1350s). Inequalities before pandemic death
in the Middle Ages : “chantries”, “private”
priests, lower “surgeons”, and other farces of the
rich.

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Abstract Medieval scholars, in all of their expertise, often fail to see the greater sociological rules governing their subjects in spite of having assembled all the necessary material themselves. In the following - based on their works - we remind of the great inequalities in times of pandemics, taking the events of the 14th+ c. Black Death as exemplary case. Not everyone was equal in front of death : the major divisions between “beneficed” and “regular” priests are recalled (they respectively received a fixed income, while the others made vows of poverty and subsisted on offerings), as well as the institutions that emerged around that time - “chantry”, “private” services, etc. : the rich sought a faster, surer way to heaven, while the first category of priests sought a faster way away from death - the poor, and the working-class, and their regular priests stayed behind, joined in common death. (Experimental history : a historian and sociologist once again steps out of their comfort zone, so as to make others uncomfortable.)

Figure 1: Hans Holbein the Younger - *Mendicant friar* (16th c.)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C..

1 Introduction

"A great mortality of men began in India and, raging through the whole of (...) Syria and Egypt, and also through Greece, Italy, Provence and France, arrived in England, where the same mortality destroyed more than a third of the men, women and children." —

A contemporary of the Black Death wrote in a journal of the cathedral priory of Rochester in 1348 (one year after its onset)¹.

We describe here the rest of the events (up to the 16th century, and today) from a social history perspective, with particular attention paid to evolving class dynamics : i.e. the ways in which the rich were able to accommodate the new disease and sometimes escape death, while others had little choice, and merely lived through the events.

Divisions within the social order of Middle ages are made current again, in this study : in the religious professions, "beneficed" vs. "regular" priests lived different lives, as did university doctors vs. "surgeons" in the medical professions — and different deaths too.

2 Sociology of a (medieval) pandemic

In his woodblock series, the German artist Hans Holbein the Younger had documented the effects of his own pandemic in 40 portraits : from Abbess to Judge, from the young to the elderly, and from the academically (astrologer) to the commercially inclined : all were visited by death. This work was done in the tradition of then popular "Dance of death" art, and meant to highlight the so-called "universality" of death.

Not all were equal.

In *Miracle in Milan* by Vittorio de Sica — no greater defender of the working-class and poor has ever existed in cinema, except Ken Loach — a bourgeois announced to an enthusiastic homeless crowd : *"We all have hands and noses: We're all the same!"* — before ordering the army to have them expelled (as oil reserves were discovered on their grounds). The rich not only own great wealth, they have more precious : they own their representations.

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To understand the diverging fates of the rich and the poor during the Black Death we must turn to the various religious institutions of the 14th c., in particular the divisions and rules that shaped them : higher offices were bought, literally, e.g. archbishop positions², while their direct subordinates were recruited amongst the offspring of the upper classes³ (meanwhile landlords ap-

¹Horrox 1994 : 70

²"At this time in history high church offices were effectively purchased from the pope. The archbishop's post cost a good deal of money, and [John] Offord had borrowed much of what was required. His early death left many creditors bankrupt." (Byrne 2005 : 116)

³"Bishops were spiritual pastors, political hacks, and administrators of vast organizations rich in lands, personnel, and other resources. Drawn for the most part from the nobility" (Ibid.)

pointed their family members, in the tradition of "I pat your back, you pat mine" feudalism).

Among priests, they were those who had stable offices and received an income (the so-called "beneficed" priests, as some Middle Ages scholars put it) while others had made vows of poverty (the priests who lived by "rules", values other than money).

As one historian writes (as Jacques Le Goff had done before him) :

"In the Catholic West there were two types of priests who worked in the world outside [the monastery]. The traditional diocesan priest was [hired] by and worked for the local bishop. (...) "Beneficed" clergy had a set position, as in a parish, and could expect an income (benefice)" (Byrne 2005 : 116)

Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the social spectrum :

"a second type of clergy, known as the mendicants ("beggars") or friars ("brothers"), developed during the thirteenth century. Francis of Assisi and Dominic Guzman, founders of the Franciscans and Dominicans respectively, (...) new orders of clergy that blended (...) apostolic detachment from the worldly life [with service] in Europe's burgeoning cities." (Ibid. 117)

It was in this general context, that the institution of "chantry" (i.e. mass-less "Masses") and the new class of "private priests" emerged, encouraged – as all too often – by the greed and heaven-less ways of the rich.

"During the later Middle Ages the wealthy (...) began to demand, and the church provided, Masses that were celebrated not with a congregation but by the priest alone and on behalf of the spiritual needs of [rich] individuals or families. (...) Since the priest sang or chanted the Mass, it was known as a "chantry." Such positions certainly paid better than those in some lowly parish and imposed only minimal obligations on the priest. With the uncertainties of plague the demand for these "private" priests grew and drew many away from pastoral duties." (Ibid. 123)

When the pandemic of the Black Death struck, these divisions suddenly manifested themselves in extreme ways : they were those – well-fed, well-earning, well-connected – who fled at the first sight of trouble, but not before having enriched themselves from the tragedy (selling their services to the rich while neglecting the poor); others kept true to their vows, soon joining those they served in mass graves.

The rich had understood the seriousness of the situation and could only think of one, death appearing seemingly inescapable : these "private", luxury Masses were meant to bypass long Purgatory stays (as described in part two of

Dante's 'Divine Comedy' : sinners walking with heavy weights on their bodies, fire walks, etc. etc.) or even ascend directly to heaven⁴.

Today, the rich don't seek a way to heaven as much as to New Zealand, or out of Milan...

In the 14th c. friar Jean de Venette, had observed amongst the privileged clergy similar attitudes. He wrote : "*[T]he cowardly priests took themselves off, leaving the performance of spiritual offices to the regular clergy, who tended to be more courageous.*" (Ibid. 122)⁵

The other domain that should be of interest to anyone trying to create a sociological history of a pandemic, Black Death not only, is the fate of the medical professions :

Its appearance here too brought to light fundamental inequalities : the learned doctors – these good gentlemen of the (new) universities – decided collectively, for there is no greater and sure solidarity than among the rich, that they would not do the menial tasks of their professions henceforth.

Thus a new class of lower practitioners emerged (contemporaneously known as "surgeons", though their role appears to be much closer to that of modern-day nurses) who would handle the bodies and the daily chores - plainly put : take all the risks.

In other words, the wealthy and educated created distance from the "populace" (as their modern-day successors like to say, in euphemisms so big) and had created an intermediary class to deal with everyday patients.

Occasionally, the surgeons paid visits - part social, part medical one is inclined to believe - to the rich patrons of the doctors they served, having not had access to the same (theoretical) education.

"Because of their lack of university education and generally lower income and status, surgeons often were second-class citizens within physicians' guilds." (Ibid. 35)

We find here, again, another example of the 'socialism' of the rich : in this morbid, and inverted system, the victims were always, and continue to be the poor.

"For many parish priests their post was little more than a job, and, being human, when the plague struck they did what so many others did: they fled. (...) Some merely sought their own safety, but the worst offenders were those who fled out of greed." (Ibid. 122)

We are left wondering how many doctors, and judges, and ambassadors did likewise, and how many will do the same now?

⁴Notably, even in Heaven not all are equal, and divisions and sub-divisions (of sins, and perhaps class) continue to exist — at least in Dante's visions, renditions.

⁵Byrne notes of the denomination "regular" : "Priests who were members of an order and followed a specific rule for living or *regula*; includes the mendicants."

Bibliography

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