

Belich, James. *The World the Plague Made: The Black Death and the Rise of Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. viii + 622 pages. Paperback, \$24.95.

James Belich, cofounder of the Oxford Center for Global History, has made a compelling and well documented case for considering the Black Death through two primary lenses integrated in the form of interlocking historiographies. These co-occurring foci include a long-term infectious disease, commonly known as bubonic plague, along with the economic transformation of Europe. The disease, caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, or *Y. pestis*, is a zoonotic bacteria usually found in small mammals and their fleas. These are well suited for traveling with humans engaged in trade by land or sea. Drawing on historical and epidemiological sources, the author demonstrates how this disease led to a depopulation of Europe, decimating about half of the total population. This dramatic shift in demography, ironically brought about cultural, social, and economic renewal. This included a significant increase in per capita endowment, labor scarcity that drove innovation, and European expansion in trade, especially with China.

The book is structured in four parts comprising sixteen chapters. The two chapters of Part I, along with an insightful Prologue, describes the disease origins, geographically and socially, with some basics on the medical science aspects such as pathogenesis and epidemiology. Part II is substantially focused on commerce and conflicts, both contributing to the spread of the pandemic. Part III is primarily geographic with its major emphasis on Western Eurasia and Eastern Europe, two areas at the core of the book's scope. Part IV focuses on expansion beyond Europe, including the Americas and Britain. Additionally, the author provides twelve maps that are most useful, serving as a visual aid to foster a deeper understanding of the geographic context, as the reader progresses through the book's 622 pages.

In the book's introduction, the author presents two paradoxes that he revisits often. The first addresses the intersection of depopulation and successful expansion, while the second paradox reflects a conjunction of epidemics with technological advances and economic development. These paradoxes are substantially resolved as the book meticulously builds on documentation from published literature and historical sources, demonstrating the profound impact of bubonic plague.

The central thesis is that through such large-scale disease related disruption, Europe created opportunity with its newfound wealth and the necessity for invention, ultimately leading to the industrial revolution. This, in turn contributed to the almost concurrent scientific revolution that propelled human imagination much beyond the dark period of the Black Death.

With its many examples underscoring his primary thesis, Professor Belich's book is fascinating to read. It provides insight into a bygone world, helping the reader better understand much of the book's sweeping sociocultural landscape. Furthermore, the author embeds his history within a deeper understanding of pandemics and the profound changes that often emanate from them. There have been 249 documented pandemics since 1200 BC, with the most recent starting in 2021. To reflect this long arch of globalized infectious disease, while supporting Belich's thesis, Johnson and DeShore, observe "Pandemics have wiped out entire populations, decimated societies, determined outcomes of wars, and unexpectedly paved the way for innovation and progress in science, medicine, public health, the economy, and politics."¹

In conclusion, the author has written a timely, yet timeless book that informs the reader while engrossing them in systems thinking, an important paradigm for global health and social sciences more broadly. Early in the book, Belich asks in his own erudite way, Why Europe, Y

Pestis. This, of course, embarks the reader onto a fascinating journey, leading to a much better understanding of a profound and highly consequential period of human history.

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¹ James A. Johnson and Naomi E. DeShore *COVID-19 Global Pandemic: The World Responds*. (Austin, TX: Sentia Publishing, 2023), 5.