When Adam Dolve

Pandemics and Social Revolution

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> "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

The author of Ecclesiastes knew what he (she?) was talking about. History shows us very little that is really new, just iterations on a recurrent dialectic of the powerful versus the oppressed.

The Black Death or bubonic plague of 1348–1350 was perhaps the worst pandemic in history, killing up to a third of Europe's population, and possibly more than that in Asia and North Africa, where records are lacking. It was not the first pandemic, and Covid-19 will not be the last. Psychologically, this one may be the worst yet – we are better at denying our mortality than our medieval ancestors were. The omnipresence of unpredictable death forces us to remember that we're all mortal.

But can pandemics lead to social progress, even revolution? It's happened before.

Peter Kropotkin shows decisively, in his *Mutual Aid*, that the primary force in stripping away individual freedom and local autonomy in European culture was the slow growth of the centralized state. Medieval society was (to use Tönnies' words) a *Gemeinschaft*, a naturally evolving community, while the rising state was a *Gesellschaft*, an artificial domination imposed from without. Kropotkin did not know of Tönnies' work, but he understood social evolution and domination, better than anyone of his time. Governments, aided by nascent capitalism, slowly usurped functions that had emerged intuitively in the communities. Medieval towns fought long and hard against this trend – what Kropotkin calls the "war against the castles" – but in the end they lost, as the newly rich capitalists in the cities made alliance with the castles in order to exploit class differences. "The greatest and the most fatal error of most cities," Kropotkin says, "was to base their wealth upon commerce and industry, to the neglect of agriculture."[1] It was that same early capitalism that brought the Black Death to Europe via its new trans-Eurasian trade routes.

The 'Black Death' (so called because it produced swollen necrotic black lymph nodes called buboes) was caused by a bacterium carried by fleas carried by rats – pretty hard to avoid in medieval Europe. Unlike Covid-19 it was not a new mutation; its DNA has been found in prehistoric skeletons, and it still crops up occasionally today, with an average mortality rate of 11%

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[1] Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (originally published 1902; Montréal: Black Rose, 1989 edition), 219.

despite antibiotics. It entered Europe via Asian trade routes in 1348, and over the next two years killed about one third of the total population – already weakened by an earlier famine. Smaller outbreaks occurred about every twenty years thereafter, as new generations grew up without immunity. As always seems to be the case, the poor were hit hardest – the rich could isolate themselves on their country estates. And the poor were more likely to have preexisting conditions and poor nutrition – not unlike today. Of course there's one big difference between 1348 and 2020: no one understood what was causing the Black Death or how to avoid it. Suggested cures included chopping up a snake and rubbing it on the buboes, or partially plucking a chicken and strapping it with its bare skin against the buboes; when the chicken became ill (and no doubt it did!) that was seen as drawing the infection out of the person (think: injecting disinfectants!). And let's not forget prayer.

Here we'll look at the situation in England, because the available medieval sources and records are better than for most countries; keeping in mind that the damage and ruin were just as bad all across Europe and the Middle East. In fact the first major post-pandemic revolt, the Jacquerie, happened in France in 1358. In England the so-called Peasants' Revolt (a misnomer; many townsfolk and urban workers participated) happened in May and June of 1381.

European economies were devastated, but for those who survived, there was a bonus: too many jobs and not enough workers. Serfs and free peasants who worked the noble estates were suddenly in great demand. Some had their own farms; most did not. Even before the plague, the growth of free cities (that is, those with charters, not under the thumb of some noble family) offered the attraction of a more independent life and higher wages for craftspeople and artisans. After the pandemic, city life looked even better. Depending on their legal status, many agricultural workers were not free to leave the manors, but they went anyway. City governments, happy to have them, could be counted on not to hand the runaways back to their masters. In order to keep their workers, the lords often began to pay them in cash and to offer other perks. But the workers knew they had the upper hand and demanded more freedom and a bigger share in the nation's wealth.

