



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own practice, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218 FAX
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
www.LucienCanton.com

You may reprint this paper provided you include my copyright, the source, the author, and "reprinted with permission."

Learning from The Past

Can past pandemics prepare us for COVID 19 recovery?

Those who have read my publications or heard me speak know that I'm a passionate advocate for the study of historical disasters. From studying how people in the past dealt with disasters we can potentially avoid making the same mistakes or affirm the use of tactics that have remained unchanged over centuries. It also builds our knowledge base for the type of pattern recognition that can lead to effective decision making.

However, there are risks associated with applying the lessons of the past and perhaps I don't talk about them as much. The principal problem in learning from the past is the assumption that the past is a predictor of the future, that the current disaster will unfold in the same way as the disasters of the past. Past events are indicators, not predictors.

The second trap that many fall into is failing to understand the complexity of both the context of the time in which the disaster occurred and the social upheavals that result from its impacts. This is particularly true as we move beyond the study of immediate response and attempt to predict what will happen in recovery. This is the

position we find ourselves in now as we attempt to develop recovery strategies for COVID-19 using the study of previous pandemics.

Economic Recovery

Surprisingly, the people who survived the Black Death in the 14th Century were better off economically speaking following the plague. Real wages increased and income inequality underwent a significant reduction, one of only two times in history this has happened (the second being the early 20th Century and related to the two World Wars). In much the same way, the 1918 Influenza Pandemic sometimes associated with the boom times of the Roaring '20's.

But these are examples of the problem I noted above: failing to understand the complexity of context and social upheaval. It is true that the Black Death produced improved economic conditions but one of the lessons of past disasters is that they are asynchronous; they do not affect everyone equally.

The chief result of the plague was a significant reduction in population. This had a different impact across Europe. In England this produced a labor

shortage that resulted in increased wages and rural mobility necessary to support commercial agriculture. However, in Spanish Catalonia where commercial agriculture was much less developed, the feudal system remained largely unchanged. The point here is that while the Black Death did produce economic change, that change was dependent on pre-existing conditions and was not the same across Europe.

Technological Advances

One of the results of the Black Death that has received little attention is the increased use of technology to compensate for a decreased labor pool. This included improvements to agriculture, such as the heavy plow and a shift from grain farming to animal husbandry, which resulted in more efficient production.

Something similar occurred following the 1918 Influenza Pandemic. The impact of widespread electrification across the United States, aided by the mass manufacturing of automobiles, the development of supporting industries, and highway construction, sparked increased growth and productivity. To be clear, there is little connection between the pandemic and this economic rebirth, aside from the accumulation of capital that occurred during the depression associated with the pandemic.

Social Dynamics

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of past dynamics is how people reacted. Here we do find several commonalities:

- **Government Involvement** – One of the results of pandemics seems to be increased centralization and a consolidation of political power. During the Black Death, Italian city-states imposed restrictions on travelers and shipping. England, for the

first time, attempted to centrally manage its economy in attempt to maintain the status quo of the feudal system. In 1918, the US imposed farm tariffs and made significant tax cuts to stimulate the economy.

- **Resistance to Restrictions** – Government intervention appears to have never been well received. England's attempt at economic control, coupled with recurring outbreaks of plague, led to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the largest revolt in English history. There was widespread resistance to social distancing and mask wearing in 1918.
- **Increased xenophobia and racism** – One of the darker sides of pandemic is the psychological need to blame the plague on outsiders. In the Middle Ages, the Jewish population were accused of poisoning wells to spread the plague. The 1918 pandemic, known as "The Spanish Flu," most likely originated in the US. The introduction of bubonic plague in San Francisco in 1900 was initially ignored because it was considered a "Chinese disease."

What Can We Learn?

As I have said, past pandemics are indicators, not predictors. What we can glean from them requires careful interpretation and recognition that the interaction of pandemic and pre-existing conditions is extremely complex and unique and do not produce similar results.

If there is common ground, it lies in the social dynamics and the tension between government and the governed. We should not underestimate resistance to government restrictions or perceptions of favoritism toward vested interests. Nor should we underestimate the impact of xenophobia and racism. In the end, past pandemics teach us one great lesson: we will survive this. 