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“The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism”

*Past & Present*, No. 97 (Nov., 1982), pp. 16-113
THE AGRARIAN ROOTS OF EUROPEAN CAPITALISM*

INTRODUCTION

IN MY ORIGINAL ARTICLE I BEGAN FROM THE IDEA THAT SOCIAL-
property systems, once established, tend to set strict limits and im-
pose certain overall patterns upon the course of economic evolution.¹
They do so because they tend to restrict the economic actors to certain
limited options, indeed quite specific strategies, in order best to re-
produce themselves — that is, to maintain themselves in their estab-
lished socio-economic positions. On this basis I argued that the
long-term demographic or commercial trends, which have hitherto
formed the foci of widely accepted interpretations of long-term econ-
omic development in pre-industrial Europe, acquired their economic
significance for the distribution of income and the development of
the productive forces only in connection with specific, historically
developed systems of social-property relations and given balances of
class forces. Under different property structures and different bal-
ances of power, similar demographic or commercial trends, with their
associated patterns of factor prices, presented very different oppor-

* I am deeply indebted to Perry Anderson, Lawrence Stone and Geoffrey Symcox
for the substantial time and effort they gave in criticizing and suggesting improvements
on this article. I wish also to thank Josh Cohen, Jon Elster, Franklin Mendels, Jon
Wiener and Ellen Wood for their helpful comments.

¹ R. Brenner, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Ind-
ustrial Europe”, Past and Present, no. 70 (Feb. 1976), pp. 30-75.
tunities and dangers and thus evoked disparate responses, with diverse consequences for the economy as a whole. Indeed, as I tried to show, under different property structures and balances of class forces in various European regions, precisely the same demographic and commercial trends yielded widely divergent economic results, not only with respect to long-term trends in the distribution of income, but to overall patterns of the development or non-development of the productive forces. For this reason the relatively autonomous processes by which class structures were established, developed and transformed have to be placed at the centre of any interpretation of the long-term evolution of the pre-industrial European economy.

My argument thus started with the assertion that the feudal social-property system established certain distinctive mechanisms for distributing income and, in particular, certain limited methods for developing production, which led to economic stagnation and involution. It did so, most crudely, because it imposed upon the members of the major social classes — feudal lords and possessing peasants — strategies for reproducing themselves which, when applied on an economy-wide basis, were incompatible with the requirements of growth. In particular, reproduction by the lords through surplus extraction by means of extra-economic compulsion and by peasants through production for subsistence precluded any widespread tendencies to thorough specialization of productive units, systematic reinvestment of surpluses, or to regular technical innovation. The system-wide consequence of this structure of reproduction — especially given the tendency to long-term demographic increase — was a built-in secular trend towards declining productivity of labour and ultimately to large-scale socio-economic crisis.

I argued, correlative, that the original breakthrough in Europe to a system of more or less self-sustaining growth was dependent upon a two-sided development of class relations: first, the breakdown of systems of lordly surplus extraction by means of extra-economic compulsion (especially serfdom); secondly, the undermining of peasant possession or the aborting of any trend towards full peasant ownership of land. The consequence of this two-sided development was the rise of a novel social-property system, above all on the land, in which, for the first time, the organizers of production and the direct producers (sometimes the same persons) found it both necessary and possible to reproduce themselves through a course of economic action which was, on a system-wide scale, favourable to the continuing development of the productive forces. Because in this system the organizers of production and the direct producers were separated from direct, non-market access to their means of reproduction or subsistence (especially from possession of the land), they had no choice, in order to maintain themselves, but to buy and sell on the market. This meant
that they were compelled to produce competitively by way of cost-cutting and, therefore, that they had as a rule to attempt to specialize, accumulate and innovate to the greatest extent possible. They were, on the whole, able to succeed in this because the collapse of the system of surplus extraction by extra-economic compulsion, in connection with the separation of the direct producers from their means of subsistence, freed labour power, land and the means of production to be combined (accumulated) in the most profitable manner. In particular, the rise of the landlord/capitalist tenant/wage-labourer system provided the basis for the transformation of agriculture and, in turn, the breakthrough to the ongoing economic development which took place in early modern England. On the other hand, throughout most of the Continent in the same period, the perpetuation, in various forms, of social-property systems characterized by peasant possession and surplus extraction by extra-economic compulsion (the tax/office structure in France, serfdom in eastern Europe), was at the root of continuing agricultural stagnation, involution and ultimately general socio-economic crisis.

