

COERCION AND CATASTROPHE
THE BLACK DEATH IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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With apologies for veering away from my abstract, I am addressing the subject of coercion and natural disaster in late medieval (Mamluk) Egypt on a more general level.

I hope that this broader approach to Egypt's crisis will be interesting and useful. I will talk about coercion's role in the Black Death plague depopulation and economic collapse. It is an analysis of this subject based largely on my 2005 work, *The Black Death in Egypt and England*.

TEXT

Coercion can determine how people respond to catastrophe. It can shape social response to a blow from outside, i.e. it can determine endogenous reaction to exogenous shock. Struck with equal force, one society weathers the storm, another falls apart. Coercion can play a huge role here. The degree and amount of coercion, and in particular the manner in which coercion is expressed are vital in long-term.

In this context, I want to talk about a specific instance of socioeconomic response to disaster, and to coercion's role in determining the response. I will address this subject on a comparative level – and in a long-term context.

The setting for this comparison is the late medieval period, and the disaster is the Black Death, the worst of medieval catastrophes – and perhaps the most decisive of disasters in terms of how it shaped subsequent history, particularly economic history. The Black Death's rank among the determining elements of world history continues to rise, and this much is certainly true of the economic history of Europe. As more and more is known about depopulation's role in the European path to industrialization and the influence it ultimately had on the Great Divergence, increasingly sophisticated studies are teaching us important lessons about economic development.

In Europe, coercion played a big role in the outcome. Coercion made some vital decisions about who would survive and who would not, about which institutional framework would be preserved and which discarded. Coercion thus had a vital role in shaping and effecting the evolutionary adaptation to this demographic blow.

What about the Black Death in the Middle East? From what we know, the Black Death played a truly vital part in the drama of Middle Eastern and Islamic history, perhaps being as decisive as it was in Europe. Coercion was important here as well. In a comparative

perspective, I want to focus on Egypt and compare Egypt with England. I will examine the differences between two manifestations of coercion, England's and Egypt's: two types of coercion and one giant disaster.

The contrast in the way that England and Egypt confronted this disaster tells us something interesting about the way in which coercive force and demographic change influence history. In very broad strokes, we can talk about how England made an economic recovery in the late fifteenth century, at least in per-capita terms. We can also describe how England, through a process of socioeconomic evolution molded by coercion, adapted substantial parts of its economic structure to the circumstances of massive population loss. England did recover, and in fact by end of the fifteenth century, England was arguably in better shape than it had been in in the early 1300s.

Egypt meanwhile couldn't pose a starker contrast, at least in the long-term. By the late 1400s, it seems clear that Egypt's economy, which had been doing so well in the early fourteenth century, was utterly devastated by this ongoing catastrophe. Depopulation appears to have been no worse in Egypt than in England, that is to say that it was equally horrific for both countries, but Egypt fared very badly in the long-term: a ruined economy, a gravely weakened society, and an utter failure in terms of adaptation.

Why? Landholding is really at the center of this. In the pre-industrial world, landholding was, the primary venue for the expression of coercion. Landholding practices mattered, they mattered a lot, and I will try to line up the contrasting structural elements so that their decisive roles, as twin foci of coercion, could be compared and analyzed. Not surprisingly, landholding practices in Egypt were quite different from those in England, and so too was the manifestation of coercive power. Coercion's tone, its dialect, and the nuances by which it expressed itself were articulated in a very different way in Egypt; one can certainly say the same of a much wider contrast between Europe and the Middle East.

Within the general rubric of landholding practice, the contrast between England and Egypt was (in part) governed by the distance between landholder and peasant; the gap between the landholder and the peasant varied strikingly in depth and degree between the two countries. It makes sense to start by talking about this interval and how it varied so decisively.

The gap was wide in both countries, not surprisingly for what we know of medieval social circumstances. Yet while it was a substantial and defining interval in England, it was in Egypt on an altogether different scale. For Egypt, the contours of that gap tell us much about the differences in the two societies, differences in social structure that became

decisive when catastrophe struck; and these social differences are intimately intertwined with variations in coercion and coercive power

As much as landlord and peasant differed in England, the distance between the two in Egypt was much greater, so great that it was almost unbridgeable. The Egyptian landholder and the medieval peasant shared almost nothing in common: language, customs, culture and social practice separated the one from the other, separated them at such a distance that it was in fact almost impossible for them to interact with each other, alone and unaided, unaccompanied by some means of mediation.

