

A Miniature Portrait of Life for the Huge Majority of Populations Almost Anywhere before 1900 (and for Some People in the Future “First World” Even after That)

If you were somehow transferred back to several hundred years ago (or earlier), into the same economic and social level of society you occupy now, there is a very good chance that you would have already been dead for quite a few years by now, perhaps since shortly after your birth. But let's ignore that (very real) probability and place you among the living at the same relative economic and social place in society then that you occupy today. Or we could just assign you randomly to a rank in society, and this would almost certainly be the result, perhaps up to 99% of the time.

If you suddenly woke up back then, you would immediately notice in your life a *lack or extreme rarity* of: metal, clean water, light, warmth, variety, money, freedom, privacy, respect, justice, verifiable truth, escape, choice, news, texts, property, tall buildings, meat, sugar, salt (not to mention chocolate, coffee, and spices), old people, human noise (beyond a few hundred feet), fat, speed, health, teeth, machines, clean clothes (or many clothes at all), voluntary sex (whether you are female or male), and throwaways (except throwaway people). You would notice an *overwhelming presence* of: nearby noise, violence, hunger, dirt, blood, smoke, mucus, phlegm, pus, and outright filth, including sewage everywhere. Your world would seem both extremely big, as you tried to get around in it even a few miles on foot (your only transportation ever), and small, because all you would see throughout your life would be the same few square miles, the same few dozen buildings, the same few hundred people, the same south end of the same north-bound plow mule (or human mule), the same someone else's urine and excrement in the same chamber pot which you had to empty several times each day, including Sundays.

Life was boring almost all the time, but could turn violent quickly, and was short for most people. Mortality between birth and age two was extremely high: multiple instances in many families, often in the same wave of disease or famine. You and everyone else would expect to die sooner rather than later, but for many death would still come unexpected: a wound that led to blood poisoning, a sudden disease, individual violence, or the sudden appearance (lack of communication beyond the horizon!) of hostile people who might be difficult to distinguish from “friendlies” until they were too close to evade (and besides, your own rulers might not be “friendlies”). You might be allowed all the rats you could eat, but the rats would also eat back when they could, which was often, even before their human hosts died.

Idling and wearing clothes above your station in life were offenses that could be punished fairly severely (“sumptuary laws”). Employment was at the whim of the employer, and it was impossible to get beyond the range of a negative reference. Offenses which many people commit lightly today (shoplifting, blasphemy) could easily be punished with death or mutilation. Imprisonment of commoners for common crimes was extremely rare, because costly; flogging, branding, disfigurement, etc., were cheaper and, because they might be conducted publicly, served both as a deterrent and a source of entertainment, even for your own class. “Cruel and unusual punishment” was the point, not something to attempt to abolish.

At your death your personal possessions could easily fit into your grave with you, probably even into your coffin. But that would not happen; other people would be using them soon, like later in the day.

The top few percent had it much better, though they were subject almost as much as everyone else to certain dangers, like plague. Life among the super-elite could be quite dangerous, however, since losing a political power struggle often meant death (sometimes gruesome - drawing and quartering), rather than retirement to a rose garden, professorship, think tank, McMansion, or Presidential Library.

You would also notice a nearly complete absence of schools. Indeed, you would not be reading anything like this, because you and everyone else you knew would be illiterate, and would also have no access to any channels of free distribution of expression. That would not matter greatly, since literacy would not be a job necessity for your existence as (if you were fortunate) a servant or peasant, and because your opinion would have absolutely no weight with the people who do the deciding. The penalty for writing, distributing, or merely listening to someone read this document would be death.