

FYS 525, Topic 1: The Black Death

Background: The Black Death refers to an outbreak of bubonic plague that ravaged much of the world (excluding the Americas) beginning in the 1340s. Estimates vary, but perhaps one-third of the population died. Our focus is on the economic aftermath of the Black Death.

Core Concepts:

1. Labor Supply and Demand. Supply and demand is the most fundamental model in economics. We will examine supply and demand in the context of the labor market where workers supply labor and firms demand it.

2. Subsistence vs Sustained Growth. For most of human history, most people lived near subsistence meaning that they had just enough food, shelter, and other necessities to survive. Most of the world now, however, expects sustained growth where living standards trend upwards. Why and when this transitioned occurred remains controversial. For years, most economic historians cited the industrial revolution. Some, however, cite the Black Death.

3. Economic systems. Economies may be sorted into how they are organized. Feudalism dominated much of the world at the time of the Black Death. Capitalism is currently the most popular model. Later in the term, we will encounter socialism and communism.

Key Questions:

1. Given the magnitude of the Black Death, it is hard to say that any major group benefited from it. Surviving workers did, however, see major increases in the wages in the aftermath of the plague. Why did this happen?

2. For most of human history, the vast majority of the population lived near subsistence levels. At some point, however, much of the global population started experiencing sustained growth in living standards. This shift has historically been attributed to industrialization but some scholars think the Black Death had something to do with it. How could this be?

3. Scheidel argues that disease can lead to greater economic inequality. How could the Black Death have had such an effect?

Assignment: For this topic, you will complete your first writing assignment. The style of writing is argument and your objective is to persuade the reader (assume they are a fellow student in the class) of the merits of your position. This is the most common form of writing that we will encounter during the semester. There are many different types of argumentative writing: editorials, legal arguments, and much scientific writing being important examples.

Before beginning this project, read the section of the Little Seagull Guide on writing arguments (Section W-8, pages 53-62 in the fourth edition).

Question Scheidel argues that in pre-modern agricultural societies, plagues generally reduced inequality. The covid-19 pandemic impacted many economies which were neither pre-modern nor agrarian. How did covid-19 impacted inequality?

You may also choose to study how a different recent (last twenty years) event has affected inequality. Feel free to discuss ideas with me.

You may consider any individual country or collection of countries.

I ask that you complete this assignment in three parts. First, craft an informal outline consisting of the following parts.

i. Criteria/Question. How should your argument be judged? For this topic, how *should* we think of inequality? Does it pertain to wealth, income, education, health, or another dimension that you find relevant? Or does it refer to some combination of these factors? If so, what combination? Note that this part of the topic is *subjective*, it cannot be proven that income inequality is the right criterion instead of educational inequality? This may be a question of personal values.

ii. Thesis. What is your overall position. Did inequality rise, fall or stay unchanged. Keep it short and clear. Note that your thesis may be *objective*, meaning that it is possible that it could be proven

right or wrong. Just because it is possible, however, doesn't mean it is obvious or that, in reality, people are likely to agree.

iii. Reasons. Why did the pandemic cause inequality to rise or fall. Think about causal connections. How did the pandemic affect peoples' behavior? How did this behavior affect inequality. Do you want to focus on one, very important reason or discuss multiple reasons? The answer is not always obvious.

iv. Evidence. What will help convince the reader that your reasons are sound. Evidence may be data, anecdotes, or come from other sources. Where could you look for evidence to support your reasons.

v. Retort. **Do not worry about this one yet.** Eventually, you want to anticipate and rebut the strongest counterarguments to your thesis. For now, however, make your case and do not worry about the other side. We will get there.

The first stage of this assignment is to bring your outline to class on Wednesday, September 10. It is OK if the evidence section is speculative, meaning you have ideas for where to look for sources but have not found them yet.

The second stage of the assignment will be to convert this outline into a draft. Details will be announced in class.

1. The maximum limit for the draft is 1000 words, excluding references.
2. Assume your audience is a fellow student in the class. Your goal is to convey your argument in a clear and concise manner.
3. Provide at least two references in support of your thesis. Use parenthetical notation—Rodgers (2023) argues that Shepherd's Pie is the worst meal served at commons. Provide proper references after the text of your argument. You may use any widely used reference style but I recommend Chicago. here are some [sample references](#).

4. You will receive feedback on your submission along with a grade as if it were a final submission. Note that this grade will not count. We will group edit some sample assignments as a means to work on clarifying and tightening writing.

5. As long as your criteria and thesis are reasonable, they are to become locked in (although they may be rewritten for clarity) as you move from draft to final version. i will let know know if I find them unreasonable. The goal now becomes to improve the writing and clarify your argument. Note that your grade is mostly independent of your criteria and thesis.

6. For the final draft, You should manually incorporate my edits (if you agree with them). You may also use AI to help refine your writing or find extra sources. You must, however, carefully review any suggestions made by AI before incorporating them. Add a footnote with 1-3 sentences describing your use of AI.

7. I will announce the due date for the final version in class.