

AGRARIAN CLASS STRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL EUROPE *

GENERAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PROCESSES OF LONG-TERM ECONOMIC change in late medieval and early modern Europe have continued to be constructed almost exclusively in terms of what might loosely be called "objective" economic forces, in particular demographic fluctuations and the growth of trade and markets. A variety of models have been constructed centring on these forces. But whatever the exact character of the model, and whether the pressure for change is seen to arise from urbanization and the growth of trade or an autonomous demographic development, a market supply-demand mechanism is usually assumed to provide the elementary theoretical underpinnings. So, the response of the agrarian economy to economic pressures, whatever their source, is more or less taken for granted, viewed as occurring more or less automatically, in a direction economically determined by "the laws of supply and demand".

In the construction of these economic models the question of class structure tends to be treated in a variety of ways. Typically, there is the statement that one is abstracting (for the moment) from the social or class structure for certain analytical purposes.¹ The fact remains that in the actual process of explanation, that is in the "application" of the model to specific economic historical developments, class structure tends, almost inevitably, to creep back in. Sometimes, it is inserted, in an *ad hoc* way, to comprehend a historical trend which the model cannot cover. More often, however, consciously or unconsciously, class structure is simply integrated within the model itself, and seen as essentially shaped by, or changeable in terms of, the objective economic forces around which the model has been constructed in the first place. In the most consistent formulations the very fact of class structure is implicitly or explicitly denied. Long-term economic development is understood in terms of changing

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¹ See for example below, p. 34. M. M. Postan, "Moyen Age", *IX^e Congrès International des Sciences Historiques, Rapports*, i (Paris, 1950), pp. 225 ff.

institutionalized relationships of “equal exchange” between contracting individuals trading different, relatively scarce “factors” under changing market conditions.²

It is the purpose of this paper to argue that such attempts at economic model-building are necessarily doomed from the start precisely because, most crudely stated, it is the structure of class relations, of class power, which will determine the manner and degree to which particular demographic and commercial changes will affect long-run trends in the distribution of income and economic growth — and not *vice versa*. Class structure, as I wish here to use the term, has two analytically distinct, but historically unified aspects.³ First, the relations of the direct producers to one another, to their tools and to the land in the immediate process of production — what has been called the “labour process” or the “social forces of production”. Secondly, the inherently conflictive relations of property — always guaranteed directly or indirectly, in the last analysis, by force — by which an unpaid-for part of the product is extracted from the direct producers by a class of non-producers — which might be called the “property relationship” or the “surplus extraction relationship”. It is around the property or surplus extraction relationship that one defines the fundamental classes in a society — the class(es) of direct producers on the one hand and the surplus-extracting, or ruling, class(es) on the other.⁴ It would be my argument then that different class structures, specifically “property relations” or “surplus extraction relations”, once established, tend to impose rather strict limits and possibilities, indeed rather specific long-term patterns, on a society’s economic development. At the same time, I would contend, class structures tend to be highly resilient in relation to the impact of economic forces; as a rule, they are not shaped by, or alterable in terms of, changes in demographic or commercial trends. It follows therefore that long-term economic changes, and most crucially economic growth, cannot be analysed adequately in terms of the emergence of any particular constellation of “relatively scarce

² For a recent attempt to apply this sort of approach to the interpretation of socio-economic change in the medieval and early modern period, see Douglass C. North and Robert Paul Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World* (Cambridge, 1973).

³ The following definitions derive, of course, from the work of Karl Marx, especially: “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York, 1970 edn.); “The Genesis of Capitalist Ground Rent” and “Distribution Relations and Production Relations”, in *Capital*, 3 vols. (New York, 1967 edn.), iii, chaps. xlvii and li; and “Introduction” to *Grundrisse* (London, 1973 edn.).

⁴ This is not necessarily to imply that classes exist or have existed in all societies. Classes, in my view, may be said to exist only where there is a “surplus extraction” or property relationship in the specific sense implied here, that is in the last analysis non-consensual and guaranteed either directly or indirectly by force.

factors” unless the class relationships have first been specified; indeed, the opposite outcomes may accompany the impact of apparently similar economic conditions. In sum, fully to comprehend long-term economic development, growth and/or retrogression in the late medieval and early modern period, it is critical to analyse the relatively autonomous processes by which particular class structures, especially property or surplus-extraction relations, are established and in particular the class conflicts to which they do (or do not) give rise. For it is in the outcome of such class conflicts — the reaffirmation of the old property relations or their destruction and the consequent establishment of a new structure — that is to be found perhaps the key to the problem of long-term economic development in late medieval and early modern Europe, and more generally of the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

Put in such general terms, the foregoing propositions and definitions likely appear vague. What I should like to do is to try to give them substance by relating them to a critique of certain major explanatory motifs in the economic historiography of late medieval and early modern Europe, where they have hardly been taken for granted, and where it seems to me that economic-determinist model-building holds an overwhelmingly dominant position. Thus, I will focus on two different over-arching interpretations of long-term economic change in medieval and early modern Europe, one of which might be called the demographic model, the other of which might be called the commercialization model. The former grew out of a critique of the latter, but I shall try to show that both are subject to analogous problems.

I

THE DEMOGRAPHIC MODEL

The emerging dominance of the so-called demographic factor in the economic historiography of Europe even through the age of industrialization was recognized as early as 1958 by H. J. Habakkuk in his well-known article “The Economic History of Modern Britain”. As Habakkuk wrote:

For those who care for the overmastering pattern, the elements are evidently there for a heroically simplified version of English history before the nineteenth century in which the long-term movements in prices, in income distribution, in investment, in real wages, and in migration are dominated by changes in the growth of population. Rising population: rising prices, rising agricultural profits, low real incomes for the mass of the population, unfavourable terms of trade for industry — with variations depending upon changes in social institutions, this might stand for a description of the thirteenth century, the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth, and the period 1750–1815. Falling or stationary population with depressed agricultural profits but high mass incomes might be said to be characteristic of the intervening periods.⁵

⁵ H. J. Habakkuk, “The Economic History of Modern Britain”, *Jl. Econ. Hist.*, xviii (1958), p. 487.

Well before Habakkuk's article, M. M. Postan had presented the basic contours of what has become the standard interpretation of long-term socio-economic change in the medieval period; and his demographic approach has now been filled out and codified in his chapter on "Medieval Agrarian Society in Its Prime: England" in the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*.⁶ Roughly the same line of argument has, moreover, now been carried through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by P. J. Bowden in the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*.⁷ Nor has this approach been confined to English economic history, where it is now more or less standard. It has been rigorously applied in what is perhaps the most influential work on French socio-economic history of the pre-industrial period, E. Le Roy Ladurie's classic monograph *Les paysans de Languedoc*.⁸ With such eminent exponents, it is hardly surprising that what might be termed secular malthusianism has attained something of the level of orthodoxy. Its cyclical dynamic has replaced the unilineal "rise of the market" as the key to long-term economic and social change in pre-industrial society.

Nor can there be any question but that the malthusian model, in its own terms, has a certain compelling logic. If one takes as *assumptions* first an economy's inability to make improvements in agricultural productivity, and secondly a natural tendency for population to increase on a limited supply of land, a theory of income distribution seems naturally to follow. With diminishing returns in agriculture due to declining fertility of the soil and the occupation of increasingly marginal land, we can logically expect demand to outrun supply: thus terms of trade running against industry in favour of agriculture, falling wages, rising food prices, and, perhaps most crucially in a society composed largely of landlords and peasants, rising rents. Moreover, the model has a built-in mechanism of self-correction which determines automatically its own change of direction and a long-term dynamic. Thus the ever greater subdivision or overcrowding of holdings and the exhaustion of resources means "over-population" which leads to malthusian checks, especially famine/starvation; this results in demographic decline or collapse and the opposite trends in income distribution from the first phase. As Habakkuk pointed out, this two-phase model has now been applied to the entire period between roughly 1050 and 1800. Indeed, the very essence of "traditional economy" has seemed to be captured in

⁶ M. M. Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England", *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, i, 2nd edn., ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge, 1966).

⁷ P. J. Bowden, "Agricultural Prices, Farm Profits, and Rents", in H. P. R. Finberg (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, iv, Joan Thirsk (ed.), 1500-1640 (Cambridge, 1967).

⁸ E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1966).

this centuries-long *motion biséculaire* (two-phase movement). As Le Roy Ladurie succinctly states, "Malthus came too late": ironically, Malthus's model was correct not for the emergent industrial economy he was analysing, but for the stagnant backward society from which this had arisen. Indeed, for Le Roy Ladurie the pattern seemed so "inescapable" as to invite analogies from biology or physiology. The history of rural Languedoc over six hundred years should be seen, he says, as "the immense respiration of a social structure".⁹

(a) *Demography, Income Distribution and Economic Growth*

In terms of its special premises and the small number of variables it entails, secular malthusianism seems almost foolproof. Yet, what must be questioned is its relevance to the explanation of actual historical change. Do the model's assumptions and constants, indeed its very dynamic, illuminate or actually obscure the crucial conditions and processes underlying the varying patterns of long-term economic change in late medieval and early modern Europe? In his classic article of 1950 which set out his demographic model for medieval European economic development, Postan made sure to specify that he was concerned only with what he termed "the economic base" of medieval society. He defined the "economic base" as:

population and land settlement, technique of production and the general trends of economic activity: in short, all those economic facts which can be discussed without concentrating upon the working of legal and social institutions and upon the relations of class to class.¹⁰

Postan argued that what made it "possible and necessary to deal with this group of subjects together", and in abstraction from class relations, was that "they have all recently been drawn into the discussion of general trends of economic activity, or to use the more fashionable term, the 'long term movements of social income'".¹¹ But the question which must immediately be posed precisely when one is attempting to interpret "long term movements of social income" — that is, long-term trends of income distribution and economic growth — is whether it is at all admissible to abstract them from "the workings of social and legal institutions". Can the problems of the development of Postan's so-called "economic base" be very meaningfully considered apart from the "relations of class to class"?

With respect to long-term trends in income distribution, I shall try to argue that the malthusian model runs into particularly intractable problems in relation to the always ambiguous and contested character of medieval and early modern landholding arrangements. On the one hand, the very distribution of ownership of the land between landlord and peasant was continually in question throughout the period. Could the peasantry move to establish heritability and fixed

⁹ *Ibid.*, "Introduction", esp. p. 8; also "Conclusion", esp. pp. 652-4.

¹⁰ Postan, "Moyen Age", p. 225.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

rents, that is essentially freehold rights on the land? If so, the very significance of rent would be transformed, and the viability of the landlord class put in jeopardy. On the other hand, in situations where the landlord had established ownership of the land, a further question might be raised: could the landlord gain extra-economic power over the person of his tenant, control marriage, and in particular land transfers and peasant mobility? If so, the possibility would emerge of imposing "extra-economic" or arbitrary payments upon the peasantry — payments beyond custom or beyond what the relative scarcity of factors might dictate. Any explanation of the progress of income distribution in the late medieval and early modern period must therefore be able to interpret not merely the changing distribution of the immediate product of the land, but the prior questions of the distribution of property between lord and peasant and of the direct applicability of force in the rent relationship. Some economic historians have attempted to deal with this problem by denying or ignoring its existence, in particular by describing the economy in terms of contractual relationships among individual holders of scarce resources, such as military skill and weaponry, land, agricultural labour power and so on.¹² Others have attempted

¹² See for example, D. C. North and R. P. Thomas, who argue that "serfdom in Western Europe was essentially a contractual arrangement where labor services were exchanged for the public good of protection and justice": "The Rise and Fall of the Manorial System: A Theoretical Model", *Jl. Econ. Hist.*, xxxi (1971), p. 778. North and Thomas can make this argument because they assume: (a) that the serf was essentially "protected from arbitrary charges" and (b) that because there was an absence of "a central coercive authority" the serfs were essentially free, especially to move, and that as a result there was a "rudimentary labor market". In my view, these assumptions are consistent with one another but inconsistent with the realities of serfdom precisely because serfdom was in its essence non-contractual. There was no "mutual agreement" between lord and serf — according to North and Thomas a defining feature of contract. On the contrary, it is precisely the interrelated characteristics of arbitrary exactions by the lords from the peasants and control by landlords over peasant mobility that gave the medieval serf-economy its special traits: surplus extraction through the direct application of force rather than equal exchange via contract, as North and Thomas would have it. The sort of problems entailed in the approach of North and Thomas are evident in their account of the origins of serfdom. Thus: "Individuals with superior military skills and equipment were urgently needed to protect the peasants who were unskilled in warfare and otherwise helpless. Here was the classic example of a public good, since it was impossible to protect one peasant family without also protecting their neighbours. In such cases coercion was necessary to overcome each peasant's incentive to let his neighbour pay the costs, and the military power of the lord provided the needed force." *Rise of the Western World*, pp. 29-30 (my italics). This explanation not only begs the fundamental question of class: How do we explain, in the first place, the distribution of the land, of the instruments of force, and of military skill within the society. It also undermines their own argument for the essentially contractual character of serfdom, for it is here explicitly admitted that the serf is coerced. To go on to say that "the lord's power to exploit his serfs . . . was not unlimited but constrained (in the extreme case) by the serf's ability to steal away" (p. 30) does not eliminate the fundamental difficulty: that is attempting to treat serfdom as contractual, while admitting its essentially coercive character.

to meet the problem by assimilating it to their basic economic models: by insisting, directly or indirectly, that in the long run, the distribution of property and the successful applicability of force in the rent relationship will be subject to essentially the same sorts of supply-demand pressures as the distribution of the product itself, and will move in roughly the same direction. I shall try to show empirically that this is not the case and argue instead that these are fundamentally questions of class relations and class power, determined relatively autonomously from economic forces.