The English parliament and aristocracy saw their economic and political dominance slipping away, and took action. The 1351 Statute of Labourers decreed that all workers would have to continue paying their rents and feudal dues in the form of labor rather than commuting these to money payments, a practice that was already established, though not widespread. More seriously, it fixed maximum wages for a wide variety of jobs, and fixed them low – usually what they had been before the pandemic (think: minimum wage today). The result was to keep these workers poor and tied to the land, as well as crippling the growth of urban centers. At the same time, prices rose due to shortages of almost every commodity and service (think: toilet paper in 2020). No laws forbade price gouging.

It's hard to say how ordinary people reacted to the Statute of Labourers – there were no public opinion polls, and the people most affected were usually illiterate. We do know that membership in craft guilds and other working people's associations rose in the 1350s and 1360s, as workers banded together for self-protection and to provide some solidarity. Guilds could help financially when a member was out of work, and pay for medical expenses and funerals.

Over the next several decades the decentralized English economy improved. This was relatively easy since nearly everyone depended on local work and a local food supply. Prices continued to rise, and so did wages, but more slowly. Other abuses continued. Many peasants were obliged to work several days a week on church or monastic properties, with no compensation, and the

Church already owned a larger chunk of England's land and wealth than any other entity, including the Crown itself (think: today's tax-exempt churches). We cannot overlook the heavy hand of Mother Church, partnering with the State to bamboozle the credulous bumpkins into blind obedience (think: Paula White, Kenneth Copeland). The Hundred Years War with France still dragged on – it actually lasted 116 years, from 1337 to 1453, though with some long truces. It was ruinously expensive and unwinnable (think: Afghanistan).

The immediate catalyst for the revolt was a poll tax enacted by Parliament in 1377 – four pence, to be paid by every adult, regardless of wealth, to help finance the war. This was bad enough; but the next year it was enacted again, for an additional four pence, and then once again in 1380, raised to twelve pence, that is, one shilling. That doesn't sound like much today but in the 1380s, an unskilled laborer earned about £2 per year – that is, 480 pence, so 12 pence was a good chunk of money for the poor. In London the average worker earned ten to fifteen pence a week. Serfs working on country estates earned no cash at all but were still taxed. The rich did not pay their fair share (think: the US today). In 1380 the revenue from the poll tax decreased because so many people avoided paying it. The tax collectors tried to crack down, often with the aid of soldiers, and that intensified anger.

The chroniclers of the day, and most later historians, described the 1381 revolt from the point of view of the ruling class – understandable, when we remember who paid their salaries. The key primary source is the French *Chronicle* of Jean Froissart, who lived at the time but was not an eyewitness. He was employed first by Queen Philippa of England and later by Duchess Joanna of Brabant. The first English translation (by the English Lord Berners, 1523–25) uses words like "mischief" and "evil." But Froissart accurately describes the workers' grievances. "These unhappy people of these said countries [i.e., English counties] began to stir, because they said they were kept in great servage, and in the beginning of the world, they said, there were no bondmen, wherefore they maintained that none ought to be bond."[2]

Here is what was new about this revolt: not so much grievances against masters, which are as old as history, but the claim that we are all equal due to our common human ancestry. It was about ideology as well as money. The rebels cannot be called anarchists, as they did not condemn government as such. Still, they are forerunners, because unlike earlier rebels they did not call for a return to some mythical golden age of equality and freedom, but rather for a *future* of equality and freedom.[3]

One of the leaders of the revolt was a priest, John Ball ("a foolish priest," says Froissart), reported to have asked one of those questions on which history turns:

> "When Adam dolve and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?"

Inspired by Wyclif's egalitarian theology, Ball wandered across Kent and East Anglia in the early months of 1381, preaching in a number of towns. Froissart records an example:

> "Ah, ye good people, the matters goeth not well to pass in England, nor shall not
> do till everything be common, and that there be no villains nor gentlemen, but that

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[2] Jan Froissart, *The Chronicles of Froissart*, Book II (late 1380s), translated by John Bourchier, Lord Berners (1523–25), 61, at sourcebooks.fordham.edu

[3] Anarchist historian Peter Marshall argues for the 'golden age' interpretation but most evidence leans the other way. Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 90–91. Marshall also calls attention to a neglected classic of anarchist fiction, William Morris, *The Dream of John Ball* (1888).