However, mediation was forthcoming, in the form of a third person, a person who could speak to both sides, and make communication possible. In the end, the landholder and the peasant did interact. In fact they interacted in very meaningful ways, though this is saying nothing really positive about that interaction: it existed, that was essential for the landholder, probably essential for the economy in any case.

This third person was the Egyptian bureaucrat, generally in short supply in the pre-industrial world. Bureaucrats were the key: bureaucrats bridged this landholder-peasant social gap and solved this problem, for the landholders at any rate. In fact there was a long train of bureaucrats, a long train composed of all the different parts they played, in titles and occupations, in practice and status. Thirty is a rough figure for the number of job titles we find for bureaucrats in Egypt, thirty - and it's hard to keep track of which is which; a really essential history of medieval Egyptian bureaucracy, with a solid structural and analytical focus, has yet to be written here.

Despite all the different roles played by these bureaucrats - and the way in which they varied in function - the bureaucrats in their professions intersected, mixed and blended in such a way that they oddly enough formed a uniform mass - a continuity, a large aggregate of functionaries that could be used on a large scale, used as a kind of tool in fact; their status as tool is a particularly important point here.

This collection of personnel connected at one end with the urban terrain of the Mamluk slave soldier and on the other with the rural terrain of Egypt's mass of peasantry. On the one end bureaucrats were connected with the factional feuds, games and customs of the Mamluks (and all that was foreign about them) and on the other end the bureaucrats were connected with the dialectical nuances and particularistic traditions of the rural communities.

These bureaucrats, sharing parts and pieces of practices from both worlds, bridged this gap and allowed the landholder and peasant to communicate back and forth. The role played by

the bureaucrats allowed the landholders, the Mamluk elite, to express themselves, eloquently, through coercion. The capacity to coerce and be coerced in particular way, was really bureaucracy's gift to Egypt's elite.

Social underpinnings are critical here; roots and origins are important as well. But the primary aspect I want to focus on is the way in which the bureaucrats created a phenomenon that was altogether absent from England. The bureaucrats as a mass fashioned a kind of collectivism utterly alien to English and European property-holding; fluid collectivism in the sense of property fused together but always rapidly exchanged, violently exchanged. This property became – in effect – the common and shared of a collective; in Egypt's case this was a factional collective, riven by feuds and schemes.

Was this phenomenon entirely new? In some ways yes and in others no. Bureaucracy, for example, was a truly generic facet of Egyptian life. It had always been there. The geography of Egypt and the Nile, demanded it; that was one thing. The exigencies and eccentricities of the Nile's annual flood – and its distinct agrarian cycle: the intricacies of harvesting that cycle, controlling arable basin, and making the cycle and flood basin pay, that was a special job qualification of the bureaucrat; that was his preserve. That is not to say that the peasants themselves didn't do the heavy-lifting, nor to suggest that they in any way lacked know-how, but the bureaucrats turned the system into an administrative process, a process with elements of the modern in the way that it produced a certain kind of operational – and even substantial – uniformity. Whether by term or by action, the bureaucrats imposed a kind of sameness that tied rural resources together and made them amenable to processing en masse. In this way, they turned the distinct and variegated into the uniform and homogenous, and thus in this sense, they made the medieval Egypt's form of land and property collectivism possible.

This type of processing paid off – and channeled agrarian resources to the urban economy. That was what the bureaucrats were about in the end. But it was also more than that. The bureaucrats, at the end of the day, were themselves the key resource, more so than the deed to land (the mital its value, its `ibra for the iqta`, numerated still in Coptic letters) was less important than the bureaucrat; the bureaucrat was himself the agrarian resource. For powerful Mamluks, having a lot of bureaucrats meant having a lot of land – and vice-versa.

But if bureaucrats were not new to Egypt, where did the Mamluk version of bureaucracy come from? Ancient Egypt had had a bureaucracy – and Roman Egypt as well. Early Islamic Egypt also had a bureaucracy, and the Ottomans would later host a bureaucracy here as well. But bureaucracy in Egypt was not a constant: bureaucracy waxed and waned with era

and dynasty, now larger, now smaller, now more complex, now simpler. The density of bureaucracy and its scope of application shifted and changed with time.

From the perspective of historical cycles, it looks as though bureaucracy reached a kind of zenith in the 1200s and 1300s. My guess is that this had something to do with the Mamluks themselves. The Mamluks were strangers in the Egyptian rural landscape, more so than were the Greek-speaking outsiders of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt.