The demographic interpreters of late medieval and early modern economies run into even more serious problems in attempting to explain general trends of total production, economic growth or stagnation, than they do with regard to the distribution of income. Certainly, their assumption of declining productivity in agriculture is a reasonable one for most, though not all, pre-industrial European economies. Indeed, these economic historians have been able to specify clearly some of the technical and economic roots of long-term falling yields through their researches into the problems of maintaining soil fertility in the face of a shortage of animals and fertilizer, especially under conditions of backward agricultural organization and technique and low levels of investment.¹³ Nevertheless, specifying in this manner the conditions conducive to long-term stagnation is not really explaining this phenomenon, for no real account is provided of why such conditions persisted. Thus, to explain economic "rigidity" as does Le Roy Ladurie as the "fruit" of technical stagnation, of lack of capital, of absence of the spirit of enterprise and of innovation" is, in fact, to beg the question.¹⁴ It is analogous to attempting to explain economic growth merely as a result of the introduction of new organizations of production, new techniques, and new levels of investment. These factors do not, of course, explain economic development, they merely describe what economic development is. The continuing stagnation of most of the traditional European economies in the late medieval and early modern period cannot be fully explained without accounting for the real economic growth experienced by the few of these economies which actually developed. More generally, economic backwardness cannot be

¹³ Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England", pp. 548-70; M. M. Postan, "Village Livestock in the Thirteenth Century", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xv (1962); J. Z. Titow, *English Rural Society 1200-1350* (London, 1969).

¹⁴ Le Roy Ladurie, *op. cit.*, p. 634. Le Roy Ladurie seems at times to want to view economic development as essentially the direct result of apparently autonomous processes of technical innovation. Thus, he says, "it was the technological weakness of the society . . . it was its lack of ability to raise productivity, its incapacity lastingly and definitively to raise production, which created the barrier which, at the end of the period, stopped its quasi-two-phase (*quasi-biséculaire*) growth of population and of small peasant proprietorship" (p. 639); see also below, note 37.

fully comprehended without an adequate theory of economic development. In describing the specific two-stage agrarian-economic cycle set in motion in a number of medieval and early modern European economies by declining agricultural productivity, the malthusian theorists have indeed isolated one important pattern of long-term economic development and stability. But this dramatic two-phase movement is not universal even for traditional societies;¹⁵ and besides, it still needs an interpretation. I shall argue that the malthusian cycle of long-term stagnation, as well as other forms of economic backwardness, can only be fully understood as the product of established structures of class relations (particularly "surplus-extraction relations"), just as economic development can only be fully understood as the outcome of the emergence of new class relations more favourable to new organizations of production, technical innovations, and increasing levels of productive investment. These new class relations were themselves the result of previous, relatively autonomous processes of class conflict.

(b) *The Demographic Model in Comparative Perspective*

I hope the force of these objections will appear more compelling as they are specified in particular historical cases. My concrete method of critique is exceedingly simple and obvious: it is to observe the prevalence of similar demographic trends throughout Europe over the six- or seven-hundred-year period between the twelfth and the eighteenth centuries and to show the very different outcomes in terms of agrarian structure, in particular the patterns of distribution of income and economic development, with which they were associated. In this way I may begin to expose the problems inherent in the complementary and connected demographic-deterministic models of Postan (for the twelfth to fifteenth centuries) and Le Roy Ladurie (for the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries).

Demographic growth, according to Postan, characterizes the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It leads to the occupation of marginal lands and the increasing infertility of the soil: in short, a rising demand for a relatively inflexible supply of food and land; thus, rising food prices and rising rents. However, as Postan is of course aware, we are dealing in this period with a very peculiar form of rent. There is very little in the way of direct lease and contract. We have instead a theoretically fixed, but actually fluctuating, structure of customary rights and obligations that define landholding arrangements. These specify in the first place the regular (ostensibly fixed) payments to be made by the peasant to the lord in order to retain his land. But they often lay down, in addition, a further set of conditions of

¹⁵ Cf. Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution* (Berkeley, Calif., 1963).

landholding: the lord's right to impose additional extraordinary levies (tallages and fines); the peasant's right to use, transfer, and inherit the land; and finally, the very disposition of the peasant's own person, in particular his freedom of mobility. Now it is Postan's argument that these latter conditions, which together defined the peasant's customary status — his freedom or unfreedom — in so far as they are relevant to long-term economic trends, can be more or less directly assimilated to his supply/demand demographic model. Thus the central point for Postan is that due to developing pressure of population, the thirteenth century is a period in which the landlords' position improves *vis-à-vis* the peasants not only in those few areas where what might be termed modern leaseholding has emerged, but also in the so-called customary sector. Thus competition for land induces the peasantry to accept a serious degradation of their personal/tenurial status in order to hold on to their land and this, in turn, exacerbates the generally deteriorating economic situation to which they are being subjected simply by forces of supply and demand. So, in order to retain their land, the peasants must submit, in particular, to (1) increasing arbitrary taxes (fines, tallages), levied above and beyond the traditional rent; and (2) increasing labour-services on the lord's demesne. These increased payments are part and parcel of the generally increasing ability of the lord to control the peasants and determine their condition. In other words, for Postan, the extra-economic relationships between lord and peasant — specifically, those payments which are associated with increasing peasant unfreedom — can be understood in terms of the same form of "relative scarcity of factors" argument that would apply to purely market contractual arrangements, and indeed conduced to the same effect in terms of income distribution between lord and peasant. As Postan says, for example, at one point: "The fluctuation of labour service requires no other explanation than that which is provided by the ordinary interplay of supply and demand — demand for villein services and supply of serf labour".¹⁶

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed a decline in population as a result of falling productivity, famine and plague. Ultimately, demographic catastrophe led to a drastic reversal of the man/land ratio. Postan thus argues, consistently enough, that this demographic change brought about precisely the opposite situation to that which had obtained in the thirteenth century. Scarcity of peasants meant a decline not only in the level of rent, but equally in the lord's ability to restrict peasant mobility, and peasant freedom in general. With competition among lords to obtain scarce peasant

¹⁶ M. M. Postan, "The Chronology of Labour Services", *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 4th ser., xx (1937), p. 171. For the previous paragraph, Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England", pp. 552-3, 607-9.

tenants, one gets according to the laws of supply and demand, not only declining rents in general, and labour-services in particular, but giving up by the lords of their rights to control the peasantry. Demographic catastrophe determines the fall of serfdom.¹⁷

Le Roy Ladurie takes up the cycle from the point where Postan leaves it, that is at the end of the fifteenth century. Serfdom is now no longer extant in either England or most of France. We have instead a society of free peasants in both England and France, some holding their land on a roughly contractual basis from the landlords, others having achieved a status of something like freeholders. (I shall return to this a little later.) At any rate, as has been noted, we get a repetition of the two-phase movement Postan charted for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and then the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: that is first an upward push in population during the "long sixteenth century" leading to rising rents, falling wages and the disintegration of peasant holdings. Drastically declining productivity then leads to demographic catastrophes during the seventeenth century, a turning of the trend, and the opposite configuration in terms of the distribution of income and of land.¹⁸

The obvious difficulty with this whole massive structure is that it simply breaks down in the face of comparative analysis. Different outcomes proceeded from similar demographic trends at different times and in different areas of Europe. Thus we may ask if demographic change can be legitimately treated as a "cause", let alone the key variable. So it is true that in the thirteenth century increase in population was accompanied by increasing rents and, more generally, increasing seigneurial controls over the peasantry, not only in England but in parts of France (especially in the north and east of the Paris region: Vermandois, Laonnais, Burgundy).¹⁹ Yet, it is also the case that in other parts of France (Normandy, Picardy) no counter-tendency developed in this era to the long-term trend which had resulted in the previous disappearance of serfdom.²⁰ Moreover, in still other French regions (especially the area around Paris) a

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 608-10. "In the end economic forces asserted themselves, and the lords and the employers found that the most effective way of retaining labour was to pay higher wages, just as the most effective way of retaining tenants was to lower rents and release servile obligations" (*ibid.*, p. 609).

¹⁸ Le Roy Ladurie, *Paysans de Languedoc, passim*.

¹⁹ M. Petot, "L'évolution du servage dans la France coutumière du XI^e au XIV^e siècle", *Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin*, ii (1937), pp. 155-64; Ch.-E. Perrin, "Le servage en France et en Allemagne", *X^e Congrès International des Sciences Historiques, Rapports*, iii (Rome, 1955), pp. 227-8; Guy Fourquin, *Les campagnes de la région parisienne à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris, 1970), pp. 175-9; Robert Fossier, *Histoire sociale de l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1970), pp. 161-3.

²⁰ Robert Fossier, *La terre et les hommes en Picardie jusqu'à la fin du XIII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1968), ii, pp. 555-60. See also the references cited in note 19 above.

process of deterioration in peasant status was at just this time abruptly terminated and an opposite movement set in motion which had decisively established peasant freedom (as well as nearly full peasant property) by the end of the thirteenth century.²¹ These contrasting developments obviously had a powerful effect on trends of income distribution. As Postan himself points out, landlords were able to extract far greater rents from serfs (villeins) than from free tenants — and were able to increase these significantly in the course of the thirteenth century.²² Postan contends, however, that:

The reason why landlords were now not only desirous to increase the weight of labour dues but also "got away with it" are not difficult to guess. With the growing scarcity of land and with the lengthening queues of men waiting for it, the *economic* powers of the landowner over his tenants were more difficult to resist.²³

Clearly, a growth of population leading to rising demand for land would tend to increase a lord's power to extract rent, in whatever form, from the peasantry — but only if the lord had successfully established his right to charge more than a fixed rent. However, the point is that by and large in the medieval period the only tenants subject to the exercise of this sort of "economic" power on the part of the lord — that is to the imposition of additional labour services, as well as additional arbitrary payments of other kinds above the customary rent, in particular entry fines and tallages — were unfree and held by villein tenure. The very status of free tenant in the thirteenth century (which incidentally included a significant section of the population) generally carried with it precisely freedom from heavy (or increasing) labour-service on the lord's demesne, and freedom from tallages, entry fines and other similar payments.²⁴ So, the determination of the impact of the pressure of population on the land — who was to gain and who to lose from a growing demand for land and rising land prices and rent — was subject to the prior determination of the qualitative character of landlord-peasant class relations. Thus during the thirteenth century in the Paris region the trend toward increasing tallaging of the peasantry by landlords was directly aborted by a counter-trend toward peasant enfranchisement. The point, here as in England, was that, once free, peasants

²¹ Fourquin, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-72, 189-90.

²² Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England", pp. 552-3, 603, 607-8, 611. In particular p. 603: "... the money charges incumbent upon customary, i.e., villein, holdings were heavy by all comparison ... even with those of substantial peasant freeholders".

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 608 (my italics).

²⁴ See above, notes 16, 22, 23. R. H. Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England* (London, 1969), pp. 18-19, 24, 29-31. For graphic illustrations of the ability of established free peasants to resist the most determined (and desperate) efforts of rent-gouging landlords even during the thirteenth-century increase in population, see Eleanor Searle, *Lordship and Community: Battle Abbey and its Banlieu, 1066-1538* (Toronto, 1974), pp. 163-6.

paid only a fixed customary rent; they could not be forced to pay additional, arbitrary rents. It is notable, moreover, that this trend toward restricting rent and establishing free tenure in the Paris region took place in the most heavily populated region in all of France.²⁵

The demographic decline experienced throughout Europe which began at various points during the fourteenth century poses analogous problems. In the long run the parallel trends of declining rents and the rise of peasant freedom did dominate this period in England, certainly by the fifteenth century. But in contrast, the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also witnessed a sharpening of landlord controls over the peasantry in Catalonia; and this was also the case, apparently, in parts of France (Bordelais, the Centre).²⁶ It is true that in these areas and in most of Western Europe serfdom was dead by the early sixteenth century. On the other hand, in Eastern Europe, in particular Pomerania, Brandenburg, East Prussia and Poland, decline in population from the late fourteenth century was accompanied by an ultimately successful movement toward imposing extra-economic controls, that is serfdom, over what had been, until then, one of Europe's freest peasantries.²⁷ By 1500 the same Europe-wide trends had gone a long way toward establishing one of the great divides in European history, the emergence of an almost totally free peasant population in Western Europe, the debasement of the peasantry to unfreedom in Eastern Europe.

But the period from 1500 to 1750 marked another great divide which puts in question once more the explanatory value of the malthusian model. This time what is left unexplained is not merely the question of income distribution but the whole problem of dramatically contrasting trends of economic development: continuing long-run stagnation accompanying increase of population in some areas, the spectacular emergence of an entirely new pattern of relatively self-sustaining growth accompanying increase of population in other areas. Thus, as Le Roy Ladurie would lead us to expect, in much of France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, increasing population did lead to fragmentation of holdings, rising rents and declining productivity. And at different points in time in different

²⁵ Fourquin, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 170 ff.

²⁶ Pierre Vilar, *La Catalogne dans l'Espagne moderne*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1962), i, pp. 466 ff.; Jaime Vicens Vives, *Historia de las Remensas en el Siglo XV* (Barcelona, 1945), pp. 23-4 ff.; Robert Boutruche, *La crise d'une société. Seigneurs et paysans du Bordelais pendant la Guerre de Cent Ans* (Paris, 1947; Paris, 1963 edn.), pp. 321 ff.; Isabelle Guérin, *La vie rurale en Sologne aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles* (Paris, 1960), pp. 202-15 ff.

