The Effects of the 14th-Century Plague on Medieval European Society and Parallels in the 2014 Ebola Outbreak

Abstract
Disease represents a strong driving force of societal and cultural change, which remains consistent over time. During the 14th century, the Plague ravaged Europe, and fear of illness, destruction, and hopelessness altered society. The religious climate of the entire continent and drove many to commit acts of violence. The ship medicine was taught and practiced moved more towards modern medicine. Government began to take a more active role in the health of the citizens, and national legislation began having greater impacts at the local level. The centuries old economic structure began to crumble, setting the stage for more balanced, free-market trade. Those factors—mentality, medicine, law, and economics—elicited similar reactions in the 2014 Ebola Outbreak. Fear of Ebola resulted in. Medical researchers were inspired by the outbreak to learn more about Ebola and are looking for potential cures and vaccines. Laws restricting travel and advocating healthy practices diminished the infected countries. The economies of the diseased areas suffered. Little has changed between the nature of people in medieval Europe and today. Though centuries have passed, societies respond to disease in the same fundamental ways.

Thesis
When a disease rapidly infects large numbers of people, it leaves its mark on society in a large number of ways. The effects that a disease engulfs into a society may happen quickly or take many years to reach fruition. Some effects may be confined to the time a disease runs its course, and others may have consequences for years or even centuries later.

Upon study of historical research and current event reports, it appears that there are still striking parallels between 1340’s Europe and the modern world in the way people respond to the mass outbreak of a deadly illness. The impacts the Plague and Ebola have had on the world can be direct or indirect, with direct effects being the immediate result of illness and death and indirect effects being secondary results that occur not as cause-and-effect, but as a response.

In the events surrounding the Second Pandemic and Ebola, a mix of direct and indirect effects can be seen on many levels of society. The four levels on which the most similarities can be seen are mentality, medicine, legal structure, and economics.

Mentality
During both the Second Pandemic and the Ebola outbreak, suspension of rational thinking because of the fear brought by disease directly resulted in distrust and acts of violence against certain groups.

Figure 1. The Flagellants Circa 1349. In their belief that the Plague was a curse sent by God, the Flagellants performed acts of penance, which included beating themselves and crying out prayers. The text below the rendering discusses a specific instance in which some 200 people arrived at the city of Dourdan, France. They performed their ritual in the marketplace and citizens of Dourdan began to copy them.

Figure 2. United States Ebola Fear. A survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation in October 2014 revealed a majority of United States citizens surveyed were “Somewhat worried” or “Very worried” that and Ebola cases would increase in the United States. Fifty-five percent were worried either they or a family member would contract the virus.

Law
Societies require laws, and rules to maintain order. This is especially true when a disruptive force, like disease, appears amongst the populace. The Second Pandemic and the 2014 Ebola Outbreak saw changes appear in the ruling structures and laws of affected nations in response to the appearance of disease. The need for advocating health and dealing with disease-related crime.

Figure 3. Bloodletting. One of the many treatments practiced during the Black Death was bloodletting. Because physicians of the time believed that the disease was the result of an imbalance of humors within the body, they determined that removing the “bad humors” would allow a person to get better. There were multiple ways to bloodlet. Some, as illustrated to the right, chose to use a knife or scalpel to cut a blood vessel. Other physicians used leeches. When these techniques did not work, many turned to alternative cures, talismans and amulets for example.

The collective failure of all these methods to cure the Plague helped to bring about reform in the way medicine was taught and practiced.

Figure 4. Healthcare Workers in the Ebola Outbreak. Those who handled patients directly took all available safety precautions, unfortunately, the supplies needed were often absent. Some here, an aid worker in full gear. Gowns, goggles, gloves, and mask (note the tape around his wrists). Upon entering a care facility, workers would be sprayed with bleach in order to eliminate any possible viral contamination from their gars.

Figure 5. Quarantines. In August of 2014, the slums of West Point in Monrovia, Liberia was cordoned off to prevent the spread of disease outside of it. This decision resulted in a number of riots.

Economics
When a disease affects a large number of people, the day-to-day economic activity that occurs within a nation can be severely disrupted. During the Second Pandemic of the 14th Century, where the Plague facilitated the decline of the feudalistic economic structure. Similar effects are present in the 2014 Ebola outbreak, but to a lesser extent than medieval Europe.

Figure 7. The Layout of a Manor. Prior to the collapse of the manorial system, a landowner’s property would have been composed of numerous sections of land used for a variety of purposes, such as seasonal planting, grazing, orchards. With a large number of serfs or other laborers working the land, a manor in many respects was similar to a small town. A result of the Black Death was the deaths of many laborers, leading to the survivors demanding higher wages. Large landowners would sometimes be unable to pay for enough laborers to care for their land. This combination of new wealth and an excess of land led to manors he separated into small parcels of land, which would then be sold, often to those tenants who had once labored on the land.

Figure 8. Short-term Economics Effects of Ebola. Though all three nations that dealt with the worst of the Ebola Outbreak suffered some economic decline, it is predicted that their economies will eventually recover over the next several years, depending on the results of economic policy within the nations and improvements of infrastructure.

Conclusion
Progress has been made since the 1340’s. The world today is much better equipped and informed to handle outbreaks of deadly illnesses, but that does not mean we do not share many commonalities with the people of medieval Europe. We are still prone to fall victim to our fear and make what may not be rational or well-informed decisions, but we progress nonetheless, constantly changing along with our society, in no small way because of our responses to disease.