

AFTER THE BLACK DEATH, BY GEORGE HUPPERT:
AN *ANNALES* SCHOOL ANALYSIS OF EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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George Huppert's *After the Black Death: A Social History of Early Modern Europe* is an interdisciplinary analysis of European society from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. The text examines peasants, nobles, and clergy in rural areas, villages, and cities across Europe. Dedicating his book to Fernand Braudel, Huppert immediately expresses his adherence to the *Annales* school's method of historical interpretation. Following Braudel's use of geography, sociology, economics, social anthropology, and other interdisciplinary fields, Huppert constructs a picture of European life by describing a few representative individuals, villages, and cities. He juxtaposes the source information available from the case studies in an attempt to find similarities, differences, and generalizations. Huppert's analysis of rural and urban life, including topics ranging from armed rebellion to marriage practices, provides historians with a detailed view of daily life and an insight into aspects of Renaissance history typically overlooked in traditional political narratives. Thus, *After the Black Death* provides a worthwhile resource for those interested in a social history of the Renaissance that combines a wide range of sources that go beyond well-known popes, kings, inventors, painters, and philosophers.

Dr. George Huppert (b. 1934), professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has written several books, chapters of books, and articles about history and philosophy.¹ Most of his writings focus on the Renaissance and Europe before the Industrial Revolution. In the preface of his text, Huppert acknowledges his adherence to the *Annales* tradition of social history, founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, and espoused by Fernand Braudel.² Unlike military and political historians, who focus primarily on a narration of the events surrounding the life of a great general or the reign of a king, *Annales* historians focus on historical problems and human

¹ University of Illinois at Chicago, "George Huppert," <http://hist.uic.edu/history/people/emeriti/george-huppert> (accessed January 30, 2016).

² George Huppert, *After the Black Death: A Social History of Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed., Interdisciplinary Studies in History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), x.

activities in an organized and quantifiable way. Febvre, Bloch, and Braudel hoped to “break down compartments” and “fight narrow specialization” in order to place individuals and events in context, in their “milieu.”³

Like texts of other *Annales* historians, Huppert’s *After the Black Death* illustrates an effort to write a life-encompassing history that recognizes large-scale structures of human behavior, while respecting the role of the individual.⁴ Also, like other *Annales* histories, Huppert’s text largely ignores the key historical figures of the period, calling attention instead to case studies of little-known commoners, nobles, and villages. This, however, does not overly diminish the role of politics, as critics often cite as a shortcoming of *Annales* historiography.⁵ Huppert’s text is replete with descriptions of local politics and the reactions of locals to the various laws and political structures imposed upon them. For these reasons, *After the Black Death* is a historical analysis that organizes the wealth of available written and archaeological sources in the tradition of Braudel, with a vision of history as a whole.⁶

The wealth of available written and archaeological sources, and the desire to write a life-encompassing history, presents numerous challenges for the historian. These challenges flow from the overall structure of Huppert’s research and the organization of *After the Black Death*. Huppert examines Western Europe from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century, forcing him to define the territorial limits of “Western Europe.”⁷ As geography is an important consideration of *Annales* historians, it is of little surprise that Huppert clearly defines the geographic parameters

³ Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929-89* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 2.

⁴ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 391.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 393; Breisach describes the diminution of the role of politics as a “major shortcoming” of the *Annales* school.

⁶ Burke, 41.

⁷ Huppert, xii.

of his research. Related to geography, Huppert acknowledges the uneven distribution of available sources across the studied territory. To account for this problem, Huppert offers a limited number of case studies in different parts of Europe, each of them meant to represent broader patterns of behavior. In each case study, Huppert attempts to recreate the life a family, village, or city in great detail, highlighting similarities, constants, and variations throughout Western Europe. Huppert openly acknowledges the limitations and advantages of this method of historiography.⁸

Huppert begins with Gérard Bouchard's detailed examination of the "typical" eighteenth-century village of Sennely (France), near Orléans. Huppert repeats this pattern throughout the book with other villages and cities, referencing the research of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and other specialists. Huppert essentially recreates the village for the reader from the ground up, complete with descriptions of the houses and farms, as well as the living arrangements of the residents. Huppert describes the thatch-roofed farmhouses and the subsistence lifestyle of Sennely's villagers. He describes the residents' malnutrition, the reliance on delayed marriage and delayed procreation to maintain the population, the high rate of infant mortality, and the catastrophic danger posed by crop failures.⁹ The precarious existence of the poor in Sennely is one thing its residents had in common with poor Europeans in other case studies in *After the Black Death*, such as in Valladolid (Spain), Nördlingen (Germany), Dauphiné (France), Frankfurt (Germany), and others.

