

CHAPTER ONE

What if “Human Rights” Means “No Humans Left”?*

The great coronavirus pandemic that erupted in the winter of 2019 has finally calmed down in China, after the bungling occasioned by the silencing of the whistle-blowers, the iron hand of the lockdown, certain changes in the virus itself, and the painful price paid by the Chinese people, particularly the Chinese people of Wuhan—although the epidemic could of course return. But beginning in March 2020, the disaster spread abroad, and at present there is no end in sight.

Discussions of the changes the pandemic will bring to China and the world, together with stories from the past about how “plagues changed history,” are a hot topic everywhere. Given the recent world situation, most of the discussion has followed the rubric of the rise and fall of great powers, with everyone happily talking about who is at risk in the post-pandemic world, and who stands to gain, and what the new international order will be, and whether there will be a new “number one.” Which leads to discussion of the “civilizational change” linked to the influence of

economic culture tied to these historical musings. We await the pundit's pronouncements.

My goal in this book is to discuss one central theme: the impact of the pandemic on institutions. From the point of view of the history of mankind, the rise and fall of the great powers is a blip on the radar screen; the fate of institutions is much more important to our common destiny. Over the past century and a half, the world's most powerful nation has changed from the United Kingdom to the United States, which was really no big deal. As the Qing-period Chinese novel *Unofficial History of the Scholars* puts it, "the river flows to the east for thirty years, and then to the west for thirty years," so it is simply a question of changes in the wind and the water. If the change had been from Britain to Nazi Germany, then it would have been dangerous, because in that case it would not have been a simple question of who is number one and who is number two, but instead a question of civilization and barbarism for the whole human race.

From the perspective of history, certain plagues have brought about institutional changes, but, as I have stressed many times before, while the standard of human progress may be universal, specific historical processes are inherently uncertain. The "cause" of a plague and the "outcome" it brings may be different, or even the complete opposite, depending on certain conditions. The famous example of the Black Death and the rise and fall of serfdom in the late Middle Ages is one example.

Globalization and the Rise and Fall of Serfdom after the Black Death

In Western Europe, one of the most significant consequences of the Black Death was that it caused or at least hastened the disappearance of serfdom. Prior to the plague, serfdom in Western Europe was already showing signs of decline. After the plague, population declined, land was abundant, and labor was in short supply. This, coupled with the fact that death and depopulation were more severe in the cities than in the countryside—due to the high population density and contagion rate of the epidemic—plus the fact that there were more urban employment opportunities during the recovery period, led peasants to migrate to the cities. Under these circumstances, feudal lords competed for labor and were forced to offer better terms to peasants, reducing feudal obligations, improving their legal status and income, removing physical constraints, and encouraging farmers in their territories to start families and increase the population. Some lords even changed their economic strategy, moving from labor-intensive agriculture to capital-intensive sheep farming, abandoning serfdom and contracting out land to tenants. As a result, serfdom died away in Western Europe, especially in England.¹ And free peasants, whether they were initially tenant farmers or hired laborers, benefited from rising wages due to the scarcity of land and falling land rents.² The freeing of the serfs and the increase in the incomes of free farmers led to the flourishing of family farms, the so-called late medieval “agricultural revolution” in Western Europe, and to a boom in handicrafts, commodity economy, cities, as well as the rise of civil society.

Of course, it was not necessarily smooth sailing for Western Europe from that point forward. There were still bumps in the road between the era of the Black Death and the pre-modernization period, and no one would “attribute” modernization entirely to the terrible plague. However, most scholars today who look at history from the perspective of the *longue durée* acknowledge that the changes that occurred in Western Europe after the Black Death, especially the elimination of serfdom, played a huge role in the modernization of the region, which was the first to emerge from the Middle Ages.

We know that the unprecedented bubonic plague entered Europe from the Middle East and then swept across almost all of Europe from southwest to northeast, skipping a few “islands,” such as southeastern Poland and Milan, Italy. But in the Middle East, the source of the infection of Western and Southern Europe, and in Eastern Europe, which was infected by Southwestern Europe, the social changes following the Black Death were the exact opposite of those in Western Europe: serfdom in the Middle East remained intact, while in Eastern Europe, where serfdom had not previously existed, the practice became increasingly widespread, even replacing free small farmers in the centuries following the Black Death, in what was called “late-developing serfdom” or the “second edition of serfdom” in Eastern Europe. In the context of Europe as a whole, it is also known as the “second serfdom” (Western European serfdom being the first).

