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Introduction

PLAGUE PARADOXES

IN 1345, Europe and its neighbours were beset by a terrible plague. In proportion to population, it may have been the most lethal catastrophe in human history. It appeared first in the Black Sea/Volga region, spread throughout the Mediterranean from 1347, and swept Northern Europe in 1348, though it did not reach some Russian regions until as late as 1353. Once known as the "Great Death", "The Great Plague", or simply "*The* Death" or "*The* Plague", it came to be called "The Black Death". Its horrors and terrors defy description, though evocative chroniclers came close. Some variants killed quickly, in a day or two; the main variant took a week or so from the first appearance of symptoms. Sufferers lay in agony, their kin sometimes reluctant to nurse them for fear of infection. Uninfected children died because their parents had done so; infants suckling the breasts of dead mothers. Medics did their best, as shown by their numerous "plague tracts", but could find no effective treatment. Francesco Petrarch, voice of the early Italian Renaissance, wrote: "Our former hopes are buried with our friends. The year 1348 left us lonely and bereft, for it took from us wealth which could not be restored by the Indian, Caspian or Carpathian Sea. Last losses are beyond recovery, and death's wound beyond cure. There is just one comfort: that we shall follow those who went before".[1]

New information about the Black Death requires four revisions to our understanding of it. The case for each is made in part one. Here we briefly consider their possible implications. The first is less a revision than the restoration of an older view. During the twentieth century, most experts were convinced that the Black Death was bubonic plague, caused by the bacteria *Yersinia Pestis* (*Y. Pestis*), which normally infected only wild rodents. Between 2001 and 2011, the notion that the plague was bubonic came under serious attack, but recent science has now decisively reaffirmed it. This confirms that the Black Death kicked off the second of three known bubonic plague "pandemics". "Pandemic" technically means a single vast epidemic, but in common usage has come to mean a series of plague epidemics in the same large space. It is important that we distinguish them from one-off plague epidemics and from regional and local outbreaks—the last at least were, and are, quite common. The First Pandemic was the early medieval "Plague of Justinian", the reigning Byzantine emperor, which hit much the same region as the late medieval Black Death, but eight centuries earlier, in 541. Subsequent strikes, 17 or 18 of them, persisted for two centuries. The Black Death Pandemic, beginning in 1345, persisted for more than three centuries and involved about 30 major epidemics in all. The third, or modern, pandemic went intercontinental from southeast China in 1894, reached all six habitable continents, and declined from 1924. We draw much of our information about plague from this last pandemic, but it was much shorter, more pan-global, and proportionately far less lethal than the previous two. So the Second Plague Pandemic was a rare event, with only one generally accepted precursor and no real successor. If random curveballs from nature ever affected the course of human history over the past two thousand years, the Black Death pandemic is a candidate.

This is even more so because of the Black Death's horrifyingly high mortality, our second revision. The standard estimate for the first strike, 1346–53, is between one-quarter and one-third of the population of Western Europe, say 30%—bad enough in anyone's terms. Many scholars have found this unconvincingly high, given the fact that the Third Pandemic killed no more than 3% in the worst afflicted regions. Yet new and reinterpreted evidence suggests that the real Black Death toll was more like 50%: a sudden halving in the first strike alone. It may seem macabre to dispute the details of so terrible a tragedy: what does it matter if death took a third or a half? But humans are resilient, and the difference could be important to the survivors. If harvests decline 40% and 30% of people die, there is dearth for the living. If 50% die, they have modest abundance. Our third revision concerns the timing of population recovery. None of the later strikes had the spread or lethality of the first one, and, until recently, recovery was thought to be quite rapid, beginning by 1400 and complete by 1500. It now seems that this is about a century out: demographic recovery was not general until about 1500, and was not complete until about 1600. England recovered its pre-plague population in 1625, after 275 years.[2] So, during the fifteenth century, Western Europe still had half its "normal" population—the level before 1345 and after 1600. Yet this is the very century in which Western Europe's global expansion began.

Why Europe? Why did this small continent expand to the point of global hegemony? In 1400, Western Europeans controlled around 5% of the planet's surface. They are said to have controlled about 35% by 1800, reaching 80% by 1900.[3] Territory is a crude measure, and we will see that substantive European control was exaggerated. But, even by 1550, with population recovery still incomplete, Europeans dominated South America's richest bullion sources and had begun to settle in other parts of the Americas. They were also major players in the sub-Saharan African gold and slave trades, as well as in the dynamic mercantile activity of the Indian Ocean, and were beginning to stretch to China too. The wealth of Petrarch's ocean seas proved, after all, to be of some comfort to plague's survivors. This strange intersection of depopulation and successful expansion is plague's first paradox.

Geographic expansion, beginning in the fifteenth century and culminating in global hegemony in the nineteenth, was only one-half of Europe's "Great Divergence" from the rest of the planet. The other half was economic development, culminating in industrialisation in the later eighteenth century. China and India were the global economic leaders in the High Middle Ages (c.900–1300 CE), and the point at which Europe began to catch up on them is disputed. But a case will be made, in part two of this book, for the post-plague era, 1350–1500. This conjunction of terrible epidemics with economic and technological advance is plague's second paradox, which brings us to our fourth and final plague revision. Many authorities still believe that the Black Death pandemic also hit India and China in the fourteenth century, as well as Europe and its neighbours. Part one will suggest that this was probably not the case. This may implicate plague in "the" Great Divergence. To oversimplify for emphasis (and to preempt a possible quip), this book tests a new two-word answer to an old two-word question: Why Europe? *Y. Pestis*.