The choice of Sennely as a starting point comes as a bit of a surprise given Huppert's title, *After the Black Death*. In fact, the Black Death plays almost no direct role in the book, as most of the case studies involve seventeenth-century examples. According to historian Philip

⁸ Ibid., xiii.

⁹ Ibid., 1-3.

Ziegler, the Black Death caused “conspicuous changes” in the life of Europeans and left “scars” that lasted long after the disease.¹⁰ Huppert’s description of life in early modern Europe bear witness to Ziegler’s “scars,” but only obliquely. In one rare direct mention, Huppert briefly describes the Black Death’s aftermath as a cautious and slow recovery, stating that population growth in the centuries that followed continued to be limited by famine and disease. This, according to Huppert, was the “most fundamental constraint” on Europeans after the Black Death.¹¹ Disease, rodents, bad weather, famine, the ravages of war, and other horrors remained until after 1700.¹²

Although beyond the scope of Huppert’s book, it is important to understand that such constraints on population began long before the Black Death’s arrival. The people of Sennely and the other case studies were not unlike their counterparts hundreds of years earlier. The Famine of 1315-1317, perhaps caused by flooding summer rains, dramatically increased food prices created scarcity that weakened the population both physically and psychologically.¹³ The Hundred Years’ War and other conflicts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries created additional constraints on population due to battle deaths and the related circumstances of warfare. Sieges, for example, kept residents cooped up in their cities for long periods of time. This created a sanitation crisis with large amounts of waste and trash. As Ziegler points out, “few places are so vulnerable to disease as a besieged city.”¹⁴ Rats, which often carry disease, thrived in such a climate. As a means of preparation to withstand an impending siege, city residents

¹⁰ Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (New York: John Day Co., 1969), 232.

¹¹ Huppert, 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ Johannes de Trokelowe, “Famine of 1315,” in *Annates*, Rolls Series 28, ed. H. T. Riley (London, 1866), in Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/famin1315a.asp> (accessed January 29, 2016).

¹⁴ Ziegler, 16.

engaged in food hoarding and the hasty construction of communal food storage facilities. This encouraged an increase in the rat population, allowing further spread of disease.¹⁵ Unfortunately, these events, as Ziegler noted, did indeed leave long-term scars on European life. Huppert's description of life in Sennely almost certainly shows evidence of such scars hundreds of years after the Black Death. The poor in Sennely adapted their lifestyles to survive amidst such constraints. However, not everyone in Sennely was poor. Those with connections to the city, many of whom did not reside permanently in Sennely, lived very differently.

The greatest difference in lifestyle, however, was enjoyed by those who permanently resided in the city. Huppert's description of city life shows that many city residents generally enjoyed freedoms and extravagance poor villagers could scarcely imagine. The economic system of a city was different from the agrarian subsistence of the rural village. As a result, as Huppert notes, "Thirty thousand wage-earning consumers within the walls...[show] the first element of an economy that will float free of the constraints gripping the peasant world."¹⁶ The medieval commune, ruled by the bourgeois, was its own sovereign community. It owed allegiance to a distant king or emperor, paying taxes when necessary or bribing tax officials when possible, but it was largely self-sufficient.¹⁷ The wealthy of Valladolid or Frankfurt lived in remarkable luxury compared to the residents of Sennely. However, not all city residents fared so well.

Throughout *After the Black Death*, Huppert draws comparisons between the seemingly different worlds of the rural village, the city, and the great urban centers. The differences in lifestyle for many residents in Sennely, Valladolid, and Frankfurt, were great. However, the lives

¹⁵ Michael McCormick, "Rats, Communications, and Plague: Toward an Ecological History," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, no. 1 (Summer, 2003): 19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3656705> (accessed January 29, 2016), 19.