²⁷ F. L. Carstens, *The Origins of Prussia* (London, 1954), pp. 80-4, 101-16; M. Malowist, "Le commerce de la Baltique et le problème des luttes sociales en Pologne aux XV^e et XVI^e siècles", *La Pologne au X^e Congrès International des Sciences Historiques à Rome* (Warsaw, 1955), pp. 131-6, 145-6; J. Blum, "The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe", *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, lxii (1957), pp. 820-2.

regions we do get the classic crises of subsistence, demographic disaster and ultimately a "turning of the trend".²⁸ Nevertheless, ironically, parallel growth of population in England in this same period has been used to explain precisely opposite developments. Thus, according to Bowden:

Under the stimulus of growing population, rising agricultural prices, and mounting land values, the demand for land became more intense and *its use more efficient*. The area under cultivation was extended. *Large estates were built up at the expense of small holdings*.²⁹

So, in France, as population increased, there was extreme fragmentation of holdings and declining productivity. But in England, by contrast, the dominant tendency was to build up larger and larger units; to consolidate holdings and to farm them out to a large tenant farmer who in turn cultivated them with the aid of wage labour. Accompanying this change in the organization of production were major increases in agricultural productivity, with truly epoch-making results. By the end of the seventeenth century English population had returned to its high, late thirteenth-century levels, but there was nothing like the demographic pattern of seventeenth-century France, no phase *B* following inescapably from phase *A*. Instead, we have the final disruption of the malthusian pattern and the introduction of a strikingly novel form of continued economic development.³⁰

II

THE COMMERCIALIZATION MODEL

Before I present the alternative which I think follows from the foregoing comparative analysis, it should be noted that both of the two most prominent exponents of the population-centred approaches to economic change in pre-industrial society, Postan and Le Roy Ladurie, originally constructed their models in opposition to a prevailing historiographical orthodoxy which assigned to the growth of trade and the market a role somewhat analogous to that which they were ultimately to assign to population. Thus Postan and Le Roy Ladurie made powerful attacks on the simple unilineal conceptions which had held that the force of the market determines: first, the

²⁸ See for example, Pierre Goubert, "Le milieu démographique", in *L'ancien régime*, i (Paris, 1969); also, Pierre Goubert, *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730* (Paris, 1960); Jean Meuvret, *Etudes d'histoire économique* (Paris, 1971); Ernest Labrousse, *et al.*, *Histoire économique et sociale de la France, ii, 1660-1789* (Paris, 1970).

²⁹ *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, iv, 1500-1640, p. 593 (my italics).

³⁰ On English agrarian change, its causes and consequences, see for example R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1912; New York, 1967 edn.); Eric Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution* (London, 1967); Eric Kerridge, *Agrarian Problems of the Sixteenth Century and After* (London, 1969), esp. ch. 6; W. G. Hoskins, "The Leicestershire Farmer in the Seventeenth Century", *Agricultural History*, xxv (1951); *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, iv, 1500-1640. See also below, pp. 62-8.

decline of serfdom, which was often simply identified as the change from labour- to money-rents and *ipso facto* the emergence of a free contractual tenantry; and secondly, the rise of capitalist agriculture, classically large-scale tenant farming on the basis of capital improvement and wage labour.

(a) *Trade and Serfdom*

Postan was, in particular, concerned to show that in the medieval period the force of the market, far from automatically bringing about the dissolution of serfdom, might actually coincide with its intensification. He demonstrated, for example, that in some areas most accessible to the London market the trend toward increased labour-service and the seigniorial reaction of the thirteenth century was most intense. Perhaps an even clearer illustration of Postan's point is provided in the areas under the influence of the Paris market during the same period. Thus, as one proceeded along the Seine through a series of different regions all of which produced for Parisian consumption, one passed through regions of peasant freedom, peasant semi-freedom and peasant serfdom. Most spectacular, as Postan pointed out, was the case of Eastern Europe, where during the late medieval and early modern period the powerful impact of the world market for grain gave a major impetus to the tightening of peasant bondage at the same time as it was stimulating the development of capitalism in the West.³¹

Still, Postan never really specified the fatal flaw of the trade-centred approach to European development; this, in my view, is its tendency to ignore the fact that serfdom denoted not merely, nor even primarily, labour- as opposed to money-dues, but, fundamentally, powerful landlord rights to arbitrary exactions and a greater or lesser degree of peasant unfreedom. Thus serfdom involved the landlord's ability to control his tenant's person, in particular his movements, so as to be able to determine the *level* of the rent in excess of "custom" or what might be dictated by the simple play of forces of supply and demand. For this reason the decline of serfdom could not be achieved, as is sometimes implied, through simple commutation, the "equal exchange" of money-rent for labour-rent which might be transacted in the interest of greater efficiency for both parties.³² What would remain after commutation was still the lord's power over the peasant. Indeed, it is notable that commutation could be unilaterally dictated —

³¹ Postan, "The Chronology of Labour Services", esp. pp. 192-3; Fourquin, *Campagnes de la région parisienne*, pp. 169-70 and 170, n. 71; See also M. M. Postan, "The Rise of the Money Economy", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, xiv (1944).

³² For a recent re-statement of this view, see North and Thomas, *Rise of the Western World*, pp. 39-40. It is of course a corollary of their view of serfdom as an essentially contractual, rather than coercive and exploitative relationship. (See above, note 12.)

and reversed — at the lord's will. Thus, as Postan points out, commutation was an extremely widespread development in twelfth-century England; but this trend did not signify the emancipation of the peasants, for in the thirteenth century, they were once again made subject to the landlords' demands for services. Indeed, even where the lord did not decide to take labour-services, the peasant was still required to pay money fees to "buy off" his labour-dues and moreover remained subject to those arbitrary exactions (tallages, entry fines and so on) which were bound up with his status as a "bondsman".³³ What therefore had to be eliminated to bring about the end of serfdom was the type of "unequal exchange" which was manifested in the direct, forceful, extra-economic controls exerted by the lord over the peasant. Since the essence of serfdom was the lord's ability to bring extra-market pressure to bear upon the peasants in determining the level of rent, in particular by preventing peasant mobility and thus a "free market in tenants", it is hardly surprising that fluctuations in trade, indeed of market factors of any type, were not in themselves enough to determine the dissolution of serfdom. Serfdom was a relationship of power which could be reversed, as it were, only in its own terms, through a change in the balance of class forces.

Obviously there might be periods when the enormous demand for land, and thus for tenancies, deriving in particular from the rising pressure of population, would allow the lords to take a very relaxed attitude toward peasant mobility (voluntarily easing restrictions on their villein tenants' movements) since they could always get replacements, quite often indeed on better terms. The latter part of the thirteenth century, as noted, was probably just this sort of period. But evidence from such a period cannot be legitimately used to argue for the end, or the essential irrelevance, of peasant unfreedom.³⁴ Serfdom can be said to end only when the lords' right and ability to control the peasantry, *should they desire to do so*, has been terminated. It is significant that even throughout the thirteenth century peasants wishing to leave the manor were required to obtain licences to depart and had to return each year for the one or two views of frankpledge. In this period, as Raftis says, "the manorial court was usually only concerned to keep the villein under the lord's jurisdiction, not to have him back on the lord's demesne". What is telling, however, is the sudden change in the conditions surrounding villein mobility which followed immediately upon the Black Death and the sudden shortage

³³ Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England", pp. 604-8, 611. For an analysis of the reasons why commutation is misunderstood if it is assumed to mean a relaxation of serfdom, see esp. R. H. Hilton's *Decline of Serfdom*, pp. 29-31, as well as his "Freedom and Villeinage in England", *Past and Present*, no. 31 (July 1965), p. 11.

³⁴ As does, for example, Titow, *English Rural Society 1200-1350*, pp. 59-60.

(as opposed to plethora) of tenants. For this period there is ample evidence for the distraining of villeins to become tenants and take over obligations; for much heavier fines for licence to leave the lord's manor; for a remarkable increase in the number of pledges required for those permitted to leave the manor; for a sharper attitude concerning fugitives from the domain; and for limitations on the number of years the villein was allowed to be away from the manor.³⁵ Certainly, from the lord's point of view, serfdom was still the order of the day, and they had every intention of enforcing it. Whether or not they would be able to was a question that was answered only in the conflicts of the following period.

(b) *Commercialization and Agricultural Capitalism*

In a manner analogous to Postan's, Le Roy Ladurie carried forward the critique of the trade-centred approach to European economic development by showing that even following the downfall of serfdom a tendency toward capitalism (large, consolidated holdings farmed on the basis of capital improvement with wage labour) could not necessarily be assumed, even under the impact of the market. Thus Le Roy Ladurie's study of rural Languedoc was designed in part to qualify the earlier conceptions of historians like Raveau, Bloch and others that the early modern period, under the stimulus of the market, witnessed a steady tendency toward the development of large holdings, cultivated often by farmers of bourgeois origin with a strong orientation toward improvement and efficient production for the market. In contrast, as we have seen, Le Roy Ladurie showed that the emergence of "capitalist rent" (based on increases in the productivity of the land due to capital investment) as opposed to the simple squeezing of the peasant (on the basis of rising demand for land stimulated by increased demographic pressure) was far from inevitable; that fragmentation of holdings was as likely as consolidation. Still the fact remains that, like Postan, Le Roy Ladurie does not get to the root of the difficulties of the trade-centred approach to agrarian change in this period for he does not attempt to specify why, in fact, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a new cycle of fragmentation and declining productivity was set off in some places, while consolidation and improvement took place in others. He does imply that *morcellement* (fragmentation) and *rassemblement* (consolidation) were in some sense competitive trends, and shows that the "mercilessly pursued dismemberment" of holdings "rendered derisory the efforts of the consolidators of the land". The result, he says, was that the economic history of rural

³⁵ J. Ambrose Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility: Studies in the Social History of the Medieval English Village* (Toronto, 1964), pp. 139-44.

Languedoc ended up as "pure peasant history . . . far from the 'origins of capitalism'".³⁶

But Le Roy Ladurie never really poses the question (not only for rural Languedoc but for all of Western Europe) of why the victory of one trend rather than another occurred.³⁷ Nor does he search for an answer, as I am inclined to do, in the emergence of a structure of ownership of land which provided the peasantry in most of France (in contrast to England and elsewhere) with relatively powerful property rights over comparatively large areas of the land. This presented a powerful barrier to those who wished to concentrate land. For whatever the market situation or the price of land, the peasantry would not in general easily relinquish their holdings, the bases of their existence and that of their heirs. It was thus, I will argue, the predominance of petty proprietorship in France in the early modern period which ensured long-term agricultural backwardness.³⁸ This was not only because of the technical barriers to improvement built into the structure of small holdings, especially within the common fields. It was, as I shall try to demonstrate, because peasant proprietorship in France came to be historically bound up with the development of an overall property or surplus-extraction structure which tended to discourage agricultural investment and development; in particular, the heavy taxation by the monarchical state; the "squeezing" of peasant tenants (leaseholders) by the landlords; and, finally, the subdivision of holdings by the peasants themselves.³⁹

³⁶ Le Roy Ladurie, *Paysans de Languedoc*, *passim*; the quotations are at p. 8.

³⁷ Le Roy Ladurie, *Paysans de Languedoc*, pp. 8 ff. To explain the failure of agrarian capitalism in France, Le Roy Ladurie falls back, in the last analysis, upon the prevalence of backward mentalities. Thus (*ibid.*, pp. 640-1): "technological stagnation (*immobilisme*) was enveloped in, supported by, a whole series of . . . cultural blockages". For Le Roy Ladurie, it was the "invisible spiritual frontiers" which were "the most constraining of all" on the economy (p. 11). And consistently enough, he appears to find the germs of true economic growth in the "new mentalities" (*mentalités nouvelles*) of the epoch of the Enlightenment (p. 652).

³⁸ For the difficulties (not of course the impossibility, especially under certain conditions and over a relatively long term) of consolidating large holdings in the face of widespread and entrenched peasant proprietorship, see Louis Merle, *La métairie et l'évolution agraire de la Gâtine poitevine de la fin du moyen âge à la révolution* (Paris, 1958), pp. 70-2; André Plaisse, *La Baromnie du Neubourge* (Paris, 1961), pp. 583-5; also Le Roy Ladurie, *Paysans de Languedoc*, p. 327. Roger Dion enunciated the following general rule concerning the powerful limiting impact of the French peasant community on the development of large farms: "The regions of large farms are defined negatively: they are those which largely escaped the grip of the village communities". Quoted in J. Meuvret, "L'agriculture en Europe aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles", in his *Etudes d'histoire économique* (Paris, 1971), p. 177. Of course, as Meuvret points out (agreeing with Dion) large farms tended to develop in France only to a very small extent, and even then generally on the worst lands — precisely because they were prevented from doing so by the widespread strength of the "strongly-rooted peasant collectivities" (*ibid.*).

³⁹ For the full arguments, see below, pp. 72 ff.

III

CLASS CONFLICT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In sum, despite the destructive force of their attacks upon the unilineal trade-centred theories of economic change, it may be doubted that either Postan or Le Roy Ladurie has carried his critique quite far enough. For, rather than searching for underlying differences which might account for contrasting lines of development in different places under similar constellations of economic forces, both Postan and Le Roy Ladurie have chosen to construct new models largely by substituting a different objective variable, population, for the old, discredited one, commerce. Because, in my view, they have failed to place the development of class structure and its effects at the centre of their analyses, their own cyclical malthusian models encounter, as we have seen, precisely the same sorts of difficulties in the face of comparative history that they themselves criticized in the trade-centred unilineal approaches. In particular their methods prevent them from posing what in my view are perhaps the two fundamental problems for the analysis of long-term economic development in late medieval and early modern Europe, or more generally, the "transition from feudalism to capitalism": (1) the decline versus the persistence of serfdom and its effects; (2) the emergence and predominance of secure small peasant property versus the rise of landlord-large tenant farmer relations on the land. In historical terms this means, at the very least: (1) a comparative analysis of the intensification of serfdom in Eastern Europe in relation to its process of decline in the West; (2) a comparative analysis of the rise of agrarian capitalism and the growth of agricultural productivity in England in relation to their failure in France. Simply stated, it will be our contention that the breakthrough from "traditional economy" to relatively self-sustaining economic development was predicated upon the emergence of a specific set of class relations in the countryside, that is capitalist class relations. This outcome depended, in turn, upon the previous success of a two-sided process of class development and class conflict: on the one hand the destruction of serfdom; on the other hand, the short-circuiting of the emerging predominance of small peasant property.⁴⁰

(a) *The Decline of Serfdom*

One can begin by agreeing with Postan that there was a long-term tendency to demographic crisis inherent in the medieval economy. But this tendency to crisis was not a natural fact, explicable solely by

⁴⁰ This view obviously derives from Marx's arguments on the barriers to and the class structural bases for the development of capitalism, especially as presented in "The So-called Primitive Accumulation of Capital", *Capital*, I, pt. VIII, and *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, ed. E. J. Hobsbawm (New York, 1965), pp. 97-120.

reference to available human and natural resources in relation to an ostensibly given level of technique. It was, rather, built into the interrelated structure of peasant organization of production on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the institutionalized relationships of serfdom by which the lord was able to extract a feudal rent. Thus the inability of the serf-based agrarian economy to innovate in agriculture even under extreme market incentives to do so is understandable in view of the interrelated facts, first, of heavy surplus-extraction by the lord from the peasant and, secondly, the barriers to mobility of men and land which were themselves part and parcel of the unfree surplus-extraction relationship.