* * *

"Why Europe?" is a question that will not go away, though there are many who wish that it would, for some good reasons. Mainstream historians have had enough of European auto-hagiography and "high" histories of politics, diplomacy, and Great Men. Thankfully, their attention has turned to the histories of silenced European majorities, of the layers of subjectivity that refract history, and of the agency and particularity of the vast range of societies outside Europe. This has yielded an impressive array of new scholarship, which has helped to build this book. Historians have also become understandably suspicious of sweeping generalisations, especially when organised into "meta-narratives"—overarching stories of world history into whose categories the facts can be made to fit. Some feel that the very craft of truth-seeking history is a delusion—"there is no face behind the mask",[4] leaving us with only the masks to study, or that professional history is so embroiled with the late nineteenth-century Eurocentric and nationalist milieu in which it flowered that it cannot transcend it. I see these considerations as reasons for caution, not evasion. Reconstructing history with full accuracy and fully transcending Eurocentrism may well be impossible. But we *can* get closer or farther away. Broad arguments do oversimplify, but they can also contextualise, enable comparison, and uncover fresh kinds of complexity. Should we leave them to economic historians, historical sociologists, or populist historians, who are somewhat prone to leave out the messy bits of the past, otherwise known as contingent history?

Another argument for ditching the study of Europe's geographic spread and economic growth is that the global ascendancy it delivered was short-lived (say, 1850–1950) and is now long gone. But this is surely no reason for disinterest from historians whose business is, after all, the past. Further, the death of European ascendancy has been exaggerated. Including Europe itself, four and one-third of the world's six habitable continents (the two Americas, Australasia, and Asian Russia) are still dominated by people of European descent, who still often self-define as "European". Europe's great legacy, industrialisation, still pervades the globe, affecting most human lives for good and ill. Of course, whole libraries of explanations for the ascendancy already exist, and most of the more recent have transcended racism and triumphalism. There are many plausible theories about the causes of European imperialism. They include adventurism and evangelism; an urge to deploy surplus European labour or capital; the advent of modern technology giving teeth to long-standing expansionist aspirations; and the competitive system whereby any respectable modern European state had to have an empire. Most focus on the age of "high imperialism", 1860–1914, or on the long nineteenth century, 1783–1914. It is true that the latter period witnessed a massive surge in empire (the subjection of other societies), in settlement (the reproduction of one's own society in distant locales at the expense of the prior inhabitants), and in bulk trade. But these processes built on centuries of earlier expansion, whose origins have yet to be satisfactorily explained.

I do not claim that plague dominates the causal jigsaw. I do suggest that it is the biggest missing piece, whose inclusion casts new light on the whole. While a few prescient historians have intuited a connection, none , to my knowledge, have traced out a plausible causal sequence between Europe's own plague and its geographic spread, let alone tested it. This is less true of economic growth. Since 1860 if not earlier, some scholars have linked the Black Death to the beginning of Western Europe's economic progress and its associated technological development.[5] This view seems cyclical, periodically going in and out of fashion. The last century has been mostly an "out" period. "Most historians writing in the twentieth century . . . relentlessly downplayed the impact of the Black Death, which was relegated to the role of an accelerator of a crisis already in motion".[6] Some continue to explicitly deny the Black Death a major role. In 2014, a leading medieval environmental historian wrote that the Black Death "failed to alter long-term fundamentals".[7] In 2016, a leading economic historian agreed that "In the end, the plague effected no significant long run economic changes".[8] Un-plagued explanations for Europe's modern economic growth currently prevail, though the wheel shows signs of turning again (see chapters 3 and 16).

A sequence of great intellectual movements has been credited with modern Europe's ascent: the Renaissance, centred on the fifteenth century, the sixteenth-century Reformation, the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution, and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. This Holy Quartet, particularly the last, still has its advocates.[9] Exceptional culture traits of long standing and benign institutions now feature more. "Scholars who credit inherent qualities in Europe with making possible the emergence of the modern world typically emphasize either culture or institutions".[10] The traits include nuclear families, individualism, curiosity, and creativity. The institutions include strong centralised states, stable law, representative assemblies, and freer markets. There is nothing "politically correct" or "Europhobic" about questioning this causal package. Though now shorn of racism, it remains suspiciously flattering towards Europe. The law of averages, one would think, might include a few more vices and contingencies among the virtues. Most "virtues" did exist, and were important, but we seldom get much of an explanation for their emergence and exceptionality, or hear precisely how they interacted with each other, or with geographic expansion and economic growth. Were they causes or effects of "the" Great Divergence? Or did they, and Europe's real or alleged exceptionality in general, spring from earlier seeds, such as the legacies of classical Greece and Rome, or the Christian religion, or various medieval epiphanies dated to the eighth, tenth, or twelfth centuries? This book seeks to bring the Black Death, and a few other fresh variables, into the conversation—not just for Europe and its geographic spread and economic growth, but for global history.

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