What is interesting is that this strengthening of serfdom in Eastern Europe and the Middle East has been attributed to the same factors that led to the disappearance of serfdom in Western

Europe: the scarcity of people and the abundance of land in the aftermath of the plague that created a labor shortage. E. D. Domar (1914–1997), the prominent Russian-American economic historian, argued that because of the scarcity of labor, feudal masters, fearing that the peasants would flee, bound them more tightly to the land, turning free peasants into serfs. Under conditions of labor surplus, there are always many fish in the sea, and there is no need to bind the peasants to the land.³ This is known as the Domar Theory of the relationship between abundant land, population scarcity, and feudalism.⁴ This theory seems to be confirmed by the fact that in China, in the chaos following the fall of the Han dynasty, the population declined drastically, and forms of serfdom such as *buqu* 部曲 and *sishu* 私屬⁵ were prevalent.

Why did the Black Death, which led to depopulation in both regions, cause the demise of serfdom in Western Europe and the rise of serfdom in Eastern Europe and the Middle East? From a purely economic perspective, people holding things in short supply should be in a better bargaining position than people holding things that are in surplus. Thus it was logical that labor scarcity should have favored the worker. But this only works under conditions of competition. In Western Europe, the feudal lords competed for scarce manpower by offering advantages to the peasants in the form of lower rents, higher wages, freedom, and so on. But as a young scholar at Stanford recently pointed out, the feudal lords of the Middle East and Eastern Europe were able to avoid such competition, because the period following the Black Death saw the rise of centralized, authoritarian empires: the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the Russian Tsarist Empire. These

empires obviated the need for competition among the nobility to recruit serfs, because the monarchy could simply allocate serfs to the nobles and help them capture runaways, so the feudal masters did not have to “sweet-talk” the peasants in order to hire them. Instead, sweet-talking the emperor was a better way for feudal lords to obtain even more serfs, and their “allocation” required that their status be changed from peasant to serf, for which the emperor’s power was useful. Given these conditions, it would have been a wonder if serfdom had *not* flourished.⁶

At the time he articulated his theory, Domar did not consider these political factors. However, he did mention another economic factor, in addition to the scarcity of labor, which stimulated the development of serfdom in Eastern Europe: after the demise of serfdom in Western Europe, a market economy and civil society began to emerge, and economic development and consumption levels surged ahead of those of Eastern Europe. The demand in Western Europe for agricultural products, whether as direct consumer goods or as industrial raw materials, increased greatly as a result, leading to the emergence of a thriving export-oriented agriculture in land-rich, sparsely populated Eastern Europe. In this context, small, self-sufficient, free farmers were indeed inferior to feudal estates in terms of productivity. Relying on its “low human rights advantage,” the Russian manor economy, which exported grain to Western Europe, had its beginnings in the 16th century and reached its peak in the 18th century after the Industrial Revolution in Western Europe. The export capacity of the feudal estates made the Russian economy the model of a high surplus economy among the major powers of the time, and

the Russian Empire, which had absorbed large agricultural areas such as Poland and Ukraine, became the “breadbasket of Europe” and indeed one of the breadbaskets of the world, just as China has become the “factory of the world” over the past few decades. Western Europe, advanced and free, was running a trade deficit and exporting capital to the late-developing but rapidly growing feudal Russian empire, which might be seen as one of the first signs of globalization and its contradictions.

Political Institutions and Epidemiology

Today’s coronavirus is certainly not the same thing as the medieval Black Death. But in terms of their impact on humanity’s institutions, we can identify parallels between the two.

The first period of the epidemic played out mainly in China, and the second period moved abroad, especially to Europe and the United States. Both periods have produced a certain number of “maxims.” Regarding China, we have:

“They started by shutting down the whistle-blowers, which led to locking down the city.”

“Without the shameless 404,” (the Internet code for “page not found”) “there would be no lamentations on April 4” (the date on which Wuhan’s collective Qingming funeral was held).⁷

“They shut down a few whistles and the mourning flutes blew sadly throughout the country” (another reference to Qingming).

“First they hid little things that became large things, and then they concentrated their forces to take care of the big things.”

And finally, “The system first shat on the world, then showed the world how good it was at wiping its ass.”