Thus the lord's surplus extraction (rent) tended to confiscate not merely the peasant's income above subsistence (and potentially even beyond) but at the same time to threaten the funds necessary to refurbish the peasant's holding and to prevent the long-term decline of its productivity. Postan has estimated that on average something like 50 per cent of the unfree peasant's total product was extracted by the lord.⁴¹ This was entirely unproductive "profit", for hardly any of it was "ploughed back" into production; most was squandered in military expenditure and conspicuous consumption.⁴²

At the same time, given his unfree peasants, the lord's most obvious mode of increasing output from his lands was not through capital investment and the introduction of new techniques, but through "squeezing" the peasants, through raising either money-rents or labour-services. In particular the availability of unfree rent-paying tenants militated against the tendency to expel or buy out peasants in order to construct a consolidated demesne and introduce improvements on this basis. Revenues could be raised through increasing rents *via* tallages, entry fines and other levies, so there was little need to engage in the difficult and costly processes of building up large holdings and investing, of removing customary peasants and bringing in new techniques. Thus the argument sometimes advanced that the medieval landlords' agricultural investments were adequate to the requirements of their estates begs the question, for it takes as given the landlords' class-position and the agrarian structure bound up with it.⁴³

⁴¹ Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England", pp. 603-4.

⁴² M. M. Postan, "Investment in Medieval Agriculture", *Jl. Econ. Hist.*, xxvii (1967). R. H. Hilton, "Rent and Capital Formation in Feudal Society", *Second International Conference of Economic History 1962* (Paris, 1965), esp. pp. 41-53. Hilton estimates that no more than 5 per cent of total income was ploughed back into productive investment by the landlords of the thirteenth century (p. 53). This paper is reprinted in R. H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975).

⁴³ Titow, *English Rural Society*, pp. 49-50. If I properly understand his argument, Dr. Titow is asserting that the failure to improve was by and large the result of the lack of technical knowledge, the unavailability of new techniques. Thus, he says, "the technical limitations of medieval husbandry seem to have imposed their own ceiling on what could be spent on an estate".

There were, in fact, known and available agricultural improvements — including the ultimately revolutionary “convertible husbandry” — which could have brought significant improvements in demesne output.⁴⁴ Indeed, as Professor Searle has recently demonstrated, fully-fledged convertible husbandry was systematically adopted on Battle Abbey’s manor of Marley from the early fourteenth century. It is most significant that this manor consisted entirely of a single consolidated demesne (with no customary tenancies) and was farmed entirely with wage labour, marking a total break from feudal organization of production and class relations. It is notable, moreover, that the manor of Marley had been constructed by buying out free tenants. Because these tenants were freeholders, Battle Abbey had not been able to increase its rents, although it had tried to do so. Indeed, Battle Abbey had waged an extended struggle to force its tenants into unfree status, precisely in order to open them up to the imposition of additional levies. However, in the end this had been unsuccessful and, as a result, the only alternative for raising the revenue from these lands was to buy up the peasants’ holdings. The Abbey could then farm these itself as a consolidated demesne — and this, in fact, is the solution it hit upon.⁴⁵

Of course, the methods used on the manor of Marley by Battle Abbey were almost totally ignored by English landlords. They generally did not have to improve — to raise labour-productivity, efficiency and output — in order to increase income. This was because they had an alternative, “exploitative” mode available to them: the use of their position of power over the peasants to increase their share of the product.

At the same time, because of lack of funds — due to landlords’ extraction of rent and the extreme maldistribution of both land and capital, especially livestock — the peasantry was by and large unable to use the land they held in a free and rational manner. They could not, so to speak, put back what they took out of it. Thus the surplus-extraction relations of serfdom tended to lead to the exhaustion of peasant production *per se*; in particular the inability to invest in animals for ploughing and as a source of manure led to deterioration of the soil, which in turn led to the extension of cultivation to land formerly reserved for the support of animals. This meant the cultivation of worse soils and at the same time fewer animals — and thus in the end a vicious cycle of the destruction of the peasants’

⁴⁴ See for example, the use of convertible husbandry in Flanders in the early fourteenth century: B. H. Slicher Van Bath, *The Agrarian History of Western Europe, A.D. 500-1850* (London, 1963; repr. London, 1966), pp. 178-9.

⁴⁵ Searle, *Lordship and Community*, pp. 147, 174-5, 183-94, 267-329.

means of support. The crisis of productivity led to demographic crisis, pushing the population over the edge of subsistence.⁴⁶

On the other hand, the lord's property relationships to that small group of peasants who had enough land to produce a marketable surplus and thus the potential to accumulate — that is to concentrate land, assemble a labour force and introduce improvement — was also a barrier to the development of productivity.⁴⁷ First, of course, feudal rent itself limited the funds available for accumulation. Secondly, restrictions on peasant mobility not only prevented peasant movement to areas of greater potential opportunity, but tended to limit the development of a free market in labour.⁴⁸ Finally, feudal restrictions on the mobility of land tended to prevent its concentration. Unfree peasants were not allowed to convey their land to other peasants without the lord's permission. Yet it was often in the lord's interest to prevent large accumulating tenants from receiving more land, because they might find it harder to collect the rent from such tenants, especially if they had free status.⁴⁹

Given these property or surplus-extraction relationships, productivity crisis leading to demographic crisis was more or less to be expected, sooner or later.⁵⁰ The question, however, which must be asked concerns the economic and social results of the demographic catastrophe, in particular that of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Postan showed one logic: that the peasants apparently used their economic position, their scarcity, to win their freedom. As B. H. Slicher Van Bath argues for Western Europe in general,

⁴⁶ Hilton, "Rent and Capital Formation", pp. 53-5; Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England", pp. 548-70. The net product of at least one third of all the land, including a disproportionate share of the best land, was directly in the hands of the tiny landlord class (that is in demesne): E. A. Kosminsky, "Services and Money Rents in the Thirteenth Century", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, v (1934-5); Postan, *op. cit.*, pp. 601-2. See also above, note 41.

⁴⁷ See Hilton, *Decline of Serfdom*, pp. 30-1 and *passim*.

⁴⁸ Admittedly, in the thirteenth century, given the extreme "overpopulation", the availability of wage labour was not a problem. On the supply of wage labour in the thirteenth century, see E. A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford, 1956), ch. vi.

⁴⁹ See especially Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility*, pp. 66-8, for evidence concerning lords' actions to prevent customary tenants from concentrating too much land or to prevent customary tenants from conveying land to freemen. Professor Searle suggests that a key motivation for Battle Abbey's continuing attempts from the mid-thirteenth century to depress its tenants from free to unfree status was to be better able to control the peasant land market in order to assure rents. *Lordship and Community*, pp. 185 ff. See also M. M. Postan, "The Charters of the Villeins", in *Carte Nativorum*, ed. M. M. Postan and C. N. L. Brooke (Northampton Rec. Soc. Public., xx, 1960), pp. xxxi-xxxii and ff.

⁵⁰ Especially relevant here is Postan's remark that the peasants' feudal rents "had to be treated as prior charges. They could not be reduced to suit the harvests or the tenant's personal circumstances . . . in fact, the tenant's need of food and fodder had to be covered by what was left after the obligatory charges had been met": "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England", p. 604.

“the lord of the manor was forced to offer good conditions or see all his villeins vanish”.⁵¹ Yet, curiously, quite another logic has sometimes been invoked to explain the intensification of serfdom in Eastern Europe: the crisis in seigneurial revenues which followed upon the decline in population and the disappearance of tenants led the lords to assert their control over the peasants and bind them to their lands in order to protect their incomes and their very existence.⁵² Obviously, both “logics” are unassailable from different class viewpoints. It was the logic of the peasant to try to use his apparently improved bargaining position to get this freedom. It was the logic of the landlord to protect his position by reducing the peasants’ freedom. The result simply cannot be explained in terms of demographic-economic supply and demand. It obviously came down to a question of power, indeed of force, and in fact there was intense Europe-wide lord-peasant conflict throughout the later fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, almost everywhere over the same general issues: first, of course, serfdom; secondly, whether lords or peasants were to gain ultimate control over landed property, in particular the vast areas left vacant after the demographic collapse.

In England after 1349 and the Black Death there was a seigneurial reaction: attempts to control peasant mobility by forcing peasants to pay impossible fees for permission to move; legislation to control wages; an actual increase in rents in some places. But by 1400 it was clear that the landlords’ offensive had failed; revolt and flight, which continued throughout the fifteenth century, led to the end of serfdom.⁵³ In Catalonia, a particularly revealing case, one also finds increased legislation by the *Corts* — the representative body of the landlords, the clergy and the urban patriciate — to limit peasant movement and decrease personal freedom. By the early fifteenth century this legislation had proceeded a good distance, with apparently significant success. But, correlatively, it provoked in response a high level of peasant organization and, in particular, the assembling of mass peasant armies. Well past the mid-fifteenth century it appeared quite possible that the seigneurial reaction would succeed. Only a series of violent and bloody confrontations ultimately assured peasant victory. Armed warfare ended finally in 1486 with the Sentence of Guadalupe by which the peasantry was granted in full

⁵¹ Slicher Van Bath, *Agrarian History of Western Europe*, p. 145.

⁵² Carstens, *Origins of Prussia*, pp. 103 ff.; Malowist, “La commerce de la Baltique et la problème des luttes sociales en Pologne aux XV^e et XVI^e siècles”, pp. 131-46; Guy Fourquin, *Seigneurie et féodalité au moyen âge* (Paris, 1970), pp. 215-16.

⁵³ For the seigneurial reaction and its failure, see Hilton, *Decline of Serfdom*, pp. 36-59. For a close case study, see Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility*, esp. pp. 143-4 and ff.

its personal freedom, full right in perpetuity to its property (while remaining obligated to the payment of certain fixed dues) and, perhaps equally important, full right to those vacant holdings (*masos ronecs*) which they had annexed in the period following the demographic catastrophes.⁵⁴ Finally, in Europe east of the Elbe we have the familiar story of the lords entirely overwhelming the peasantry, gradually decreasing through legislation peasant personal freedom, and ultimately confiscating an important part of peasant land and attaching it to their demesnes. In short, the question of serfdom in Europe could not be reduced to a question of economics: its long-term rise in the East corresponded first to a fall in population and stagnation in trade and then to a rise in population and rise in trade (1400-1600). In the West serfdom declined during a period first of rising population and growing commerce, then of declining population and reduced trade (1200-1500).

In sum, the contradictions between the development of peasant production and the relations of surplus-extraction which defined the class relations of serfdom tended to lead to a crisis of peasant accumulation, of peasant productivity and ultimately of peasant subsistence. This crisis was accompanied by an intensification of the class conflict inherent in the existing structure, but with different outcomes in different places — the breakdown of the old structure or its re-strengthening — depending on the balance of forces between the contending classes. Thus in the end the serf-based or feudal class structure opened up certain limited patterns of development, gave rise to certain predictable crises and, especially, tended to the outbreak of certain immanent class conflicts. The element of “indeterminacy” emerges in relation to the different character and results of these conflicts in different regions. This is not to say that such outcomes were somehow arbitrary, but rather that they tended to be bound up with certain *historically specific* patterns of the development of the contending agrarian classes and their relative strength in the different European societies: their relative levels of internal solidarity, their self-consciousness and organization, and their general political resources — especially their relationships to the non-agricultural classes (in particular, potential urban class allies) and to the state (in particular, whether or not the state developed as a “class-like” competitor of the lords for the peasants’ surplus).

Obviously it is not possible in this compass adequately to account for the differential strengths of lords *vis-à-vis* peasants and the different patterns of class conflict between them across Europe in the late medieval period. It is necessary, however, at least to pose this

⁵⁴ Vicens Vives, *Historia de las Remensas*, pp. 23 ff.; Vilar, *La Catalogne*, i, pp. 466-71, 506-9.

problem in order to confront the fundamental question of the success or failure of the "seigneurial reaction" which was nearly universal throughout medieval Europe, and thus, especially, the question of the differential outcomes of the later medieval agrarian crises and class confrontations in Eastern and Western Europe, resulting in totally divergent paths of subsequent social and economic development. It should at least be clear that we cannot find an explanation in the direct impact of forces of supply and demand, whether commercial or demographic in origin, no matter how powerful. Serfdom began its rise in the East (and its definitive downfall in the West) in the period of late medieval demographic decline; it was consolidated during the trans-European increase in population of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and it was further sharpened at the time of the demographic disasters of the later seventeenth century.

Nor will the pressure of trade provide a more convincing answer although, ironically, the rise of large-scale export commerce has sometimes been invoked to explain the rise of serfdom in the East⁵⁵ (as it has, analogously, the rise of capitalism in the West). It is not, of course, my point to deny the relevance of economic conditions, especially the growth of trade, to the development of class relations and the strength of contending classes. No doubt, in this instance, the income from grain produced by serf-based agriculture and sold by export from the Baltic to the West enhanced the class power of the Eastern lords, helping them to sustain their seigneurial offensive. But the control of grain production (and thus the grain trade) secured through their successful enserfment of the peasantry was by no means assured by the mere fact of the emergence of the grain markets themselves. In the rich, grain-producing areas of north-west Germany, the peasants were largely successful in gaining command of grain output in precisely the period of developing enserfment in north-east Germany — and they appear to have done so after a prolonged period of anti-landlord resistance. In fact, the peasants' ability in this region to control the commerce in agricultural commodities (a share of the Baltic export trade, as well as the inland routes) appears to have been a factor in helping them to consolidate their power and property against the landlords.⁵⁶ Indeed, on a more general plane, the precocious growth of commerce in the medieval West has often been taken to explain in large measure the relative strength of the

⁵⁵ For a recent version of this position, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1974), pp. 90-6.