Bureaucracy – robust at all times in Egypt – grew in size to meet the needs of the time. As the production of a familiar good in the modern-era economy expands to meet the emergence of a new and inviting market niche, the inherent capacities of Egyptian bureaucracy were available and apparent; demand could – and did – swell their numbers just as market niche expands production. .

Twin factors fused together acted to create this demand for bureaucracy. The slave-soldier system was one of these factors and the other was the iqta` system of landholding practice. Iqta` was still relatively new to Egypt in the Mamluk period and the tenuous and fickle style of iqta` landholding, with scattered estates and absentee landlordism, and with short-term and frequently changing ownership (tenure might be a better word). This made possession extremely chancy, extremely fluid – and at all times shared under the rubric of one center regime, and in this sense collective. Collectivism created a new and robust market niche. Egyptian bureaucratic capacity expanded in numbers to fill this niche.

When bureaucracy was coupled with slave soldier and iqta`, it magnified the authority of the Mamluk landholder, granting him a kind of economic power that would have made the English landholder green with envy. As augmented, this coercive power gave the landlords the ability to act as a unit, and enforce their will as a unit, despite all their feuds and factionalisms. Monopsony might be the appropriate term here, monopsony in terms of a uniform-united buyer of a good, which here would be several goods, the primary fruits of agricultural production. Calling it a monopsony hardly does justice to the true dynamic and collective might again be a better sort of characterization, the term monopsony is helpful if we want to visualize the awesome economic muscle of the Mamluk landholder in Egypt's marketplace.

The irrigation system expansion – of the pre-plague Mamluk era (1250-1347) - was one product of coercion's enhancement. If we attribute the slave-soldier system and the iqta` system to the Eurasian steppe then we can imagine that this economic impetus had its origins in a geography entirely distinct from Egypt's: steppe as opposed to floodplain and bureaucracy's enhancement of coercion in this context was at first a positive step, at least in aggregate economic terms; it was a key plus in the late 1200s, and early 1300s.

However, this institutional advancement of Mamluk landholding practice also prepared the ground for disaster: Mamluk coercion ended up aiding and abetting a catastrophe of natural origins. Plague was in the winds, and even if *Yersinia pestis* had been around in Byzantine times, and then sporadically in early Islamic Egypt, nothing could have prepared the Egyptian immune system for the deadly invasion of this virulent new strain, this most recent mutation of the bubonic plague's bacterial composition. Mortality that started in Alexandria in the fall of 1347 CE spread swiftly through Egypt's vulnerable infrastructure, through its dense mesh of rural communities connected by water. By the time the first wave of bubonic plague had swept through Egypt, about one-third of the Egyptian population was wiped out. Significant as that much depopulation was for any economy, repeated cycles of epidemic over the next century and a half of Mamluk rule cut Egypt's population in half.

Meanwhile, England suffered about the same levels of depopulation, reaching a zenith of demographic destruction sometime around the mid-1400s. In England, economic retraction was substantial, and persisted well into the fifteenth century. But per-capita recovery was something that fifteenth century England did witness, and economic adaptation was a marked feature of the 1400s. Some kind of long-term market correction seems to have been at work in England, to the apparent detriment and frustration of its landholder class.

England's elite wanted to unite and impose an extra-market solution to the demands of scarce labor. (A briefly attempted imposition of labor dues in the fourteenth century stands out as one attempt at cohesion.) , England's landlords really didn't have the capacity to keep up a united economic front that could hold market forces at bay. In the end market forces and blind evolutionary processes spurred adaptation and change in England. In the long-term they allowed for economic recovery. England was in better shape in 1500 than it had been in the early 1300s.

But Egypt was different – and its response to natural disaster was different as well. The mix of slave soldier *iqta`* and bureaucracy made the Mamluk economy special; it set Egypt apart from other countries like England by enhancing landholder power and cohesion in the way that it did. This augmentation of elite power in the rural sector of Egypt's economy set the stage for disaster. Here is where I think using England as a comparative test case is particularly helpful.

The augmentation of landholder power was indeed the key, but the word cohesion really gets the point across: Mamluk landholders were a cohesive force, and in terms of economic model-building and causative analysis, that's where the rural economic structure of Egypt

differed so essentially from that of England, despite all the other obvious differences. Cohesion amidst so much factionalism is in many ways surprising – and Mamluk Egypt was always about factionalism and factional feuds, political strife flaring up into urban violence.

