

CREATAHOLIC

**CONTRADICTIONS IN THE
DEVELOPMENT OF
RENAISSANCE EUROPE**

GLOBALIZATION



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I. The 14th century was undoubtedly the worst time of the Middle Ages with famine, war and plague in great abundance. Yet by the middle of the 15th century the Renaissance was in full bloom and signaled the beginning of the modern age. This is an apparent contradiction in the development of Europe.

The early 14th century was an age of declining markets, devalued currencies, lack of arable land still, and a creeping mood of pessimism, skepticism, fear, anxiety, and religious extremists which resulted in general economic and social slump. The century developed into a time of increasing urbanization and population, social change, intellectual crisis, growing sophistication of life, famine, plague and war. The papacy and the empire were entangled in a struggle for power, of which the papacy would emerge the eventual winner, much to the dismay and dislike of the empire and monarchs in western Europe. During this chaos, the western monarchies of France and England would establish centralized states with systems of government that would form the basis of our modern political structures. And so, this century is looked upon as a bridge between the medieval and modern world – a time of chaos and destruction that blossomed into the sophistication and scholasticism of the 15th century.

In 1314, the rains began, which ushered in very cold and wet winters that lasted for seven years. The year 1315 saw the first of the deficient harvest, which was an indicator of the economic troubles that would follow. The population exceeded the productive capacities and availability of fertile land. Overpopulation and climate change caused decreased land availability and yields. To compound the problem, landowners and monarchs who were also effected by the famine offset their decaying incomes by raising fines, rents, taxes, and forced requisitions which resulted in a decline in the standard of living. Townspeople suffered more than peasants, who had better chances to forage for food, but the “Great Famine” still took at least ten percent of the

population. Over-worked, under-paid, tired, ill-nourished, and demoralized, the door was opened to the plague.

In 1347 the plague arrived and quickly spread throughout Western Europe. Increased European trade brought many ships loaded with grain and black rats who carried the plague. The famine, which helped to cause poor health and lowered immune systems, combined with unsanitary living conditions, high population, and other various economic, political, and religious woes allowed the plague to reach epidemic proportions quickly. Isolated rural areas suffered comparatively less than the towns and cities, but the monasteries were hit the hardest because priests and nuns cared for the sick. The plague continued to return again and again up until 1407, but as it returned, more people built immunity which made later outbreaks less lethal. One-third of Europe's population perished, and everyone agreed on one major cause – God's anger. The clergy organized enormous religious processions, Christians attacked Jews, and the plague had managed to kill social ties as well as people.

The plague disrupted trade and production, consequently increasing unemployment causing a late medieval urban depression. Positive consequences of the plague include; increased land availability, more food and other resources available for survivors due to the drastic reduction in population. The plague was a sudden and radical solution to the problem of overpopulation. The overabundance of arable land left for survivors caused a labor shortage, which therefore increased wages. The drop in population caused a “golden age of laborers”¹. Wages increased

¹ C. Warrant Hollister and Judith M. Bennett. *Medieval Europe – A Short History*, 9th ed. (New York: MacGraw Hill, 2002) 331.

and people were given more money for less work, although the landowners now began to suffer. As the 15th century came to a close, towns and economies were growing again.

Some peasants attempted to take advantage of deserted towns and lands, and claimed, bought or leased extra land. These new wealthier peasants then hired laborers to farm their newly acquired lands which slowly created a new social strata, laying the foundation for later ranking of prosperous farmers and producing a decline in serfdom. Peasants resented the wealthier landowners of the elite class and revolted, which provided the elite with an incentive to develop less exploitative methods of manorial management, and the economy provided further incentive. Many landowners evicted tenants off their lands, which were then fenced off for use solely by the landowner.

After 1350, large numbers of peasants migrated into the towns and cities of Europe which recovered relatively quickly from the plague along with the urban economy. Guilds enforcing trade monopolies grew substantially which increased the restrictions placed on people wanting to enter trades. Some of the lower classes looked further a field to find profit in new markets, new commodities, and new trade routes, for example, many English landowners converted to sheep farming to take advantage of the lucrative wool trade that was not as labour intensive. Tensions between upper and lower classes were growing, and would eventually lead to revolts, but the newly developed trade routes and increased commodities would further build the economy well into the 1600's.