⁵⁶ Friedrich Lütge, *Deutsche sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1966), pp. 232-5. See the interesting material on the emergence in the regions of Dithmarschen and Fehmarn of a highly-commercialized free peasantry with large holdings deeply involved in the Baltic export trade in the late medieval-early modern period presented in Christian Reuter, *Ostseehandel und Landwirtschaft im sechzehnten und siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1912), pp. 18-29.

peasantry in Western Europe and thus the decline of serfdom. The growth of the market, it is argued, made possible the emergence of a significant layer of large peasants who, through the sales of agricultural surpluses, were able to accumulate large holdings and, on this basis, to amass power and to play a pivotal role in organizing peasant resistance.⁵⁷ So the argument for the disintegrating impact of trade on landlord power appears *prima facie* to be as convincing as the counter-case for its enhancing effects. We are therefore brought back to our point of departure: the need to interpret the significance of changing economic and demographic forces in terms of historically evolved structures of class relations and, especially, differing balances of class power.

Perhaps the most widely accepted explanation of the divergence between East and West European development, in particular the rise of serfdom in Eastern Europe, has been found in the weaker development of the towns in this region which made the entire area more vulnerable to seigniorial reaction.⁵⁸ Because the towns were smaller and less developed they could be more easily overwhelmed by the nobility, thus shutting off a key outlet for peasant flight and depriving the peasants of significant allies. However, this classical line of reasoning remains difficult to accept fully because the actual mechanisms through which the towns had their reputedly dissolving effects on landlord control over the peasantry in Western Europe have still to be precisely specified.

The viability of the towns as a potential alternative for the mass of unfree peasantry must be called into question simply in terms of their gross demographic weight. Could the relatively tiny urban centres — which could have surpassed 10 per cent of the total population in only a few European regions — have exerted sufficient attractive power on the rural masses to account for the collapse of serfdom almost everywhere in Western Europe by 1500?⁵⁹ The real economic opportunities offered by the towns to rural migrants are also questionable. Few runaway serfs could have had the capital or skill to enter the ranks of urban craftsmen or shopkeepers, let alone merchants. At the same time the essence of urban economy, based on luxury production for a limited market, was economic restriction, in

⁵⁷ See for example, R. H. Hilton, "Peasant Movements in England Before 1381", in *Essays in Economic History*, ed. E. M. Carus-Wilson, ii (London, 1962), pp. 85-90; E. A. Kosminsky, "The Evolution of Feudal Rent in England from the Eleventh to the Fifteenth Century", *Past and Present*, no. 7 (April 1955), pp. 24-7.

⁵⁸ See Carsten, *Origins of Prussia*, esp. pp. 115-16, 135; Blum, "The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe", pp. 833-5.

⁵⁹ For an indication of the very small relative size of the urban population in later medieval England, see R. H. Hilton, *A Medieval Society: The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century* (London and New York, 1966), pp. 167-8.

particular control of the labour market. Certainly, few of the established citizens of the medieval towns, typically organized in closed corporations, could have welcomed rural immigrants. Admittedly, the urban "freemen" often constituted only a minority of the urban population; but they were often in a position to place real limits on opportunities in the towns.⁶⁰ It is in fact a historical commonplace that the strength of the guilds was a significant factor in forcing potential industrial capital into the countryside to find "free labour". It is indeed far from obvious that the medieval towns housed the "natural" allies of the unfree peasantry. For many reasons the urban patriciate would tend to align themselves with the nobility against the peasantry. Both of these classes had a common interest in maintaining social order and the defence of property and in protecting their mutually beneficial relationships of commercial exchange (raw materials for luxury products). Moreover, the urban patricians were often themselves landowners and, as such, opponents of the peasants in the same nexus of rural class relations as the nobility.⁶¹ It is true that, in contrast, the urban artisans tended to be anti-aristocratic. But this would not necessarily lead them to support the struggles of the peasants; for, again, freeing the peasantry posed a threat to urban controls over the labour market and invited increased competition.

In truth, the historical record of urban support for the aspirations to freedom of the medieval European peasantry is not impressive. The large towns of Brandenburg, Pomerania and Prussia, which were the scene of chronic social conflict throughout the later middle ages, offered no apparent objection to the nobility's demands that they legislate against fleeing serfs.⁶² Nor did the townsmen of Koenigsburg come to the aid of the peasant revolt of East Prussia in 1525 — the one really large-scale rural rising of this period in north-eastern Europe. The town's patriciate positively opposed the revolt. Meanwhile the remainder of the citizenry — despite their own engagement at this time in fierce struggles against the patriciate — failed to come forth with the material aid which was requested by the rebellious peasants threatened by encroaching enserfment.⁶³ Correlatively, in the large-scale revolt of the later medieval period in which urban-rural ties were perhaps most pronounced — that of maritime Flanders between 1323 and 1328 — the peasant element

⁶⁰ For a survey of urban organization in the medieval period, see *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, iii, ed. M. M. Postan, E. E. Rich and Edward Miller (Cambridge, 1963), esp. chaps. iv, v.

⁶¹ See for example, Vilar, *La Catalogne*, i, pp. 490-3.

⁶² Carsten, *op. cit.*, p. 111 (see also pp. 83-8).

⁶³ F. L. Carsten, "Der Bauernkrieg in Ostpreussen 1525", *Int. Rev. Social Hist.*, iii (1938), pp. 400-1, 405-7; G. Franz, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg* (Munich, 1943), p. 287; A. Seraphim, "Soziale Bewegungen in Altpreussen im Jahre 1525" in *Altpreussische Monatsschrift*, lviii (1921), esp. pp. 74, 82-3, 87, 92.

was already fully free (or had never been enserfed), so there was never a question here of urban opposition to a rural social order of unfreedom.⁶⁴ Finally, in perhaps the most significant of the late medieval revolts against serfdom — that of the Catalan *remensas* from the later fourteenth century — there were no significant link-ups with the urban classes — this despite the fact that in Catalonia extended rural rebellion was paralleled by serious outbreaks of urban class conflict. The Catalan peasant revolt was probably the best organized and despite the lack of support from the urban classes the most successful in all of Europe: it brought about the downfall of serfdom in Catalonia.⁶⁵ In sum, the towns rarely aided peasant resistance to serfdom, nor was the success of such resistance apparently dependent upon such aid.

If the significance of differing levels of urban development has been overstated in some explanations of the divergent socio-economic paths taken by Eastern and Western Europe from the later middle ages, the importance of the previous evolutions of rural society itself in these contrasting regions has been perhaps correspondingly neglected. The development of peasant solidarity and strength in Western Europe — especially as this was manifested in the peasants' organization at the level of the village — appears to have been far greater in Western than in Eastern Europe; and this superior institutionalization of the peasants' class power in the West may have been central to its superior ability to resist seigneurial reaction. The divergent evolutions of peasant class organization is clearest in what is probably the pivotal comparative case — east *versus* west Elbian Germany; and the divergent developments in these two regions provide important clues to the disparate development patterns of the far broader spheres of which they were a part.

Thus, through much of western Germany by the later middle ages the peasantry had succeeded, through protracted struggle on a piecemeal village-by-village basis, in constituting for itself an impressive network of village institutions for economic regulation and political self-government. These provided a powerful line of defence against the incursions of landlords. In the first instance, peasant organization and peasant resistance to the lords appear to have been closely bound up with the very development of the quasi-communal character of peasant economy. Most fundamental was the need to regulate co-operatively the village commons and to struggle against the lords to establish and to protect commons rights — common lands (for

⁶⁴ R. H. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (London, 1973), pp. 114-15, 125-7; H. Pirenne, *Le soulèvement de la Flandre maritime de 1323-1328* (Brussels, 1900), pp. i-v and *passim*.

⁶⁵ Vilar, *La Catalogne*, i, esp. pp. 449, 492-3, 497-9, 508-9 (in general, pp. 448-521).

grazing and so on) and the common-field organization of agricultural rotation (in which the post-harvest stubble played an important role in the support of animals). Sooner or later, however, issues of a more general economic and political character tended to be raised. The peasants organized themselves in order to fix rents and to ensure rights of inheritance. Perhaps most significantly, in many places they fought successfully to replace the old landlord-installed village mayor (*Schultheiss*) by their own elected village magistrates. In some villages they even won the right to choose the village priest. All these gains the peasants forced the lords to recognize in countless village charters (*Weistumer*) — through which the specific conquests of the peasantry were formally institutionalized.⁶⁶

The contrasting evolution in eastern Germany is most striking. Here peasant economic co-operation and, in particular, the self-government of peasant villages appear to have developed only to a relatively small extent. As a result the east German peasants appear to have been much less prepared to resist seigneurial attacks and the onset of seigneurial controls leading to serfdom than were their counterparts in the west. Probably most telling in this respect was the relative failure to develop independent political institutions in the village, and this is perhaps most clearly indicated by the apparent inability of the eastern peasantry to displace the *locator* or *Schultheiss*, the village officer who originally organized the settlement as the representative of the lord and who retained his directing political role in the village (either as the lord's representative or as hereditary office-holder) throughout the medieval period. It is remarkable, moreover, that the numerous *Weistumer* which clearly marked the step-by-step establishment of village rights against the lord in the west are very rarely found in late medieval eastern Germany.⁶⁷

The relative absence of village solidarity in the east, despite the formally similar character of village settlement (the so-called "Germanic" type), appears to have been bound up with the entire evolution of the region as a colonial society — its relatively "late" formation, the "rational" and "artificial" character of its settlement, and especially the leadership of the landlords in the colonizing process. Thus, in the first place, the communal aspects of the village economy appear to have been comparatively underdeveloped. In general there were no common lands. Moreover, the common-field agriculture itself appears to have been less highly evolved; and this seems to have been bound up with the original organization of the fields at the time of settlement — in particular, the tendency of the

⁶⁶ Gunther Franz, *Geschichte des deutschen Bauernstaades von frühen Mittelalter bis zum 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1970), pp. 48-66.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 53, 58, 62. See the correlative failure of the peasantry of eastern Germany to win the right to appoint village priests (pp. 62-3).

colonists to lay out holdings within the fields in rather large, relatively consolidated strips (often stretching directly behind the peasants' houses) in contrast to the tiny, scattered parcels characteristic of the "natural" and "chaotic" development in the west. There seems, then, to have been more of a tendency to individualistic farming; less developed organization of collaborative agricultural practices at the level of the village or between villages (for example inter-commoning); and little tradition of the "struggle for commons rights" against the lords which was so characteristic of western development.⁶⁸

At the same time, the planned, landlord-led organization of settlement in the east tended to place major barriers in the way of the emergence of peasant power and peasant self-government.⁶⁹ East German villages were generally smaller and less dense than their western counterparts; they tended, moreover, to have but a single lord. As a result they were less difficult for the lords to control than were the villages of the west, where the thick population and, in particular, the tendency of the villages to be divided between two or more lordships, gave the peasants more room to manoeuvre, making *Gemeinbildung* that much easier.⁷⁰

As one historian of the German peasantry has stated, "without the strong development of communal life in (west) Germany, the peasant wars (of 1525) are unthinkable". From this point of view, it is notable that the one east German region which experienced peasant revolt in 1525 — that is East Prussia — was marked by unusually strong peasant communities, as well as an (apparently) weak ruling nobility. Thus, on the one hand, the East Prussian peasant revolt originated and remained centred in Samland, an area characterized not only by extraordinarily high density of population, comparable to Western Europe, but also by the persistence of well-entrenched and relatively powerful forms of peasant organization. The Samland was one of the few east Elbian areas to escape the process of colonization and thus the imposition of the "Germanic"

⁶⁸ Hermann Aubin, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: The Lands East of the Elbe and German Colonization Eastwards", in *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, I (1966), pp. 464-5, 468-9.

⁶⁹ Note the comment of a recent student of the late medieval east German village community (*Gemeinde*) in accounting for its weakness: "The village lord was there first, then came the village members. In the area of older settlement, the *Gemeinde*, whose beginnings are mostly lost in the dark, distant past, was primary". H. Patze, "Die deutsche Bäuerliche Gemeinde im Ordenstaat Preussen", in *Die Anfänge der Landgemeinde und ihr Wesen*, ed. T. Mayer, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1964), I, p. 151. For a suggestive case study of a locality where landlord-led colonization left the peasantry in a position of weakness, open to expropriation, see Searle, *Lordship and Community*, pt. I, ch. 3, esp. pp. 63-8.

⁷⁰ Aubin, *op. cit.*, p. 469; Franz, *Geschichte des deutschen Bauernstandes*, pp. 49, 53, 56-7.

agrarian and political forms of settlement. In consequence its original Prussian peasant communities were left largely undisturbed and were allowed to retain their own apparently ancient and distinctive socio-political structures.⁷¹ On the other hand, the East Prussian nobility was perhaps the least well-established of any in the entire region. The colonization of the area had been, of course, largely carried out under the "bureaucratic" administration of the Teutonic Order. At the time of the peasant revolt of 1525, the new "junker" ruling aristocracy was only just completing its takeover from the disintegrating state of the Teutonic Order.⁷²

Of course, the peasant wars in both west and east Germany were largely a failure, as were most of the really large-scale peasant revolts of the later medieval period in Europe. What was successful, however, not only in western Germany, but throughout most of Western Europe, was the less spectacular but ultimately more significant process of stubborn resistance, village by village, through which the peasantry developed its solidarity and village institutions. It was on this basis that the peasants of Western Europe were able to limit considerably the claims of the aristocracy and, ultimately, to dissolve serfdom and forestall seigneurial reaction.⁷³ Lacking the strength the Western peasantry had developed in constructing the

⁷¹ The quotation is to be found *ibid.*, p. 63. On the development of the Samland region, the special social, political, and demographic characteristics of its Prussian peasant communities, see R. Weinskaus, "Kleinverbände und Kleinraume bei den Preussen des Samlandes" in *Die Anfänge der Landgemeinde und ihr Wesen*, i, pp. 202-32 and ff. See Weinskaus's comment (p. 232): "In north-west Samland, the centre of resistance against the Order, the native dominant classes had disappeared. Precisely because of this, the old associations appear to have been maintained for an especially long time". See also Hans Helmut Wächter, *Ostpreussische Domänenvorwerke im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Würzburg, 1958), p. 7. Note also the apparent interrelationship of unusually dense population and distinctively powerful village communities with successful peasant revolt on the lands of the bishopric of Ermland (East Prussia) in 1440. Carsten, *Origins of Prussia*, pp. 60-1, 104-5. Patze, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-5.