we may be all united together, and that the lords be no greater masters than we be. What have we deserved, or why should we be kept thus in servage? We be all come from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve: whereby can they say or shew that they be greater lords than we be, saving by that they cause us to win and labour for that they dispend?"[4]

The archbishop of Canterbury had Ball arrested, and he was in prison at Maidstone in Kent when the rebellion exploded in May. Froissart thinks he should have been left there to rot:

"it had been much better at the beginning that he had been condemned to perpetual prison or else to have died, rather than to have suffered him to have been again delivered out of prison."[5]

Beginning with a scrap between townspeople and tax collectors at Brentwood in Essex, the revolt spread like the proverbial wildfire. Rebels in Kent broke John Ball out of jail and he accompanied a growing mob first to Canterbury and then to Blackheath, just outside London, where he spoke to a vast crowd of farmers, artisans and unskilled laborers. Most came from Essex and Kent, not far east of London, but smaller uprisings happened all across England. Froissart thinks that Ball and his comrades were in communication already with malcontents in London itself, and had also sent messages into Sussex, Staffordshire and Bedfordshire, hoping "that they should all come to the farther side of London and thereby to close London round about, so that the king should not stop their passages."[6] The leader of this motley army was Wat Tyler, about whom we know very little, not even his profession, though his skill at organizing suggests he had once been a soldier. One story holds that he lost his temper when a tax collector assaulted his daughter by lifting up her dress (think: grab 'em by the pussy). Whatever the truth, Tyler soon emerged as spokesman for the rebels marching on London. A first brief meeting with royal officials at Blackheath produced no results. On June 13 they crossed London Bridge and for the next two days sacked the city, burning records and houses of the rich, opening the prisons, and killing anyone they thought associated with the government. Some brothels owned by the Lord Mayor were also burned. The Savoy Palace, home of the king's uncle and the grandest house in London, was destroyed – ironically, today the luxury Savoy Hotel (Royal Suite starts at £14,000 per night; no peasants need apply) stands on the site.

The rebels demanded a meeting with the king, Richard II, Queen Philippa's grandson. Trust in the monarchy was deeply ingrained in the medieval mind; most people, even when discontented, believed in the king's virtue, even when he was clearly incompetent (think: the MAGA cult). John Ball did however offer a not so subtle 'or else': "Let us go to the king, he is young, and shew him what servage we be in, and shew him how we will have it otherwise, or else we will provide us of some remedy."[7] Richard's advisors told him he had better agree to a meeting, and he confronted Tyler, Ball and thousands of angry insurgents at Smithfield on June 15. The meeting went smoothly at first, with the king (who was fourteen years old; one has to admire his bravery) agreeing to many of their demands – even the abolition of serfdom, which everyone must have known was not going to happen (think: Mexico will pay for the wall!).

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[4] Froissart, 61.

[5] ibid., 63.

[6] ibid., 65.

[7] ibid., 62.

"So the king entered in among them and said to them sweetly: 'Ah, ye good people, I am your king: what lack ye? what will ye say?' Then such as understood him said: 'We will that ye make us free for ever, ourselves, our heirs and our lands, and that we be called no more bond nor so reputed.' 'Sirs,' said the king, 'I am well agreed thereto. Withdraw you home into your own houses and into such villages as ye came from, and leave behind you of every village two or three, and I shall cause writings to be made and seal them with my seal, the which they shall have with them, containing everything that ye demand; and to the intent that ye shall be the better assured, I shall cause my banners to be delivered into every bailiwick, shire and countries.'"[8]

Froissart tells us that some of the rebels, rejoicing, headed for home. Most didn't buy it. Matters quickly deteriorated when one of the king's servants attacked Tyler: he fought back, the Lord Mayor tried to arrest him, and Tyler tried to stab the mayor. The royal party retreated and a riot ensued. The army and the sheriff's men dispersed the rebels and a number were killed. Froissart, perhaps in an effort to absolve the young king of guilt, claims that he now

"departed from all his company and all alone he rode to these people, and said to his own men: 'Sirs, none of you follow me; let me alone.' And so when he came before these ungracious people, who put themselves in ordinance to revenge their captain, then the king said to them: 'Sirs, what aileth you? Ye shall have no captain but me: I am your king: be all in rest and peace.' And so the most part of the people that heard the king speak and saw him among them, were shamefast and began to wax peaceable and to depart; but some, such as were malicious and evil, would not depart, but made semblant as though they would do somewhat."[9]

Tyler was carried to a hospital but was captured and beheaded later the same day. (Froissart says he was killed on the spot when he attacked the mayor; eyewitnesses disagree.) John Ball escaped but was later captured at Coventry and was hanged, drawn and quartered on July 15, with the king in attendance.