In light of the foregoing I argued finally that it is of critical importance to recognize and analyse systematically the differing long-term processes of class formation which characterized the various regions within feudal Europe. For, in my view, these divergent processes critically conditioned the different forms and outcomes of the lord-peasant class conflicts which were endemic to later medieval Europe in the wake of the generalized crises of feudal production and seigneurial revenues. It was the various property settlements which emerged, in different places, from the later medieval seigneurial reaction and the class conflicts which accompanied that reaction which laid the basis for the dramatic regional divergences that were to characterize European economic evolution in the subsequent epoch.

The central elements of this interpretation have been called into question. First, my view of what might be called the internal dynamics of the European feudal economy has been challenged. M. M. Postan and John Hatcher, along with Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, have reaffirmed their population-centred interpretation of long-term economic development in pre-industrial Europe. Guy Bois, while critical of the demographic interpretation, has found my accounts of feudal economic development and class formation to be essentially arbitrary, especially in the absence of a fuller presentation of what he would term the "economic laws of motion" of feudalism — in par-

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particular, his own organizing conception, "the falling rate of feudal levy".

Secondly, doubts have been registered as to my account of the divergent developments, out of the later medieval crisis of seigneurial revenues and associated class conflicts, of different systems of property relations in various European regions. Heide Wunder, as well as Postan and Hatcher, has challenged my explanation of why serfdom arose in eastern Europe while it declined in the west. In parallel fashion, Guy Bois and Patricia Croot and David Parker have questioned my explanation of the divergent evolutions of property relations in England and France — the rise of agrarian capitalism versus the consolidation of peasant property in connection with absolutism.

Finally, my view of the way in which diverse property systems, once installed, structured qualitatively different long-term patterns of economic evolution in various European regions during the early modern period has been sharply debated. The view I presented, that the imposition of serfdom had deleterious consequences for the long-term evolution of the east European economy, is, I believe, widely accepted. My argument, however, that the strengthening of peasant proprietorship in connection with absolutism in France was significantly less favourable for the development of agricultural production than was the rise of capitalist social-property forms in England has been questioned, from different angles, by Croot and Parker, by Le Roy Ladurie, and by Cooper.

In what follows, I will take up each of the foregoing objections in the course of presenting a more fully developed interpretation of the problems of European feudal evolution and of the transition to capitalism. In Section I I will attempt, once again, to lay bare what I believe to be the faulty foundations upon which the demographic interpretation has been constructed. In Section II I will try to sketch a general approach to long-term feudal socio-economic evolution, and then to demonstrate that this approach can better grasp the actual course of medieval economic development, income distribution and feudal crisis in the different European regions than can either the demographic interpretation or Bois's "falling rate of levy" approach. Finally, in Section III, I will, in direct response to the criticisms that have been raised, lay out what I take to be the origins of the different property systems which emerged in different regions of Europe during the early modern period, and explain why these property systems were in fact central in determining the subsequent paths of economic development.

I

THE DEMOGRAPHIC MODEL AND CLASS RELATIONS

To lay the basis for my own argument, I offered a criticism of the dominant approaches to long-term economic trends in medieval and early modern Europe: the “demographic model”, overwhelmingly predominant these days, as well as the “commercialization model”, out of favour in recent years. To this end, pace Postan and Hatcher, I made no attempt to “minimize the role of population”, nor for that matter the growth of trade, “in the promotion of economic change”. My argument began from the acceptance, at least in broad outline, of the main long-term economic trends described by the demographic interpreters. Nor, of course, did I challenge the internal coherence, the logic, of the neo-Malthusian cum Ricardian models, given their highly restrictive premises. This, I should have thought, was obvious, since my explicit point of departure was precisely the two-phase “grand agrarian cycles” of non-development, bound up with demographic change. Population growth, in the face of stagnant technique, led in the “up-phase” of the cycle to increased returns to land relative to labour, increased food prices relative to manufactures, and declining output per person (sometimes interpreted as the declining productivity of labour). Ultimately, “overpopulation” was self-correcting, eventuating in a reversal of the demographic trend and, in turn, a “down-phase” characterized by the opposite trends in the land/labour ratio and in relative factor prices. This two-phase cyclical pattern prevailed in the economy of most of Europe in the later medieval period (1100-1450), and continued to predominate over large parts of it into the early modern period (1450-1700). My intention was not to deny the existence of these two-phase cycles; it was to expose the limitations of the neo-Malthusian cum Ricardian models advanced by the demographic interpreters in actually explaining the long-term patterns of income distribution, of cyclical fluctuations and of the economic non-development associated with them.