⁷² On the decline of the Teutonic Order and the rise of the Prussian nobility, especially in relationship to the revolt of 1525, see Carsten, "Der Bauernkrieg in Ostpreussen 1525", pp. 398-9; Seraphim, "Soziale Bewegungen in Altpreussen im Jahre 1525", pp. 2-3. Note also Seraphim's interesting suggestion that the Order frequently attempted to defend the peasantry, and its customary position, against the growing incursions of an emergent nobility which was of course simultaneously undermining the Order itself (pp. 9-11). Cf. Carsten, *Origins of Prussia*, part II ("The Rise of the Junkers"), esp. p. 111 and ff. See also below, pp. 68-70.

⁷³ For a meticulous reconstruction of those processes in one French region, see Fossier's chapter on "Les conquêtes paysannes", in *La terre et les hommes en Picardie*, ii, pp. 708-30. See Fossier's comment (*ibid.*, p. 708): "The progressive elevation of the living standard of the peasants and the progress achieved in the sphere of their social condition are rightly considered as fundamental phenomena of medieval history. . . . In the face of an aristocratic world on the defensive, that of the peasants' was strengthened, was emancipated little by little".

instruments of village co-operation and resistance, the peasantry of colonized Eastern Europe was less prepared to hold out; and in consequence they succumbed to seigneurial reaction and the imposition of serfdom.

The outcomes of the breakdowns and conflicts of the late medieval period had momentous consequences for subsequent European social change. For the pattern of economic development imposed by the now-intensified class structure of serfdom in the East, under the impact of the world market, was very different from that which prevailed in the free conditions of the West. Specifically, the newly-emergent structure of class relations in the East had as its outcome the "development of underdevelopment", the preclusion of increased productivity in general, and of industrialization in particular. First of all, the availability of forced labourers whose services could be incessantly intensified by the lord discouraged the introduction of agricultural improvements. Secondly, the lord's increasing surplus extraction from the peasantry continually limited the emergence of a home market for industrial goods. Thirdly, the fact of direct and powerful controls over peasant mobility meant the constriction of the industrial labour force, eventuating in the suffocation of industry and the decline of the towns. Finally, the landlords, as a ruling class which dominated their states, pursued a policy of what has been called "anti-mercantilism"; they attempted to usurp the merchants' function as middlemen and encouraged industrial imports from the West, in this way undermining much of what was left of urban and industrial organization.⁷⁴ Thus, the possibility of balanced economic growth was destroyed and East Europe consigned to backwardness for centuries.

In sum, economic backwardness in Eastern Europe cannot be regarded as economically determined, arising from "dependence" upon trade in primary products to the West, as is sometimes asserted. Indeed, it would be more correct to state that dependence upon grain exports was a result of backwardness; of the failure of the home market — the terribly reduced purchasing power of the mass of the population — which was the result of the dismal productivity and the vastly unequal distribution of income in agriculture, rooted in the last analysis in the class structure of serfdom.

⁷⁴ Some of the most important recent analyses of the rise of serfdom in Eastern Europe, its causes and consequences, may be found in the works of Marian Malowist. A number of these writings are collected in his *Croissance et régression en Europe XIV^e-XVII^e siècles* (Paris, 1972). See also, Malowist, "La commerce de la Baltique et le problème des luttes sociales en Pologne aux XV^e et XVI^e siècles". See, in addition, Carsten, *Origins of Prussia*; A. Maczak, "Export of Grain and the Problem of Distribution of National Income in the Years 1550-1650", *Acta Poloniae Historica*, xviii (1968); J. Topolski, "La régression économique en Pologne du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle", *ibid.*, vii (1962); L. Zytkowicz, "An Investigation of Agricultural Production in Masovia in the First Half of the 17th Century", *ibid.*, xviii (1968).

(b) The Emergence and Check of Agrarian Capitalism

Finally, however, it needs to be remembered that even in the West the collapse of serfdom did not lead in any automatic way to capitalism or successful economic development. From the late fifteenth century there was Europe-wide pressure of population, development of the market and rise in grain prices. In England we find the landlords consolidating holdings and leasing them out to large capitalist tenants who would in turn farm them on the basis of wage labour and agricultural improvement. But in France we find comparatively little consolidation. Even the land controlled directly by the landlords, that is the demesnes farmed out on terminable contractual leases, was generally let in small parcels and cultivated by small peasant tenants. At the same time, of course, fragmentation dominated the sector of peasant proprietorship. These different class structures determined substantially different results in terms of changes in agricultural productivity and, indeed, wholly disparate overall patterns of economic development — and I shall return to these shortly. But it is necessary first to account for the class structures themselves; and once again I would argue that these can only be understood as the legacy of the previous epoch of historical development, in particular the different processes of class conflicts which brought about and issued from the dissolution of serfdom in each country.

In England, as throughout most of Western Europe, the peasantry was able by the mid-fifteenth century, through flight and resistance, to break definitively feudal controls over its mobility and to win full freedom. Indeed, peasant tenants at this time were striving hard for full and essentially freehold control over their customary tenements, and were not far from achieving it. The elimination of unfreedom meant the end of labour-services and of arbitrary tallages. Moreover, rent *per se* (*redditus*) was fixed by custom, and subject to declining long-term value in the face of inflation. There were in the long run, however, two major strategies available to the landlord to prevent the loss of the land to peasant freehold.

In the first place, the demographic collapse of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries left vacant many former customary peasant holdings. It appears often to have been possible for the landlord simply to appropriate these and add them to his demesne.⁷⁵ In this way a great deal of land was simply removed from the “customary sector” and added to the “leasehold sector”, thus thwarting in

⁷⁵ Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility*, pp. 197-8; Hilton, *Decline of Serfdom*, pp. 44 ff.; R. H. Hilton, “A Study in the Pre-History of English Enclosure in the Fifteenth Century”, in *Studi in onore di Armando Sapori*, 2 vols. (Milan, 1957), i, repr. in Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages*; M. W. Beresford, “A Review of Historical Research (to 1968)”, Maurice W. Beresford and John G. Hurst (eds.), *Deserted Medieval Villages* (London, 1971).

advance a possible evolution toward freehold, and substantially reducing the potential area of land for essentially peasant proprietorship. Significantly, as we shall see, this does not appear to have been an alternative easily available to the landlords in France under similar conditions in the same period.

In the second place, there often remained one crucial loophole open to the landlord with regard to the freehold-tending claims of the customary tenants who still remained on his lands and clung to their holdings. He could insist on the right to charge fines at will whenever peasant land was conveyed, that is in sales or on inheritance. Indeed, in the end entry fines often appear to have provided the landlords with the lever they needed to dispose of customary peasant tenants, for in the long run fines could be substituted for competitive commercial rents.⁷⁶

The landlords' claim to the right to raise fines was not, at the start however, an open and shut question, nor did it go uncontested. Throughout the fifteenth century there were widespread and apparently quite successful refusals by peasants to pay fines. And this sort of resistance continued into the sixteenth century when an increasing labour: land ratio should, ostensibly, have induced the peasant to accept a deteriorating condition and to pay a higher rent.⁷⁷ Ultimately, in fact, the peasants took to open revolt to enforce their claims. As is well known, the first half of the sixteenth century was in England a period of major agrarian risings which threatened the entire social order. And a major theme of the most serious of these — especially the revolt in the north in the mid-1530s and Ket's Rebellion in 1549 — was the security of peasant tenure, in particular the question of arbitrary fines.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, pp. 287-310. Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 306-10. The significance of the use of fines "at will" as a mechanism by which the lord could gain economic control of the land remains controversial. It appears to hinge on two questions in particular: (1) the amount of "copyhold" land subject to variable fines; (2) the right of the lord to charge truly arbitrary fines where the tenant's copyhold was otherwise held by inheritance. For some estimates of the amount of land subject to variable fines, see Tawney, *op. cit.*, pp. 297-300; Kerridge, *Agrarian Problems of the Sixteenth Century and After*, pp. 35-46. Kerridge has argued that copyhold by inheritance generally ensured "reasonable fines", that is that fines had to be set at a level that would not defeat the tenant's right of inheritance. Still, the date from which this doctrine of "reasonableness" *vis-à-vis* fines on heritable copyholds was recognized and enforced by the king's courts is unclear. Kerridge appears to produce no case of this sort earlier than 1586: *op. cit.*, pp. 38-9. See also, Tawney, *op. cit.*, pp. 296, 296 n. 3, 307; Stone, *loc. cit.*

⁷⁷ Christopher Dyer, "A Redistribution of Incomes in Fifteenth-Century England?", *Past and Present*, no. 39 (April 1968); Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility*, pp. 198-9. On the early sixteenth century, see B. J. Harris, "Landlords and Tenants in England in the Later Middle Ages: The Buckingham Estates", *Past and Present*, no. 43 (May 1969), pp. 146-50.

⁷⁸ Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, p. 307; S. T. Bindoff, *Ket's Rebellion* (Hist. Assoc. pamphlet, London, 1949; repr. London, 1968), pp. 7-9.

If successful, the peasant revolts of the sixteenth century, as one historian has put it, might have "clipped the wings of rural capitalism".⁷⁹ But they did not succeed. Indeed, by the end of the seventeenth century English landlords controlled an overwhelming proportion of the cultivable land — perhaps 70-5 per cent⁸⁰ — and capitalist class relations were developing as nowhere else, with momentous consequences for economic development. Thus, in my view, it was the emergence of the classical landlord-capitalist tenant-wage labour structure which made possible the transformation of agricultural production in England,⁸¹ and this, in turn, was the key to England's uniquely successful overall economic development. With the peasants' failure to establish essentially freehold control over the land, the landlords were able to engross, consolidate and enclose, to create large farms and to lease them to capitalist tenants who could afford to make capitalist investments. This was the indispensable precondition for significant agrarian advance, since agricultural development was predicated upon significant inputs of capital, involving the introduction of new technologies and a larger scale of operation. Such higher levels of agricultural investment were made feasible through the development of a variety of different leaseholding arrangements, which embodied a novel form of landlord-

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸⁰ G. E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1963), p. 25, gives a figure of 80-5 per cent for the proportion of land held by the landlord classes (that is "the great landlords" and the "gentry") in 1790 (an additional, uncertain proportion was held by "freeholders of a better sort", a category which presumably included a significant number of capitalist owner-cultivators). He goes on to say that "the figures for the proportion of the land owned probably did not change very significantly over the hundred years before 1790, but there was certainly a shift in favour of the great landlords at the expense of the other two groups (that is the gentry and freeholders)". F. M. L. Thompson has estimated that freeholders (large and small) owned about one third of the land at the end of the seventeenth century: "The Social Distribution of Landed Property in England Since the Sixteenth Century", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xix (1966), p. 513.

⁸¹ This is not to say that *precisely* these arrangements were necessary for real agricultural breakthrough leading to economic development in this period; it is to say that some form of larger-scale capitalist farming was required. Thus the only real alternative to the "classical English" landlord-large tenant-wage labour form of capitalist agriculture seems to have been an equally capitalist system based on large-scale owner-cultivators also generally using wage labour. The latter was the structure which in fact emerged in Catalonia at the end of the fifteenth century out of the previous period of agrarian struggle in which the large peasants had been able to win not only essentially freehold rights over their lands, but in addition, the proprietorship of large areas of land (*masos ronecs*) which had been left vacant by demographic disaster in the later fourteenth century. Thus the characteristic unit of agricultural ownership and production in sixteenth-century Catalonia, the *Masia*, was typically a very large but compact farm. And this structure did in fact provide the basis for significant and continuing agricultural advance throughout the early modern period. Vilar, *Catalogne*, i, pp. 575-8, 584, 586, 588. See also above, pp. 51-2, and below, note 88.

tenant relationship. By virtue of these arrangements the capitalist tenants entered into essential partnership with landlords. They were assured that they could take a reasonable share of the increased revenue resulting from their capital investments and not have them confiscated by the landlords' rent increases.⁸² They were therefore set free to bring in those key technological innovations, most especially convertible husbandry systems and the "floating of the water meadows", as well as to make sizable investments in farm facilities, which were generally far less practicable on small unenclosed farms operated by peasants.⁸³

This is not to say, of course, that peasant production was incapable of improvement. The point is that it could not provide the agrarian basis for economic development. Thus small scale farming could be especially effective with certain industrial crops (for example flax) as well as in viticulture, dairying and horticulture. But this sort of agriculture generally brought about increased yields through the intensification of labour rather than through the greater efficiency of a given unit of labour input. It did not, therefore, produce "development", except in a restricted, indeed misleading use of the term. Of course the very spread of this type of husbandry in "non-basic" agricultural commodities was, as in industry, predicated upon the growth (elsewhere) of basic food (grain) production. And improve-

⁸² Kerridge, *Agrarian Problems*, p. 46; E. L. Jones, "Agriculture and Economic Growth in England, 1660-1750: Agricultural Change", *Jl. Econ. Hist.*, xxv (1965).