The 1400's brought territorial and religious conquests and peasant revolts which further reduced the population, but also ransacked towns and ravaged food stores. Monarchs and elites depleted their reserves, raised taxes and requisitions which affected society as a whole. Wars cost money – armies need food and weapons. Kings were left unchecked and raised or created new taxes at the blink of an eye. It was not until the 15th century that legislatures became more involved in the monarchy's monetary decisions.

Rural and urban violence swelled to new levels and was one of the causes of the decline in serfdom. The “Jacquerie” of 1358 was a peasant revolt in France, but French nobles and urban elites crushed the uprising quickly and with much brutality. In England, John Wycliffe was believed to have caused an uprising in 1381 because he and his followers challenged the authority and wealth of the church and questioned the injustices of the church and state. Increased unemployment caused by disrupted trade due to plague – economic recession, unemployment, tensions between enemy factions, guild rivalries, and power struggles, all contributed to outbreaks of urban violence

With an increase in the questioning of church doctrines and practice, troubles within the church were inevitable. Papal disruption was caused by the constant changing of residence for the many Popes that would sit upon the holy throne during the 14th and 15th centuries. Popes made residence in Avignon rather than Rome which caused a crisis within the papacy, and within the monarchies. Canon-lawyer popes, Gregory VII and Innocent III developed a doctrine entitled “fullness of power” which stated that the bishop of Rome had absolute authority over the church. This was challenged on numerous occasions by the monarchs of Western Europe. France and

England taxed the clergy to pay for war between each other, after which Pope Boniface issued the bill *Clericis Laicos*, which forbade taxation for clergy without papal approval and threatened both kings with excommunication. Both kings refused to submit to the Pope's threats. This was just the beginning of the struggle for power between the church and the state. In 1387 the Great Western Schism occurred when French and Italian cardinals both elected different popes who were then supposed to be replaced by a third elected pope. At one point, there were three popes. Choices had to be made by monarchs as to which pope they should support, and states shifted their support from one side to another as it suited their needs. In addition to papal chaos and power struggles, the Hussite Revolt was the beginning of religious change and development that would form the foundation for the religious transformations that would occur in the 15th century.

The church was not the only place where trouble was brewing. The French and English fought the Hundred Year's War, which began in 1337 over territory and political control of France. The war devastated many parts of France where the majority of the battles were fought. The Hundred Year's War would inevitably affect the economy of both countries as Kings increased taxes and requisitions to pay for their battles.

The War of the Roses followed the Hundred Year's War in 1455 which saw a nasty struggle for the throne between the rival houses of York and Lancaster. The war finally ended with the marriage of Elizabeth of York and Henry VII of Lancaster. This war would also affect society greatly as leadership of their country was unstable and volatile. The result of this war? A more stable monarchy joining the two warring factions to form the remarkable Tudor Dynasty that currently reigns over England today.

As discussed previously, the most important factor in the contradiction in the development of Europe is population, and developments in government and scholasticism. The population declined allowing more resources for less people. The papacy reestablished supremacy after 1450, and monarchs began to consolidate their powers. Voyages of discovery were becoming more common and capitalism was flourishing with new rural industries and new technological innovations in mining, shipping, water power, spinning wheels and more. Both munitions and printing gave rise to larger workplaces and literacy spread more readily due to the availability of more affordable books in an increasing number of vernacular languages. The age of creativity was ushered in and flourished as people looked more to the future.

Psychologically, a person's primary concern is survival, and after the quality of life improved for most of Western Europe during the transition from the 14th to the 15th century, a person could focus more on improving additional aspects of their life and those around them. Many peasants had more land and freedoms, wage-workers earned better money, and both groups lived in better houses, wore better clothing, and were better nourished. Rich townspeople began to invest in new industries, new technologies, new explorations, and Christians of all types worshiped their God in new, fulfilling, and challenging ways. The 15th Century ushered in greater reliance on science, protestant Christianities, capitalist economy, larger and more important cities, geographical expansionism, and the forming of nation-states. All was not a "bed of roses". The 15th Century certainly differed in many ways from the 14th Century, but evolved from visible chaos to visible progress. Everything on the surface appeared to be progressing in a positive manner, for the elites. The deceiving way in which historians describe the Renaissance does not

describe in full detail the hardships and backward 'medieval' occurrences. Historians neglect to focus on the witch-hunting, slavery, persecutions and class tensions that were abundant during this time period. The Renaissance was more of an elitist phenomenon as they were the people who could afford to take advantage of the opportunities and posh benefits. For lower class people, the renaissance simply meant a slightly better quality of life and the possibility of religious prosecution.