(i.1) DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND INCOME DISTRIBUTION

No one would deny, concerning income distribution, that in an economy where the potential for increases in the productive forces is limited, population growth will tend to bring about rising returns to land relative to labour and rising prices of food relative to manufactures (and vice versa). Postan and Hatcher pile fact upon fact to “prove” that these relationships held in medieval Europe, as if I had argued the contrary, which of course I did not. My point was that the de-

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mographic interpreters have erred in attempting to use this model of demographically determined returns to factors to explain the distribution of income between classes. In order to do so they have been compelled to assimilate — illogically in my view — the evolution of class relations to their demographic model. On the other hand, where they have avoided this pitfall, they have been obliged to introduce class relations in an ad hoc manner to cover trends in income distribution which their model cannot explain; but to do this, of course, is to beg the question.

It was my argument that changes in relative factor scarcities consequent upon demographic changes exerted an effect on the distribution of income in medieval Europe only as they were, so to speak, refracted through the prism of changing social-property relations and fluctuating balances of class forces. Thus, any effect of demographically induced changes in relative factor scarcities or prices on the distribution of income was obviously strictly dependent upon the relative amounts of land held outright by lords and by peasants. It was this prior allocation which determined the degree to which lords or peasants could potentially benefit from changes in the land/labour ratio. Of course, through most of the medieval epoch, much of the land was owned outright by neither lords nor peasants; it was "possessed" by peasants, subject to exactions by the lords which were in theory fixed, but in practice often fluctuating (this was land held by peasants from lords in customary tenure). The effect, if any, of demographic changes on the distribution of income between lords and peasants holding this customary land depended entirely upon whether the peasants succeeded in getting the dues fixed, or on whether the lords retained the power to alter them. In the former case, the peasants could assume something akin to full property in the land, appropriating most of its fruits. In the latter case, the lords could levy a rent which might be less than, equal to, or even greater than the market-determined rent for the same amount of land, depending on their powers over their customary peasants and their desire to exercise these powers. Once again, a prior distribution — this time of class power — structured the significance of demographically determined market forces.

To cope with the foregoing considerations, the demographic interpreters have been more or less compelled to make surplus extraction or class relations a dependent variable in their population-centred models. In order to explain trends in income distribution in medieval Europe in terms of trends in population, they have been obliged to argue, explicitly or implicitly, that demographic developments determined not only relative factor scarcities or prices, but also the distribution of power and property. They have asserted, as do Postan and Hatcher once again in their contribution, that the demographic rise
of the thirteenth century not only brought about high land prices relative to those for labour, but made for the lords’ increased capacity to impose levies on their customary tenants (an intensification of serfdom) and, more generally, for lordly prosperity in England. They have argued in turn that the medieval demographic decline determined not only the opposite constellation of relative factor scarcities and prices, but also the decline of serfdom in western Europe.

I would simply reassert that this line of argument can be refuted by demonstrating, as in my original essay, that the same demographic trends in roughly the same period were accompanied by the opposite trends in income distribution in different European regions. During the population upturn of the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was in England a shift, *grosso modo*, favourable to the lords over and against the peasants; this was made possible by an interrelated strengthening of lordly property (stable or growing demesnes) and the strengthening of lordship (the lords’ increased capacity to make arbitrary levies on customary tenures). But in France, under the same conditions, there was just the opposite shift in the distribution of income, favourable to the peasants over and against the lords; this was made possible by the interrelated weakening of lordship (fixing of peasant dues) and of the lords’ control over property (shrinking demesnes). During the population downturn of the later medieval period, there was in western Europe a shift in the long run favourable to the peasants over and against the lords, manifested in the decline of serfdom. But from the fifteenth century onwards in eastern Europe, especially eastern Germany, there was just the opposite trend.