⁸³ On the strong advantages of large "capital" farms with respect to agricultural improvement, investment and general efficiency, see Kerridge, *Agrarian Problems*, pp. 121-6, and G. E. Mingay, "The Size of Farms in the Eighteenth Century", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xiv (1962). It should be noted that some of the most important recent works dwell on the advantages of English agrarian class relations for agricultural development, but in the end tend to play down their significance. Thus, in his "Editor's Introduction" to *Agriculture and Economic Growth in England 1650-1815* (London, 1967), E. L. Jones argues that the key to English agricultural development was the introduction of new techniques rather than changing institutional arrangements, apparently dismissing the idea that these were indissolubly linked. He states at one point (pp. 12-13): "Novel systems of husbandry thus account much more for the new 'responsiveness' of agricultural supply than do improvements in agrarian organization". Nevertheless, Jones himself at other points emphasizes the crucial advantages of large-scale capitalist farming for agricultural advance and, moreover, provides the key intra- and international comparisons which would tend to demonstrate the saliency of this connection and, correlatively, to show up the barriers to improvement built into peasant-dominated agricultural systems. Thus, he says (p. 17), "the pattern of the countryside and the agrarian organization which evolved in England made production more flexible and far more responsive to the market than a peasant system could have been". He also gives the following case in point (p. 43): "In parts of the Midlands where the land had belonged to a few proprietors and enclosure had come early, the 'new' crops had been sown and farmers specialized in fatstock breeding. More usually, the 'peasant' farming of the Midland clays defied any change, except the pungent expedient of parliamentary enclosure".

ments in the productivity of grain were, in fact, best achieved on large consolidated farms with major capital inputs.⁸⁴

Even the emergence of large-scale units of farming does not, in itself, guarantee agricultural improvement. As we shall see, in those (relatively restricted) areas where big farms emerged in France, they did not generally bring major increases in agricultural productivity. What proved, therefore, most significant for English agricultural development was the particularly productive use of the agricultural surplus promoted by the special character of its rural class relations; in particular, the displacement of the traditionally antagonistic relationship in which landlord "squeezing" undermined tenant initiative, by an emergent landlord-tenant symbiosis which brought mutual co-operation in investment and improvement.⁸⁵

That agricultural improvement was already having a significant effect on English economic development by the end of the seventeenth century can be seen in a number of ways; most immediately in the striking pattern of relatively stable prices and (at least) maintenance of population of the latter part of the century; and in the long run in the interrelated phenomena of continuing industrial development and growth in the home market. Thus although English population in this period reached the very high levels of the early fourteenth century (which at that time had meant demographic crisis) there were not the same sort of violent fluctuations in prices nor the crises of subsistence which gripped France and much of the continent in this period.⁸⁶ Nor was there the marked demographic decline which came to dominate most of Europe at this time, the famous malthusian phase *B*.⁸⁷ In short, England remained largely exempt from the "general economic crisis of the seventeenth century" which sooner

⁸⁴ B. H. Slicher Van Bath, "The Rise of Intensive Husbandry in the Low Countries", esp. pp. 135-7, 148-9, 153. As Slicher Van Bath concludes of the Flemish region of intensive husbandry (p. 153), "it is not a picture of wealth, but of scarcely controlled poverty".

⁸⁵ See Jones, "Agriculture and Economic Growth in England, 1660-1750". On large-scale farming in early modern France, see below, note 111.

⁸⁶ For the avoidance of crises of subsistence in late seventeenth-century England, see A. B. Appleby, "Disease or Famine: A Study of Mortality in Cumberland and Westmorland, 1580-1640", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxxi (1973), esp. pp. 403, 430-1. For a comparison of fluctuations in prices between France and England in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century, stressing England's avoidance of the "violent fluctuations" which characterized much of France, see J. Meuvret, "Les oscillations des prix des céréales aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles en Angleterre et dans les pays du bassin parisien", *Études d'histoire économique*, pp. 113-24.

⁸⁷ G. S. L. Tucker, "English Pre-Industrial Population Trends", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xvi (1963), pp. 205-18. This is not to deny the possibility that there was some slowing down in the rate of growth of population, even perhaps a temporary halt, in the late seventeenth and/or early eighteenth century.

or later struck most of the continent.⁸⁸ This crisis, much like the previous "general economic crisis of the fourteenth century", was in the last analysis a crisis of agrarian productivity, resulting as had its predecessor from the maintenance of relationships of property or surplus-extraction which prevented any advance in productivity. By contrast, it was the transformation of the agrarian class structure which had taken place over the period since the later fourteenth century that allowed England to increase substantially its agricultural productivity and thus to avoid a repetition of the previous crisis.

It seems, moreover, that agricultural improvement was at the root of those developmental processes which, according to E. L. Jones, had allowed some 40 per cent of the English population to move out of agricultural employment by the end of the seventeenth century, much of this into industrial pursuits.⁸⁹ Obviously, English industrial growth, predominantly in cloth, was in the first instance based on exports, spurred by overseas demand. Yet such export-based spurts were common in Europe throughout the middle ages and the early modern period; but previously none had ever been able to sustain itself. The inelasticity of agricultural output, it seems, had always set strict limits on the development of industrial production. Rising food prices, if not a total failure of food supply, resulting from declining agricultural productivity might directly stymie industry by limiting the proportion of the population which could devote itself to non-agricultural pursuits. Otherwise they would undermine the markets for industrial goods either by forcing up wages (the cost of subsistence) and thus industrial prices or by cutting into the proportion of the population's income which was available for non-food purchases. These mechanisms meant, in particular, that the general agricultural-demographic crisis of the seventeenth century would also mean, for most of Europe, a long-term crisis of industry. This has been shown most clearly for seventeenth-century France by Goubert, who directly links the long-term decline of the extensive textile industry of Beauvais in this period to underlying problems in the production of food.⁹⁰ But a similar case could seemingly be made for the decline of Italian industry in the early seventeenth century. Here drastically rising food prices seem, as much as any other factor, to have been responsible for the enhanced (subsistence) wage costs which ostensibly priced Italian goods out of their European and

⁸⁸ It is notable that Catalonia, one of the few areas to achieve agrarian transformation with a concomitant increase in agricultural productivity in this era, was also one of the few areas to escape the "general economic crisis of the seventeenth century", and, like England, to avoid demographic catastrophe while achieving continued economic development. Vilar, *Catalogne*, I, part III, esp. pp. 586, 588. See also above, note 81.

⁸⁹ Jones, "Editor's Introduction", *Agriculture and Economic Growth*, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Goubert, *Beauvais et les Beauvaisis*, pp. 585-7.

especially their eastern Mediterranean markets. Correlatively, the backward, largely peasant agriculture appears to have largely cut off the possibility of developing a significant home market in Italy itself.⁹¹ Finally, although Dutch industry appears to have escaped the "seventeenth-century crisis" with relatively minor damage, its failure to sustain continued development through the eighteenth century appears to have been bound up to an important extent with an overwhelming dependence on overseas grain imports, which rose precipitately in price after 1750.⁹²

Thus what distinguished the English industrial development of the early modern period was its continuous character, its ability to sustain itself and to provide its own self-perpetuating dynamic. Here, once again, the key was to be found in the capitalist structure of agriculture. Agricultural improvement not only made it possible for an ever greater proportion of the population to leave the land to enter industry; equally important, it provided, directly and indirectly, the growing home market which was an essential ingredient in England's continued industrial growth through the entire period of the "general economic crisis of the seventeenth century" in Europe.⁹³ Thus, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the prosperous class of tenant and yeoman farmers, as well as landlords, appears to have offered significant outlets for English industrial goods.⁹⁴ At the same time, and in the long run, especially from the later seven-

⁹¹ On high wages as a basic cause of the decline of export-centred Italian industry from the early seventeenth century, see C. Cipolla, "The Economic Decline of Italy," in Brian Pullan (ed.), *Crisis and Change in the Venetian Economy* (London, 1968), pp. 139-42. On problems of food supply and high food prices leading to higher wages (subsistence), see B. Pullan, "Introduction", and "Wage Earners and the Venetian Economy", *ibid.*, pp. 12-14, 146-74. On the structural roots of problems of food supply and the home market in the small-tenant, rent-squeezing organization of the Venetian mainland, see S. J. Woolf, "Venice and the Terraferma: Problems of the Change from Commercial to Landed Activities", *ibid.*, esp. pp. 179-87. For the general problem of food supply in Italy and the Mediterranean, which intensified sharply in the latter part of the sixteenth century, see C. T. Smith, *An Historical Geography of Western Europe Before 1800* (New York, 1967), pp. 416-18.

⁹² This is suggested by E. L. Jones, "Editor's Introduction", *Agriculture and Economic Growth*, p. 21.

⁹³ For continued English industrial growth into the later seventeenth century, and the important role of the home market in this process, see L. A. Clarkson, *The Pre-Industrial Economy in England 1500-1750* (London, 1971), ch. 4, esp. pp. 114-15. See also, "The Origins of the Industrial Revolution" (Conference Report), *Past and Present*, no. 17 (April 1960), pp. 71 ff. Charles Wilson, *England's Apprenticeship 1603-1763* (London, 1965), ch. 9, esp. pp. 185 and ff. F. J. Fisher, "The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: The Dark Ages of English Economic History", *Economica*, new ser., xxiv (1957).

⁹⁴ W. G. Hoskins, "The Leicestershire Farmer in the Sixteenth Century", in his *Essays in Leicestershire History* (Leicester, 1950). F. J. Fisher, "London as an Engine of Economic Growth", in J. Bromley and E. H. Kossman (eds.), *Britain and the Netherlands* (London, 1960); Fisher, "The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries".

teenth and early eighteenth centuries, continuing improvements in agricultural productivity combined with low food prices to give an extra margin of spending power to significant elements throughout the middle and perhaps even the lower class so as to expand the home market and fuel the steady growth of industry into the period of the industrial revolution.⁹⁵ English economic development thus depended upon a nearly unique symbiotic relationship between agriculture and industry. It was indeed, in the last analysis, an agricultural revolution, based on the emergence of capitalist class relations in the countryside which made it possible for England to become the first nation to experience industrialization.

The contrasting failure in France of agrarian transformation seems to have followed directly from the continuing strength of peasant landholding into the early modern period, while it was disintegrating in England. Reference has already been made to the relative success with which peasant communities throughout Western Europe were able to resist landlord power in the medieval period. In particular, the long-term process by which village after village in various French regions was able to win certain important economic and political rights — to use the commons, to fix rents and secure heritability, and to replace the old village mayors with its own elected representatives — has been traced with special care by historians, who have remarked upon its historical significance.⁹⁶ What still requires explanation, however, is the ability of the French peasants not only to establish certain freedoms and property rights *vis-à-vis* the landlords in the first place, but to retain them over an extraordinarily long historical epoch — in particular, through the period in which their English counterparts ceased to be able to do so. Any answer must be very tentative. But in the light of English developments, what appears to lie behind the striking persistence of peasant proprietorship in France is its close interconnection with the particular *form* of evolution of the French monarchical state.

Thus in France, unlike England, the centralized state appears to have developed (at least in large part) as a “class-like” phenomenon, that is as an *independent* extractor of the surplus, in particular on the

⁹⁵ For this argument, see Jones, “Editor’s Introduction”, *Agriculture and Economic Growth*; Jones, “Agriculture and Economic Growth in England, 1660-1750; Agricultural Change”; E. L. Jones, “The Agricultural Origins of Industry”, *Past and Present*, no. 40 (July 1968); A. H. John, “Agricultural Productivity and Economic Growth in England, 1700-1750”, *Jl. Econ. Hist.*, xxv (1965); A. H. John, “Aspects of English Economic Growth in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century”, *Economica*, new ser., xxviii (1961); D. E. C. Eversley, “The Home Market and Economic Growth in England, 1750-1780”, in E. L. Jones and G. E. Mingay (eds.), *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1967).

⁹⁶ See esp. Fossier, *La terre et les hommes en Picardie*, ii, pp. 708-30. Also above, note 73. See, in addition, Fourquin, *Campagnes de la région parisienne*, part I, ch. iii, esp. p. 190.

basis of its arbitrary power to tax the land. To the extent that the peasants were able to unite against the landlords, to win their freedom from serfdom and to gain the essentials of freehold property — and they did so, as noted, to a significant degree — they tended to open themselves to potential exploitation as a financial base for the monarchy. For if the peasants' locally-based organization — which was the essential source, and effective limit, of their power — might at times be adequate to withstand the claims of the local landlord, it was far less viable against the pretensions of the centralizing state, at least in the long run. Correlatively, the state could develop, as it ultimately did, as a competitor with the lords, largely to the extent to which it could establish rights to extract the surplus of peasant production. It therefore had an interest in limiting the landlords' rents so as to enable the peasants to pay more in taxes — and thus in intervening against the landlords to end peasant unfreedom and to establish and secure peasant property.

Probably the archetypal case of the state actually developing in this manner as an independent class-like surplus-extractor in relation to the emergence of an entrenched landholding peasantry can be found in the rise of the “mini-absolutisms” of the west German princes in the early modern period. In these states the princes pursued a conscious policy of protecting a peasant proprietorship which, emerging from the medieval period, was already relatively well ensconced. In particular, the princes sought to defend the security and extent of peasant landholding, with the aim of providing their own independent tax base (*Bauernschutzpolitik*). Thus peasant dues were fixed in law; peasant heritability was retained or restored; and in some cases land which had formerly been in peasant hands but had then been lost to the nobility was returned to the peasants. At the same time the princes did what they could to reconstitute the scattered parcels of peasant land into unified tenements and, on the other hand, acted to prevent the peasants from sub-dividing their holdings. In the end the princes succeeded in turning the peasant holding into a unified fiscal unit for taxation.⁹⁷ But, correlatively, by the seventeenth century the west German peasantry appears to have been able to gain control of up to 90 per cent of the land.⁹⁸

The stages in the corresponding process by which the French peasantry was able to consolidate its own powerful (if far less

⁹⁷ F. Lütge, *Geschichte der deutschen Agrarverfassung* (Stuttgart, 1963), pp. 100-2, 134-54. For the foregoing discussion of west German developments I am deeply indebted to Mr. Joel Singer.

