

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

Federal efforts to reduce unemployment, including President Carter's \$10 billion federal job creation effort (a new departure in U.S. domestic policy), tend to ignore an estimated 17 million potential job-seekers not now counted among the 7 million officially unemployed: those in school or in poor health, those with responsibilities at home, or those discouraged by unsuccessful job-hunting. Providing a job for everyone, says Ginzberg, is too ambitious; neither the public nor private sector can absorb these 17 million "overhangers" of the labor market. His conclusion: Manpower and training measures "should be focused on the groups that are currently least equipped to find and hold jobs."

A Plague of Ills

"Before the Black Death" by A. R. Bridbury, in *The Economic History Review* (Aug. 1977), 1 Mundells St., Welwyn Garden City, Herts AL7 1EU England.

Economic historians have studied the economy of the late 13th and early 14th centuries for clues to the "momentous subversion of the accepted order" in England after the Black Death of 1348. During the 14th century, the expansion of late medieval society came abruptly to an end; in England, this was reflected in the decline of the large-estate system, a net loss of land under cultivation, and political turmoil following the death of King Edward III (1327-77).

Most scholarly explanations of the breakup of English society tend to link political turbulence with economic decline and the Black Death. Some historians maintain that the plague simply delivered a death-blow to an economy already under strain; others hold that the medieval economy could have withstood the Black Death had it not been weakened by the Hundred Years War—and, in particular, by the foreign adventures of Edward III.

But Bridbury, a scholar at the London School of Economics, believes that political collapse did not necessarily mirror basic economic woes. Taxation ledgers reveal a "varied and opulent" farming economy in England. In Lincolnshire alone nearly 4,000 men were required to assist the chief commissioners in collecting taxes when Parliament authorized a new levy in 1298. Farm records indicate a sizable sheep-raising industry. Moreover, says Bridbury, medieval wars were relatively inexpensive affairs, "portentously splendid melodramas" with rarely more than 10,000 men under arms.

In addition, he writes, price levels for labor, rent, and produce remained high in the period before the Black Death; the peasant population continued to grow. When prices fell, as they did in 1333, Edward III's wars had not yet commenced. Even after the Black Death, the population of wage earners was not seriously depleted. There was no difficulty filling job vacancies.

Rather than disrupting the fabric of peasant society, Bridbury concludes, the economic troubles of the early 14th century disrupted the lives of the nobles and the commercial classes, on whom fell the main burden, finally, of financing Edward's wars.