Postan and Hatcher apparently would reject not only the content of this argument, but its entire method, its “logic”. They ask, rhetorically: “Does Professor Brenner mean that no causal factor can be
proved true unless it can be shown to produce identical results in totally different circumstances? But they can easily be answered in kind. Do Postan and Hatcher really wish to argue that an historical explanation can be counted adequate when the “factor” imputed to be “cause” (demographic increase/decline) can be shown to produce the opposite effects (in terms of income distribution) in very similar conditions? Can Postan and Hatcher deny, in particular, that the French and English countrysides of the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries are inappropriate objects for the comparative analysis which I suggested, when their rural structures were so very similar and when their evolutions were so closely intertwined? Apparently not, for in their contribution Postan and Hatcher (somewhat curiously, it is true) seek to refer me to precisely the contrast between the decline of lordship in thirteenth-century northern France and its consolidation in England in the same period, in the face of similar population trends, as one of the “better examples of the ‘contradictory’ processes” — better, that is, than those I invoked. But, of course, this was one of the two main comparative examples I used! Similarly, can Postan and Hatcher consistently assert that the west German society where serfdom declined and the east German society where serfdom began its ascent in the fifteenth century in the face of population drop-off are too different to be fruitfully compared? I think not. The latter had only recently developed as a colonial extension of the former, on very similar principles of socio-economic organization. As Postan himself asserts elsewhere, “In the early stages of German conquest and settlement, the societies of East and West differed in detail and degree rather than in substance”.

14 Ibid., p. 28.
15 Brenner, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe”, pp. 39-40. This oversight on the part of Postan and Hatcher is especially strange since elsewhere in their article they actually note that “Professor Brenner draws our attention to the disappearance of serfdom in Normandy and the Paris region . . .” Postan and Hatcher, “Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society”, p. 31.
16 M. M. Postan, “Economic Relations between Eastern and Western Europe”, in G. Barraclough (ed.), Eastern and Western Europe in the Middle Ages (London, 1970), p. 167. Postan and Hatcher seem to want further to argue that it is improper to compare east and west Germany from the later medieval period (“totally different situations”) because the rise of the international grain market stimulated grain production for export in the east, thereby providing the incentive for the rise of serfdom: Postan and Hatcher, “Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society”, pp. 27-8. Yet their argument is difficult to accept, for the impact of the international grain market was felt as profoundly in western Europe as it was in eastern Europe. It consitutes another point of similarity, not of difference, in the experience of the two regions, and for this reason cannot have accounted for their divergence. We shall have to return to this point in greater detail, but for the moment it is enough to quote Postan: “Eastern Europe diverged widely from the West in its economic and social development. It would have diverged even if it had been unaffected by trade”: Postan, “Economic Relations between Eastern and Western Europe”, p. 167 (my italics). For a similar statement, see M. M. Postan, “The Chronology of Labour Services”, Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc., 4th ser., xx (1937), pp. 192-3. See also p. 74 and nn. 134-5 below.
The point of these comparative analyses was not, of course, to challenge the fact that population growth/decline, by determining changes in relative factor scarcities and prices, created problems and opened up opportunities for lords and peasants throughout the medieval period and beyond. It was to deny that such changes in supply/demand forces could, in themselves, determine the resulting distribution of income. The demographic interpreters are, at times, obliged to grant this, if only implicitly. For they do, on occasion, refer to the (unexplained) development of class relations to account for trends in the distribution of income inexplicable in terms of trends in population. Indeed in their contribution Postan and Hatcher disarmingly assert that the demographic interpreters “have not maintained that a rising population invariably led to an intensification of serfdom and a falling population to its demise”. But, if not, the question naturally arises under what conditions the rise/decline of population did or did not so lead? Merely to ask this question is, in my opinion, to acknowledge that demographic forces in themselves led nowhere as far as the distribution of income is concerned. It is to pose the problem of systematically accounting for the (divergent) evolutions of agrarian class relations in pre-industrial Europe.