⁹⁸ Eberhard Weis, “Ergebnisse eines Vergleichs der grundherrschaftlichen Strukturen Deutschlands und Frankreichs vom 13. bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts”, *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, lvii (1970), pp. 1-14, esp. p. 13. As a result, the German nobility appears to have been forced into an extraordinary degree of dependence upon the princes, becoming the administrative aristocracy *par excellence*.

extensive) grip on the land in relationship to monarchical development are far from clear. One turning point does seem to have occurred, at least in the Paris region, during the middle part of the thirteenth century in what emerged as decisive conflicts between peasants and landlords over the landlords' attempts to extend the seigneurial *taille* (tallage). It was around the question of the *taille*, as we have noted, that the question of peasant unfreedom in this region came to be decided. The lords aimed to consolidate their right to tax their customary peasants at will. Their success would have established the peasants' unfree status, exposing them to further arbitrary seigneurial levies. However, the peasants of the Paris region resisted with force and in great number. What seems to have turned the tide in their favour was the intervention of the monarchical state against the landlords. When the crown agreed to consider the case, it recognized by implication the peasants' free legal status, paving the way for fixed rents and effective proprietorship.⁹⁹ Perhaps even more decisive in the long run were certain actions taken by the state during the fifteenth century. In this era the monarchy seems to have generally confirmed the integrity of the *cens* (peasant hereditary tenure). It thus remained legally difficult for the landlords to appropriate to their own demesnes the large number of holdings subject to this tenure abandoned as a consequence of war and demographic decline. The result was the preservation of the area of land under peasant proprietorship. It is notable that it was at just this time that the monarchy was taking decisive steps formally to organize the peasant community around village assemblies with elected syndics, in order to administer and collect the dramatically increasing royal taxes.¹⁰⁰

Certainly, by the early modern period the consolidation of peasant property in relationship to the development of the French state had created a very different sort of class structure in the French countryside from that which had emerged in England. And there is no better index of these contrasting structures than the dramatically different sorts of peasant revolts which marked the early modern era in both countries. In England, of course, peasant revolt was directed against the landlords, in a vain last-ditch struggle to defend disintegrating peasant proprietorship against advancing capitalist encroachment. In France the target of peasant revolt was, typically, the crushing taxation of the absolutist state, which ironically

⁹⁹ Marc Bloch, "Blanche de Castille et les serfs du Chapitre de Paris", *Mélanges Historiques*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1963), i, pp. 462-90; Fourquin, *op. cit.*, part I, ch. iii.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 180, 377, 382, 430-2 and ff., 514-15; J. F. Lemarignier, *La France médiévale: institutions et société* (Paris, 1970), p. 318; Marc Bloch, *French Rural History* (London, 1966), pp. 128-9.

had been instrumental in securing and protecting peasant proprietorship (and thus impeding capitalist development).¹⁰¹

Thus in France strong peasant property and the absolutist state developed in mutual dependence upon one another. The state increased its own power by virtue of its ability to get between the landlords and the peasants, to ensure peasant freedom, hereditability and fixed rents, and thus to use peasant production, *via* non-parliamentary taxation, as the direct source of revenue for royal strength and autonomy. As Marc Bloch pointed out, in the seventeenth century — the highpoint of absolutist development in France — a key function of the *intendants*, the direct administrative representatives of the monarchy in the provinces, was “to protect rural communities, ripe material for taxation, from intemperate exploitation by their landlords”.¹⁰² Correlatively, the landlords waged a fierce defensive struggle throughout the period to protect “their” peasants from the encroachments of a royal fiscal machine which sought systematically to extend its scope within the countryside.¹⁰³

In England, by contrast, monarchical centralization developed, especially from the later fifteenth century, in relationship to and with ultimate dependence upon the landlord classes, as was most dramatically evidenced in the contemporaneous growth of parliamentary institutions (while they decayed in France). The English peasantry, as we have seen, through flight and resistance were able to win their freedom from serfdom by the fifteenth century. Their relative failure, however, to establish freehold rights over much of the land (as had their French counterparts at a far earlier date) deprived the monarchy of a potential financial base in the peasantry for developing its independence of the landlords. Thus monarchical centralization could not take an absolutist and peasant-based form. By the same token, the monarchy’s reliance upon the landlords in its drive toward centralization in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries prevented its playing a decisive role in aiding the peasants

¹⁰¹ For the English revolts, see above, p. 62. On peasant revolts in France, see the summary article by J. H. M. Salmon, “Venality of Office and Popular Sedition in Seventeenth-Century France”, *Past and Present*, no. 37 (July 1967). Although there is sharp debate on many aspects of these revolts, virtually all parties to the argument, including the leading protagonists Boris Porchnev and Roland Mousnier, agree that the opposition to state taxation was central. See Boris Prochnev, *Les soulèvements populaires en France de 1623 à 1648* (Moscow, 1948; Paris, 1963 edn.); Roland Mousnier, “Recherches sur les soulèvements populaires en France avant la Fronde”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, v (1968), pp. 81-113.

¹⁰² Bloch, *French Rural History*, p. 134.

¹⁰³ For a revealing account of the struggle between the French monarchy and the French nobility to protect the peasantry in order to exploit it for themselves, focusing especially on the attempts to extend royal land-taxation and noble resistance to these attempts in the name of their peasants, see P. Deyon, “A propos des rapports entre la noblesse française et la monarchie absolue pendant la première moitié du XVII^e siècle”, *Revue Historique*, ccxxxi (1964), pp. 341-56.

in their abortive struggle for freehold, which occurred in precisely this period. Important sections of the English nobility and gentry were willing to support the monarchy's centralizing political battle against the disruptive activities of the magnate-warlords in the interest of achieving order and stable conditions for economic development. But it was precisely these same landlord elements who were most concerned to undermine peasant property in the interests of enclosure and consolidation . . . and agricultural capitalism.¹⁰⁴

It cannot be said that the French landlords did not wish to consolidate holdings. But the point is that in order to do so they could not, as in England, merely raise rents or fines to impossible levels and thus evict the small tenant at the expiration of his lease or copyhold. Through most of France, state-supported law assured hereditability and fixed fines (*lods et ventes*) for customary tenures. Thus the landlord might have to buy up countless small peasant holdings in order to amass a consolidated unit. And this was rarely easy to accomplish. On the one hand, the peasant had every positive incentive to hold onto his holding, for it formed the basis for his existence, and that of his family and heirs. On the other hand, purely economic forces seem to have worked to undermine the peasants' property only in the very long term. Thus the point is that the peasant proprietor was under relatively little pressure to operate his plot as profitably or efficiently as his potential competitors in order to survive, for there was no direct means for such competitors to "defeat" him. In other words, the peasant did not have to be competitive, because he did not really have to be able to "hold his place" in the world of the market, either the market for tenants or the market for goods. Unlike a tenant, the peasant proprietor did not have to provide a level of rent equal to what the landlord might get from any other tenant — or else be evicted at the expiration of his

¹⁰⁴ For the process of centralization under the Tudors, especially the inter-relationship between the crown and those sections of the landed class (noble and non-noble) who supported centralization against the magnate-warlords, see L. Stone, "Power", in *Crisis of the Aristocracy*, ch. v.; as well as the series of works by M. E. James: *A Tudor Magnate and the Tudor State* (Borthwick Papers, no. 30, York, 1966); *Change and Continuity in the Tudor North* (*ibid.*, no. 27, York, 1965); "The First Earl of Cumberland and the Decline of Northern Feudalism", *Northern History*, i (1966); "The Concept of Order and the Northern Rising of 1569", *Past and Present*, no. 60 (August 1973). The researches of these authors are beginning to provide detailed case studies which demonstrate the important overlap between those landlord elements, both noble and non-noble, who supported royal centralization in the interests of social peace and public order and those who wished to pursue highly commercial and progressive policies with regard to their land — consolidation, enclosure, agricultural improvement. On this point I have benefited from reading an unpublished essay by Eleanor Searle, "The Jack Cade Rebellion: Social Unrest in England 1450-1460". On the development of parliament in this period, the fundamental works are the many books and essays by G. R. Elton and J. E. Neale.

lease. Unlike the independent artisan, he did not have to be able to produce cheaply enough to sell his goods profitably at the market price — or else go out of business. All that was necessary for survival for the peasant proprietor (assuming of course that he was a food producer) was sufficient output to provide for his family's subsistence and to pay his taxes (and generally fixed customary rents); and this could often be supplemented through wage labour.

Of course, merely maintaining subsistence was rarely easy for the peasantry, especially the large numbers with relatively small holdings. Demographic growth and the subdivision of holdings diminished the size of the peasant's productive base, either relatively or absolutely. Meanwhile, the growth of taxation, especially consequent upon wars, meant that greater production was necessary merely to survive (thus, ironically, the state which in the first instance provided the primary support for peasant proprietorship was indirectly perhaps also the major source of its disintegration). Finally, rising prices over the period decreased the value of the supplementary wage often required to make the peasant's holding viable. Throughout the early modern period many peasants were indeed forced deeply into debt and were ultimately obliged to sell their holdings.¹⁰⁵ It was no accident, moreover, that the greatest number of casualties appear to have occurred in times of war (especially the Wars of Religion and the *Fronde*) and of dearth (particularly the "subsistence crises" of the later seventeenth century) and to have been concentrated in the zones immediately affected by military action (for example the Paris region and Burgundy).¹⁰⁶ Yet even such long-term pressures and short-term catastrophes seem to have worked their undermining effects on peasant proprietorship relatively sporadically and slowly over the whole of France. The continuing strength of the French peasant community and French peasant proprietorship even at the end of the seventeenth century was evident in the fact that some 45-50 per cent of the cultivated land was still in peasant possession, often scattered throughout the open fields.¹⁰⁷ In England, by contrast, the owner-occupiers at this time held no more than 25-30 per cent of the land.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ See P. Goubert, "The French Peasantry of the Seventeenth Century: A Regional Example", *Past and Present*, no. 10 (November 1956), p. 75.

¹⁰⁶ For case studies of the destruction of peasant proprietorship, see esp. Jean Jacquart, *La crise rurale en Ile-de-France 1550-1670* (Paris, 1974), *passim*; Marc Venard, *Bourgeois et paysans au XVII^e siècle: Recherche sur le rôle des bourgeois parisiens dans la vie agricole au sud de Paris au XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1957); P. de Saint Jacob, "Mutations économiques et sociales dans les campagnes bourguignonnes à la fin du XVI^e siècle", *Études Rurales*, i (1961), pp. 34-49.

¹⁰⁷ P. Goubert, "Le paysan et la terre: seigneurie, tenure, exploitation", in E. Labrousse et al. (eds.), *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, ii (Paris, 1970), pp. 135-9. "It is commonly admitted that the peasants of France were able to 'possess' . . . a mere half of the French soil . . ." (p. 135).

¹⁰⁸ See above, note 80.

Given the French property structure, it is hardly surprising that the rising population, markets and grain prices of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not lead in France to agricultural improvement, but merely to a renewal of the old malthusian cycle of underdevelopment. Given the strength of peasant property, supported by the exploitative state, the landlord could not usually take advantage of increasing prices for land and agricultural products by improving and by increasing output, because this usually entailed the very difficult task of consolidation. The landlords therefore took the only course generally open to them: to try to obtain an ever greater share of a constant or even declining total product. On their demesne land, composed generally of small separated plots, they imposed short-term leases on draconian terms, designed to squeeze the peasant tenants by raising their rents and lowering their level of subsistence by taking advantage of the growing demand for holdings arising from demographic pressure. This procedure, of course, reduced the possibility of agricultural improvement by the tenants, since they would rarely have sufficient funds for investment left over after paying the rent.¹⁰⁹ The difference from the situation in England — where landlords would obtain increases in rent by co-operating with their tenants in capital improvements on large farms and thereby increasing total output, rather than by simply taking a larger share of a constant or declining output at the expense of the tenants¹¹⁰ — could not have been more stark.¹¹¹ At the same time, in the sector

¹⁰⁹ For a good account of this procedure of “squeezing” the leaseholding tenants and its economic effects, see Merle, *La métairie et l'évolution agraire de la Gâtine poitevine*.

¹¹⁰ See Adam Smith's analogous observations: “Rent anciently formed a larger proportion of the produce of agriculture than now In the progress of improvement, rent, though it increases in proportion to the extent, diminishes in proportion to the produce of the land”. *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York, 1937), p. 318.

¹¹¹ It is striking in this respect that in those relatively restricted areas where large consolidated holdings were created in France, the landlords generally applied the same “squeezing” policy to their large tenants, with the result that even on the relatively small number of large farms few improvements were adopted. See Jacquart, *op. cit.*, pp. 289-91, 326-30, and, in particular, pp. 747-8, 756-7. Also, Venard, *Bourgeois et paysans*, esp. pp. 117-18. Why the landlords adopted this approach, rather than opting for the “English system” of landlord-tenant co-operation, is uncertain. But the reason may once again be bound up with an overall structure of landholding in France which was still heavily dominated by peasant proprietorship — and with the generally stagnant economy which this landholding structure tended to entail. Most especially, in comparison with England, French agriculture had at its disposal a great pool of agricultural labour without alternative opportunities for employment — that is at relatively very low wages — and this naturally encouraged labour-intensive methods of cultivation, the neglect of capital-using and labour-saving techniques. With no apparent incentive to promote capital improvement of his land, the lord had no reason to refrain from “squeezing” his tenant. Thus even in areas where large, consolidated farms dominated considerable portions of the surface area, they still tended to be surrounded by a sea of petty proprietors who needed to hire themselves out as wage labourers in order to make ends meet. (See

of free peasant proprietors, to repeat, the holdings were divided and subdivided. This too naturally reduced the general level of peasant income, the surplus available for potential investment in agriculture, and the slim hope of agricultural innovation. Meanwhile, of course, the state, which had helped to maintain the peasants on the land, now helped to reduce their enjoyment of it by confiscating much of what was left of the peasants' product through ever higher taxes.

In sum, it is not difficult to comprehend the dismal pattern of economic development imposed by this class structure in France. Not only was there a long-term failure of agricultural productivity, but a corresponding inability to develop the home market. Thus, ironically, the most complete freedom and property rights for the rural population meant poverty and a self-perpetuating cycle of backwardness. In England, it was precisely the absence of such rights that facilitated the onset of real economic development.

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(note 111 cont.)

Jacquart, *op. cit.*, pp. 332-48, esp. 341, 348; Venard, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-9.) It was not merely that strong peasant rights in the land tended to be bound up with subdivision of holdings (partible inheritance) and the rapid concentration of the peasant population on tiny holdings. Probably more significant, due to the lack of economic development elsewhere in the economy (industry, the towns), which was itself the result of the established peasant-dominated agrarian structure, this rural semi-peasantry/semi-proletariat, unlike the English agricultural labourers, had virtually nowhere to go (increasing pressure on the land meant downward pressure on wages). Their natural tendency to remain on their mini-holdings was thus greatly intensified by the economic necessity to do so. Thus peasant agriculture set up yet another vicious cycle of backwardness thwarting agricultural capitalism even where its outward forms (large consolidated holdings farmed by big tenants using wage labour) were present.