Froissart was clearly worried that if this revolt had succeeded, it would soon have been replicated across Europe.

"Now behold the great fortune. If they might have come to their intents, they would have destroyed all the noblemen of England, and thereafter all other nations would have followed the same and have taken foot and ensample by them and by them of Gaunt and Flanders [modern Belgium], who rebelled against their lord. The same year the Parisians rebelled in like wise and found out the mallets of iron, of whom there were more than twenty thousand."[10]

So the Peasants' Revolt failed, at least in the short run. But it was not forgotten, and the poll tax was soon repealed. Conditions for the working class slowly improved, though this was due more to changing economic conditions than to the rebels' demands.

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[8] ibid., 74.

[9] ibid., 80.

[10] ibid., 66.

Peter Kropotkin wrote little about the peasant uprisings of the fourteenth century, though he had much to say about the communitarianism that helped produce them. Several chapters of *Mutual Aid* are dedicated to describing the growth of cooperative societies, formal and informal, across Europe in the century before the revolt, particularly in the towns. The Black Death had reinforced the working-class sense that 'we're all in this together,' rather than shattering it.

> "The two powerful uprisings of the Jacquerie and of Wat Tyler had shaken society to its very foundations. Both however had been principally directed against the nobility, and though both had been defeated, they had broken feudal power. The uprising of peasants in England had put an end to serfdom and the Jacquerie in France had so severely checked serfdom in its development that from then on the institution simply vegetated, without ever reaching the power that it was to achieve later in Germany and throughout Eastern Europe."[11]

More recently, Murray Bookchin argued that up until the time of the fourteenth century revolts, the ancient Greek idea of human equality and freedom had been largely forgotten. Before the plague, grassroots movements like the Pastoureaux and the Flagellants of the thirteenth century had been essentially doctrinal arguments against the Catholic church. They had not demanded equality or the redistribution of wealth, though they did condemn the morals and extravagance of the rich. It took a catastrophic pandemic to push the faceless masses up to the next level. After John Ball asked his profound question we see others elsewhere doing the same – the Taborites in Bohemia, the Anabaptists, eventually the Quakers, the Levellers and Diggers.[12] Each of these movements was a little less about religion, and a little more about politics, than the ones before it.

Already today some pundits (see for example Paul Mason at Al Jazeera, 4/3/2020, or Marxist economist Richard Wolff) are wondering whether the Covid-19 pandemic signals the end of capitalism, as the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt marked the end of feudalism. Well, no – it's never that easy. But no doubt Bookchin was right to see a paradigmatic shift in the consciousness of the working class in 1381. Will the current pandemic lead to another such shift? Maybe, but not overnight. Serfdom was not formally abolished in England until 1574, though it had already largely died out. On the other hand, in our century everything does move faster than it once did. The current crisis makes it abundantly clear that we need a much stronger social safety net, and most of all, universal, affordable and not-for-profit health care. 'Medicare for all,' as currently promoted by many progressives, won't cut it, as Sarah Miller recently pointed out in this journal[13] – *the health care industry would still be profit-driven.* Nations that already have these services are suffering from the pandemic too, but suffering less than those who don't; and victims don't have to worry about bankruptcy. A genuinely revolutionary approach to health care is essential now. The willfully ignorant protestors who gather at state capitols to squawk about lockdowns and who congregate in megachurches may finally learn this reality, and learn it the hard way.

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[11] Peter Kropotkin, *The State: Its Historic Role*, VII (1896)

[12] Bookchin, Murray, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Montréal: Black Rose, 1991 edition), 201–202.

[13] *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory #30, 2019*

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