(I.2) THE GRAND AGRARIAN CYCLE

The difficulties faced by the demographic interpreters in accounting for their long cycles of economic stagnation are perhaps as in-

17 Postan and Hatcher, “Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society”, p. 28.
18 In a recent article Hatcher has attributed to me a position entirely at odds with the one I presented in my original essay. He asserts that, in my view, the feudal lords could essentially determine the distribution of income, by the exercise of virtually unlimited powers over their peasants. But this attribution is obviously unfounded. For the explicit point of the comparative analysis which was at the core of my essay was that under similar “objective” economic conditions (demographic or commercial), either lords or peasants could benefit at the others’ expense, depending especially upon the level of their class organization and power. I concluded that to understand the divergent evolutions of income distribution in pre-industrial Europe, it is necessary to analyse the historically specific processes of class formation and class conflict characteristic of the different regions. Compare my “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe”, pp. 37-42, with John Hatcher, “English Serfdom and Vileinage: Towards a Reassessment”, Past and Present, no. 90 (Feb. 1981), p. 4. Remarkably, in the same article Hatcher adopts several of the central arguments of my original essay, while implicitly demolishing the position of the demographic interpreters which he and Postan defended in their own contribution. Yet he makes no substantive reference to their contribution, let alone to the positions I actually presented. Specifically, Hatcher concludes as I do that “For unfree medieval peasants the strength of custom was ranged against the rights and powers of their lords. Thus although economic and demographic trends and fluctuations invariably generated powerful forces for change, a miscellany of social, political and legal influences acted and reacted upon them, sometimes compounding their impact, sometimes inhibiting, and sometimes reversing. Changes in the level of population or the supply of land could make labour or land more scarce or more abundant, but for tenants both in the power of their lords and protected by custom these changes alone did not determine the amount and type of rent they paid”. Moreover: “We can . . . state with assurance that the outcome was rarely, if ever, dictated solely by market forces”: ibid., pp. 36-7 (my italics).
tractable as those concerning the distribution of income. No one would deny that continuing demographic increase in the face of declining labour productivity sooner or later leads to an imbalance between population and resources — ultimately to poverty, famine and death. “Overpopulation” leads, therefore, to a compensatory demographic drop-off, resulting in a reversal of the land/labour ratio and a new onset of demographic growth — the two-phase, self-correcting cycle. There is no reason to challenge the logic of this model, in view of its premises. Nor is there much doubt that the two-phase grand agrarian cycle characterized most of western Europe in the medieval period and part of it during the early modern period. In question, however, is the adequacy of the Malthusian model to explain the specific contours of the grand agrarian cycle.

First, the actual appearance of “overpopulation” was strictly relative to the distribution of income and wealth (not to mention the availability of uncultivated land). To the extent that the lords owned the land and extracted a surplus from the peasants, the so-called population “ceiling” was lowered in two ways: directly, as a result of the immediate subtraction from peasant consumption for the lords’ unproductive use; and indirectly, as a result of the loss of potential funds for the increase of the peasants’ forces of production through investment and innovation. Postan and Hatcher view such references to the class-relative character of the population ceiling as so much obfuscation, since “overpopulation” tended to occur eventually in any case (under medieval conditions). Nevertheless, as shall be seen, under different balances of power and property between lords and peasants in different regions, demographic growth appears to have led to “overpopulation” at different population densities, at different points in time and with different socio-economic effects.¹⁹

Secondly, the Malthusian mechanism is supposed to have operated as a process of homeostatic adjustment, to bring the labouring population into line with the society’s potential resources (given existing technology). But, in fact, it could not necessarily accomplish this in pre-industrial Europe, because production and distribution were so profoundly shaped by the surplus extracting relationships between lords and peasants. Thus the workings of the socio-economic system did not merely tend to match the producing population and its needs with the potential output; at the same time, it tended to match the surplus appropriated from the direct producers with the needs of the non-producing ruling class. All else being equal, a decline of the producing population in response to “overpopulation” would have tended to bring it into line with potential output. Nevertheless, a decline in the number of direct producers tended simultaneously to