¹⁶ Huppert, 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

of the poor were not all that different from one place to another. The cities, great and small, had plenty of impoverished residents who lived in thatch-roofed houses, lived subsistence lifestyles, suffered malnutrition, had high rates of infant mortality, and lived at the edge of catastrophe. Rather than fearing a crop failure, the poor of the city feared a protracted illness, a siege, or the death of the head-of-household. Foreigners and the poor were excluded from the commune, and many of its benefits.¹⁸ They lived in shacks on the brink of starvation, while the rich lived in astounding luxury.

The very definition of “rich” is somewhat subjective here. Certainly, merchants and artisans were wealthy compared to the poor. However, the dramatic increase in long-distance trade, the rise of banking and other non-trade industries, and the transition of nobility from knights into courtiers and into practitioners of statecraft as a ruling elite, created a new form of wealthy citizen that, according to Huppert, usurped all power in the cities.¹⁹ Whereas cities were once governed by craft members, and nearly all members of the commune were associated with a craft, the sixteenth century brought substantial changes that allowed wealth to build in the hands of a privileged few.²⁰ Nobility, which offered avoidance of taxation and the opportunity to hold prestigious and lucrative city posts, was for sale. By the seventeenth century, nobility “had virtually no connection at all with the medieval vision of an aristocracy of warriors.”²¹ Those who purchased their nobility, whether by buying a fief or through other means, often fabricated coats of arms and elevated themselves to a “phony” status of duke or marquis. Some were

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹ Ibid., 42.

²⁰ Ibid., 43.

²¹ Ibid., 62.

legitimately wealthy, while others simply played the part. Either way, the real or the perceived gap between rich and poor was wider than ever.

This gap between rich and poor was just as noticeable with regard to the Church as with secular elites. According to Huppert, criticism of the clergy was almost ubiquitous.²² Some criticized clerical avarice, which stood in stark contrast to the poverty of most Europeans. Such criticism had a very long tradition. Petrarch railed against the avarice of the Avignon popes by stating, “I am astounded...to see these men loaded with gold and clad in purple, boasting of the spoils of princes and nations.”²³ Dante Alighieri likewise criticized clerical avarice, stating in the *Divine Comedy*, “your avarice afflicts the world, trampling the good and lifting the depraved...Ye have made yourselves a god of gold and silver; and from the idolater how differ ye?”²⁴ Despite the Reformation nearly two centuries after Petrarch and Dante, Huppert’s analysis of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century records taken by Lutheran officials in Germany indicate that Protestants were just as disaffected by their clergy as were Catholics.²⁵ Viewed alongside Huppert’s description of priests in Sennely as “outsiders” who had the most imposing house in the village, maintained by detested tithes, the entire post-Black Death period shows that the Church was often viewed in a less than favorable light.²⁶

These privileged elites often drew resentment from those who had to do without. Perhaps one of Machiavelli’s reasons for writing *The Prince* was to help his patron avoid or to guard against such resentment. Machiavelli wrote of popes and kings alike as “princes,” indicating that

²² Ibid., 142.

²³ Petrarch, “Letter Criticizing the Avignon Papacy,” in *Readings in European History*, by J. H. Robinson (Boston, 1904), 502, in Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/14Cpetrarch-pope.asp> (accessed January 30, 2016).

²⁴ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, in “Dante: Divine Comedy: Inferno: Canto 19,” Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/dante-infern19.asp> (accessed January 30, 2016).

²⁵ Huppert, 144.

²⁶ Ibid., 4.

he likely saw both as elites. Certainly, Machiavelli expressed his acute awareness of the different situations of religious and secular rulers, yet he lumped both together in his descriptions of the interplay of power politics. Machiavelli wrote, for example, “experience shows us that the greatness in Italy of the Church and also of Spain have been caused by France, and her ruin has proceeded from them.”²⁷ The Church, to Machiavelli, was one of many powerful forces in European politics. Although Huppert’s method of historical analysis differs greatly from Machiavelli’s in many respects, Huppert likewise describes the Church in less than flattering terms. In fact, in Huppert’s text, the Church has little credibility and is shown little respect, foreshadowing the Enlightenment and the French Revolution which were to follow.