To restate the rules of this game, the Mamluk style of ownership, while so ephemeral and contested on the one hand, also meant property in the hand of a single regime, property fused together by this regime, with boundaries of possession that were in a very meaningful way collective, factional, but collective. Boundaries of property were fluid and shifting, and bureaucrats made all of this possible; they molded diverse points of agrarian production into seemingly uniform streams of urban revenue. These streams of revenue mixed and mingled and were shared by the slave-soldier elite in cycles of exchange. Violence was inherent to the system, but there was a real sort of collectivism amid factionalism; bureaucracy and imported foreign practices made this collectivism possible.

Egyptian landholders were made very cohesive by this process of contested sharing. They were joined together as a unit of coercion, in a way that their English counterparts never were. This cohesion empowered Egyptian landholders to do something their English counterparts couldn't: it allowed the Egyptian landholders to impose a counter-market solution on their beleaguered economy. By these means, they hoped to solve the problem of plunging elite revenues, the same problem that bedeviled English landholders at this time.

Landholders in Egypt, united by means of bureaucracy and the collective nature of economic possession, faced the problem with unity; England's elite never managed to do this. Egypt's counter-market correction allowed the Mamluk elite to force rural labor, by coercive violence, to accede to its demands. It allowed landholders to impose their counter-market solution on the demographic problem. Just as England's landlords were in the long-run worn down by blind market forces of supply and demand, Egypt's peasants were eventually worn down by a process running in the opposite direction; a process running against evolutionary change in rural labor practice.

One aspect of this imposed solution was that Egypt's peasantry had to pay: they had to fork over more revenue, more rent, even as their numbers became small enough that rents should have gone down substantially.

The Mamluk solution to catastrophic plague mortality, to this demographic implosion, was to make Egypt look crowded – to make depopulation look like overpopulation. Egypt in the fifteenth century looked overpopulated because the contraction of arable caused by irrigation system collapse was far more severe than the retraction of population caused by plague mortality. Effective population density, as calculated in terms of the number of

persons per viable hectare of flood arable thus rose substantially - amid plague depopulation.

This crowding was very tangible; it operated in Malthusian fashion, even as fields were emptied and villages abandoned. It made late fifteenth century Egypt look like early fourteenth century England, with tiny plots that could barely feed. Egyptian hunger in the late 1400s echoed English starvation in the Great Famine of the early 1300s.

Mamluk coercion imposed this regime, in places where the irrigation system still worked. Crowding meant high grain prices and hunger. Though rents should have - by any stretch of economic imagination - dropped considerably, even precipitously, they nevertheless went up. The brute force of cohesive unity made this happen. It allowed Egyptian landholders to do what their English counterparts could not. And so grain prices went up, an awful development for plague survivors, something which should not have happened. Finally, wages dropped. In the second half of the fifteenth century, wages dropped precipitously, this at a time when labor was scarce.

So physical force was applied steadily and effectively, for long enough that Egyptian landholders won the game; they prevailed, and the peasantry lost the battle. But of course the Egyptian landholders were the real losers in the long run - and the Egyptian economy was the real victim. Brute force distorted factor markets so badly that the rural motor of the economy failed; structural adaptation, so badly needed, was ephemeral and rare.

Where the rural economy did try to adjust, the best it could was to sponsor its own forms of brute force, with local toughs like mutadarrikin taking a share of rural produce, forcing a place for themselves on the economic ladder. The reaction meanwhile was chiefly composed of rural flight, the hiding of assets, retreat from the market economy, and expansion of the Bedouin economy. The Bedouin were irrigation's primary "anti-system"; their ecology ran counter to the needs of the flood basin economy, eating away at its infrastructure. The descriptions of what happened to the irrigation system and the rural economy are convincing enough, but in terms of the overall economic outcome, there is enough quantitative data to draw a clear picture. Details aside, economic retraction in the agrarian sector was in excess of two-thirds.

This retraction was the product of Mamluk power - of Egyptian landholder cohesion. In this sense, Egypt's elite won the battle and lost the war. Coercion in these terms made all the difference in determining the socioeconomic outcome. English landlords desperately sought this coercive power, but in the long term it eluded them. English landholders would have reveled in such power, celebrating with one statute of labor after another. But in the

long-term, market medicine was better for England – as bitter as it was. Mamluk medicine was pure poison.