¹⁹ Postan and Hatcher, “Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society”, pp. 30-ff. See also pp. 60-ff below.
threaten the income of the lords; for the level of the lords’ income was a function of the number of peasant producers (tenants), given a particular rate of surplus extraction. In consequence, in order to maintain or increase their income, in the face of declining population, the lords tended to be obliged to attempt to extract a greater amount from each peasant, as well as to try to take more from one another (via brigandage, warfare and the like). The result, at least in potential, might be the disruption of production and thereby the creation of conditions for further demographic decline, rather than a return to equilibrium.

In fact, throughout much of Europe from the middle of the fourteenth century, population drop-off failed to re-establish the conditions for economic revival in accord with Malthusian principles. Hit by declining incomes, the result of fewer rent-paying peasants, the lords resorted to increasing levies (through rents and taxes) and to intra-feudal warfare, in this way undermining the peasants’ productive forces and causing further demographic decline — ultimately a downward spiral rather than Malthusian adjustment. At least in some places, moreover, population remained at a low point for quite an extended period, long after stable economic conditions had finally been restored. It was this long-term failure of adjustment in the later medieval period which gave to Le Roy Ladurie’s “grand agrarian cycle” its dramatic contours — but which seems to place it beyond the power of the Malthusian model to explain.20

(I.3) FROM MALTHUSIAN STAGNATION TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Finally, because the demographic interpreters do not root their accounts of the grand agrarian cycle in a theory of economic backwardness and economic development, they cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of either the specific form of stagnation they have isolated, or the forces which made for a break beyond it to regular economic growth — ongoing specialization, capital investment and technical change. They cannot, in other words, tell us why their Malthusian premise of the non-development of the productive forces essentially held true throughout a whole epoch, but then ceased to do so. This weakness is especially manifest with respect to the rising relative food prices which were characteristic of the “up phases” of the grand agrarian cycles and which offered the potential of increased “profits” to those who specialized, invested and improved. Such demographically inspired market incentives failed to call forth a productive response in most of Europe during the thirteenth and early

fourteenth centuries or the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; yet they do appear to have stimulated the start of an agrarian transformation in early modern England. What accounts for this difference, and could it possibly be explained in demographic terms?

Le Roy Ladurie maintains in his contribution that his demographic model does hold good for western Europe as a whole. Yet he also acknowledges that England did break from the Malthusian pattern in the early modern period. These would seem to be contradictory assertions. Le Roy Ladurie's explanation of this inconsistency would appear to be that his "homeostatic model also contains a certain unilinear drift in the direction of agrarian capitalism". Yet he never specifies either the sources of this "drift" or the reasons for its unilinear direction. At one point he appears to concede that the action of the seigneurs sometimes played an important part in creating the social conditions for economic development, by expelling the peasants from the land and creating large, unified farms. Yet, if so, this merely poses the problem. For throughout Europe, from the fifteenth century onwards, seigneurs responded to roughly similar demographic conditions in different ways; there was no simple "unilinear drift" towards capitalism. In the east, they ultimately enserfed the peasants, setting in train a highly restricted process of "growth". In France, as Le Roy Ladurie elsewhere tells us, despite the efforts of rural engrossers, peasant property remained largely intact; morcellement outran reassemblement; and meanwhile there was the development of absolutism. This led to a repetition of the established medieval pattern of declining productivity leading to population and production crisis. Finally, in England, direct seigneurial action to undermine peasant possession did pave the way for the rise of the familiar capitalist agrarian structure, underpinning the growth of agricultural productivity and overall economic development. To observe these divergences is at once to challenge Le Roy Ladurie's assumption of a "unilinear drift" and to raise the question of the different responses by the dominant feudal classes to similar conditions