Whether the urban elites were wealthy merchants, bankers, bishops, or Machiavellian princes, their status and wealth greatly exceeded the majority of the city’s residents. In a rather interesting illustration of the economic disparity, Huppert recounts a conversation between the mayor of Bordeaux and an American Indian chief who had been brought to France. The chief, speaking through an interpreter, marveled at the contrast between “fat, warmly dressed people on the one hand, and on the other, the mass of half-starved men and women wearing clothes that were not much better than rags.” The chief could not understand why the starving people did not “grab the fat ones by the throat.”²⁸ In general, respect for one’s place within the sixteenth-century commune prevented such throat grabbing. In addition, the legal system imposed extremely severe punishments for those who committed even minor crimes. Punishments were meant to act as a deterrent, and were not designed to fit the crime. A simple theft of a loaf of bread was dealt with “stupefying severity,” possibly earning a death sentence.²⁹ While Huppert

²⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Luigi Ricci (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1952), 42.

²⁸ Huppert, 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

describes this in light of city laws, one can only assume that Sennely village would have had similar laws given the dire straits of most members of the community. In the city, beggars, vagrants, deserters, prostitutes, and orphans could not share in the commune's benefits, so they often banded together to pillage the countryside surrounding the city.³⁰ These disaffected and desperate residents of the city had little to lose and much to gain from such acts of violence.

Not all who threatened violence or who banded together to share communal misery were social outcasts. In the immediate aftermath of the Black Death, surviving peasants reaped the benefits of newly available land and higher wages for their labor, hastening the demise of the feudal system. Some former serfs simply took possession of land for themselves, alarming the nobles whose power was tied to land ownership. With a 1376 example from New Shipston in Warwickshire, England, historian Colin Platt illustrates the nobility's attempt to reclaim such land on behalf of the lord.³¹ According to Platt, decades of increasingly bitter confrontations ensued as nobles battled with newly freed peasants over land. In relation to the dramatic increase in wages, Ziegler cites an example of plowmen in Cuxham, England. Plowmen had been paid two shillings per year before the Black Death, but their pay skyrocketed to seven shillings in 1349-1350 and as much as ten shillings in 1350-1351.³² In a futile effort to hold on to their power in this new political and economic climate, nobles and monarchs tried to hold prices for labor and goods at pre-Black Death levels. This led to rebellions, such as the Jacquerie of 1358 in France and the English Peasants' Revolt led by Wat Tyler in 1381. Huppert devotes an entire chapter to rebellion, and rightly so, given the numerous peasant wars and gang conflicts that erupted throughout this period. Despite Huppert's effort to show change over time in

³⁰ Ibid., 107-108.

³¹ Colin Platt, *King Death: The Black Death and its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 121.

³² Ziegler, 236.

Renaissance Europe between the Black Death and the Industrial Revolution, the constant presence of rebellion and other forms of armed violence indicate that some aspects of history were ever-present, changing very little over time.

Nevertheless, Huppert's *After the Black Death* clearly shows that vast changes did in fact occur in Europe during the Renaissance. The Black Death, while receiving little direct mention from Huppert, was no doubt a major catalyst for this change. The devastating disease is indirectly implied throughout Huppert's work, primarily due to the scars it left on European life. True to his *Annales* school roots, Huppert describes Europe's changes by relying more on analyses of small villages, the lives of Venetian slave girls, or average bourgeois merchants than key political figures such as Pope Alexander VI or Lorenzo de Medici. His interdisciplinary analysis of peasants, nobles, and clergy in rural areas, villages, and various cities across Europe constructs a holistic picture of Renaissance life and its evolution from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. Huppert's analysis provides a detailed, yet not overwhelming, examination of the available sources to reconstruct a city from the abandoned orphans of young slave girls to the privileged elites who expect a ceremonial tip of the hat from passersby on the streets. Because of its focus on constructing a history of large-scale human behavior by examining the most minute details of one family or one city at one particular moment in time, juxtaposed against other similarly analyzed families or cities, Huppert's book is a meaningful complement to the traditional "great men" narrative histories. George Huppert's *After the Black Death: A Social History of Early Modern Europe* offers a thorough, life-encompassing historical analysis that may seem overly meticulous to leisure readers, yet it is replete with observations and analyses that make it a worthy addition to the historian's bookshelf.

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