IV. At the beginning of the 16th Century European sailors and adventurers began to 'discover' the rest of the world through daring sea voyages and conquests in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Discuss this process of 'globalization' which created enormous changes among the peoples of the world. (4 pages)

The motives of monarchies in Western Europe to forge forward into the unknown varied, but all centered around economics. The plague had plunged Western Europe into a depression due to disrupted trade routes and urban unemployment. Merchants and monarchs began to look further a field to find new markets, commodities and trade routes. The new scientific advances made voyage by sea and the resulting conquests easier than they would have been in earlier years. These advances included increased mapping of stars and planets and Galileo's telescope which made navigation much easier. Ships were being built much better due to increased availability of funds from the monarchies and better naval architecture, which made longer, more difficult journeys more viable. There were increased efforts by monarchs to create state controlled churches that enforced social discipline. As these monarchs grew stronger, and their powers became more consolidated, they sought to extend their borders and their influence. Extension of borders and influences required revenue, and therefore foreign commerce was encouraged and taxed to build crown revenues. The more colonies a king had under his control, the more revenue he could build, and therefore monarchs began to greedily vie for claims to foreign lands.

This "race to conquer" began with the need to bypass the Mediterranean to reach markets in Asia. The Ottoman empire threatened the growth of European commerce and controlled much of the trade in Asia. Venetians had become the "middle-man" and marked-up prices by as much as 2000%. The Ottomans prevented conquests, direct trade, and exploration to the east by the

Western Empires. The only alternative for the west, was to attempt to sail west, around the globe, which many still believed was flat. This feverish desire to bypass the Mediterranean and reach markets of Asia directly by sea fueled the support of monarchs for exploration. Portugal took the lead in the race to the orient. The Portuguese benefited from the magnetic compass, advances in rigging, naval architecture and construction, ability to tack into the wind, and bronze canons. These ships were better built and better armed than most of their opponents, which allowed higher safety for exploration, and less chances that the boats would be attacked and sunk.

Queen Isabella of Spain funded Christopher Columbus' conquests in the America's which brought enormous wealth and proved to be a prosperous investment. Columbus claimed to have discovered the West Indies and Central America, although they had already been settled by Native Americans. His legacy would be the slave trade, although Queen Isabella forbade the trade of Amerindians, they were quickly replaced with Africans, and all natives were to be Christianized. With their relatively new found religion and fundamentalist beliefs, Christians were eager to "spread the word" and missionaries began their 'conquest' of the 'evil savages'. Once the missionaries were brought to the new worlds by the explorers, they traveled deeper into the interiors in the hopes of successfully converting more native Americans. In reality, the treatment of the Native American's was brutal.

Giovannie Caboto of Venice, paid by King Henry VII of England, explored North America from Labrador to Maryland. His voyages became the basis for England's claim to North America.

Cortes, from Spain, was determined to conquer the vast Aztec Empire and attempted to force Christianity upon the native peoples. With the fall of its capital, Tenochtitlán, the rest of the Aztec Empire soon fell to its Spanish conquerors. Pizarro, learning from Cortes, lead attacks against the Inca Empire of Peru and an expedition down the west coast of South America. Pizarro was nearly wiped out by the very people he was trying to conquer. The conquest of Mexico and Peru helped spark a boom in the European economy that lasted throughout the 16th century – sugars, dyes, vanilla, cacao, cotton, potatoes, spices, tea and silver. Once the ball was rolling, greedy monarchs and entrepreneurs increasing the capitalist trends that were already moving steadily in Western Europe, without much regard for the human casualties.

The Conquest of the America's brought corn, potatoes, chocolate, coffee, tomatoes, pineapple, and tobacco to mention a few. The conquests also allowed Syphilis to cross the ocean and become widespread in Europe, in exchange for smallpox, measles, and typhus which annihilated millions of Amerindians. In addition to the exploitation of the "New World", the African slave trade would be brutally responsible for the death of millions more.

In conclusion, this process of 'globalization' which created enormous changes among the peoples of the world was based on greed and was ultimately caused by the plague induced economic depression. Monarchs were greedy to extend territories in hopes that they could increase crown revenues by new markets and commodities that could be taxed. The new trade routes resulted in the decreasing need for "middle men" and therefore profits were much larger. Western Europe was reaching out to new possibilities in a broader world because of economic need and the egotistical tendencies of power hungry monarchs.

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