22 Le Roy Ladurie, "Reply to Professor Brenner", p. 58.
23 Ibid., p. 56.
24 Ibid., p. 59.
25 Le Roy Ladurie denies that developments in east Europe can properly or relevantly be compared to those in the west; yet elsewhere he makes precisely this comparison and for the same purpose that I do: in order to help shed light on the decline of serfdom and the strengthening of the peasantry in western Europe in general and France in particular. Compare his "Reply to Professor Brenner", p. 58, with his "Les masses profondes: la paysannerie", in F. Braudel and E. Labrousse (eds.), *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1970-7), i, pt. 2, pp. 526 ff.
and problems: how to protect and improve their positions in the face of the later medieval demographic decline and the subsequent development of population, trade and industry in the early modern period. This is, in my view, to pose unavoidably the problem of the divergent tendencies of class formation within feudal Europe, and the power struggles which lay behind them. Yet for Le Roy Ladurie such a line of investigation is ruled out. "In the final perspective", he writes, "the system contains its own destiny; the effect of conflict is merely superficial".  

II  
CLASS STRUCTURE, CLASS ORGANIZATION AND FEUDAL DEVELOPMENT IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

Countering my emphasis on the way class or property relations shaped economic development, Le Roy Ladurie accuses me of a misleading running together of "the economic" and "the political". In the words of Le Roy Ladurie, in speaking of the "surplus extracting or ruling classes", I have adopted a "simplistic assimilation between power (political) and surplus value (economic)". Paradoxically, Bois, writing from an explicitly Marxian viewpoint, makes a somewhat analogous charge. Mine is a "political" and a "voluntarist" Marxism: a preoccupation with the vagaries of the class struggle prevents me from discerning the economic "law of motion" of feudal society — in his view, "the falling rate of feudal levy". Nonetheless, it is, indeed, central to my viewpoint that a "fusion" (to put it imprecisely) between "the economic" and "the political" was a distinguishing and constitutive feature of the feudal class structure and system of production. This was manifested in the fact that the "economic" conditions for the reproduction of the ruling class — the income it required to carry out its life activities, including the continuing subjection of the peasantry — depended upon a system of extraction of surplus labour from the direct producers which was characterized by extra-economic ("political") compulsion. In turn, the varying forms of development of this system of surplus extraction by extra-economic compulsion, in connection to and in conflict with the development of the productive forces by peasant possessors of the means of subsistence (land, tools and so forth), provide an indispensable key to the evolution of the European feudal economy: to its specific patterns of agricultural and demographic development which issued in declining labour productivity; to its characteristic types of unproductive industrial production and exchange, dominated by luxury goods to fill the "political" needs of

28 Le Roy Ladurie, "Reply to Professor Brenner", p. 56; Bois, "Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy", p. 67.
the lordly ruling class; and to its particular forms of crisis, manifested
in the exhaustion of the productive forces (including the producing
population itself), the decline of lordly revenues, and the seigneurial
reaction — as well as the ways in which the system was or was not
superseded in different regions by different types of social-productive
systems.

(II.1) FEUDAL DEVELOPMENT AND FEUDAL CRISIS: SOME GENERALIZA-
TIONS

(II.1.1) Peasant “Possession” and Surplus Extraction by Extra-
Economic Compulsion

In the economy which characterized most of medieval Europe, and
much of it through the early modern period, production was, as a
rule, carried out by peasants in “possession” of the land and tools
required to produce their subsistence. “Possession” is here marked
off by inverted commas because the question of its changing and
conflicted character — manifested in the conditional character of feu-
dal property — lay at the heart of feudal development. Because peas-
ants actually did hold relatively stable and relatively uncontested
possession of their means of subsistence, their reproduction required
no economic intervention or productive contribution by the lords. As
a result, mere ownership of other land (demesne) by the lords was not
sufficient for them to realize a surplus from the peasants; for the
peasants were under no economic compulsion to work for a wage on
the lords’ land or to pay an economic rent to lease it. In order to
secure a rent — that is, to get the peasants to hand over part of their
labour or their product — the lords had to be able to exert a degree
of control over the peasants’ persons. This was made possible by
virtue of the lords’ capacity to exercise force directly.29

Peasant possession tended to be secured, on the one hand, through
the growing strength of peasant communities and the peasants’ op-
portunities for mobility (especially to the extent there was free, un-
settled land). It tended to be realized, on the other hand, as a result
of the “divided sovereignty” which characterized lordly rule — that
is, the autonomy and the mutual separation of the individual lord-

29 This situation should be contrasted with that which characterizes the capitalist
economy. Here the working class must sell their labour power to the capitalists for a
wage in order to survive. In the process they must alienate a surplus (profit) to the
employers, precisely because they do not possess the means of production and cannot
therefore provide directly for their subsistence or, alternatively, produce a commodity
for sale on the market. In turn, the capitalists may appropriate a surplus without, as
a rule, any need for directly “political” (forceful) domination over the direct producers
for the capitalists’ monopoly of the means of production allows them to exert an
“economic” compulsion against the workers, who are compelled to depend upon them
to make a living. The power of the state is needed only to protect the property of the
ruling class and enforce the contractual exchanges between capital and labour.
ships, their political self-sufficiency, which was the obverse side of their direct access to the means of coercion. Divided sovereignty, by making for competition among lordships and impeding collaboration, tended to oblige the lords to grant the peasants their plots on a more or less permanent basis, as an incentive to keep them on the land and pay their dues. Even so, by dispersing force among the individual lordships, divided sovereignty also tended to make it difficult for the peasants to secure full property, as it obliged them to put themselves under the “protection” of a lord precisely in order to maintain their land (against other lords). Thus, peasant possession was ultimately circumscribed by lordly power. Indeed, to the degree the individual lordships were able to amass force, and especially to the degree that the lords, as a class, were able to lessen the competition among themselves and to increase their collaboration — thereby overcoming the effects of divided sovereignty — they were able to intensify their domination, and even threaten peasant possession. It may therefore be understood why the changing manner in which and degree to which the lords, as individuals and as a class, were able to apply power in the rent relationship — typically expressed in the changing character and effectiveness of their politico-jurisdictional authority over the peasants — was central to their formation as a ruling class and, in turn, profoundly marked the development of the whole system of production.

It should be emphasized at once that under certain circumstances it did become possible for the feudal ruling classes to extract a surplus from the peasants without recourse to formally feudal arrangements based on extra-economic compulsion — that is, merely on the basis of ownership of land, and even without a monopoly of it. Where the peasant class as a whole had insufficient land to guarantee it subsistence, some peasants would have no choice but to lease additional plots and/or hire themselves out as wage labourers to make ends meet. They could not avoid, in the process, alienating part of their product to the lord without recompense.

This situation tended to be spontaneously produced as a result of the tendency to demographic growth which was characteristic of the European possessing peasantry, at least from the period circa 1050. Within limits (and leaving aside, for the moment, exogenously induced mortalities, diseases and so forth), the rate of demographic expansion appears to have depended on the age of marriage (for fecundity seems to have been, more or less, a constant). Marriage age, in turn, depended upon access to the means to establish a family, in particular access to a cultivable plot. Given, then, peasant possession and the associated potential for the subdivision of holdings (both of which could be limited to a lesser or greater degree, depending on the strength of lordship and the weight of lordly levies), parents could
treat their plots as the basis for the continuance of a family, and children could count upon receiving a holding at a relatively early age. There appears to have been established, in consequence, a west European pattern of relatively early marriage, which seems to have underpinned the relatively rapid medieval demographic growth rates — and this pattern may have been slow to change even in the face of the declining economic opportunities which went with the extreme morcellement of holdings.\textsuperscript{30} The long-term tendency, therefore, appears to have been towards “overpopulation”, leading to increasing demand for land, creating the possibility of extracting growing rents, without direct resort to extra-economic pressures or controls.

Even so, the degree to which the feudal ruling class could actually realize the potential in this way established for what might be termed “demographically conditioned” surplus extraction was strictly contingent, and could provide only an uncertain long-term basis for their continuing hegemony. On the one hand, the manner and the degree to which population growth leading to the appearance of a rural quasi-peasantry/quasi-proletariat would determine a change in the distribution of income between classes depended upon the existing distribution of the land — the extent, relative and absolute, of the lords’ lands (the demesnes, where they were free to charge economic rents) versus that of the peasants (customary land). Yet this distribution could not be assumed to favour the lords. On the other hand, to the extent that the lords were dependent for their income upon their landed property alone — that is lacking extra-economic access to the peasants’ labour or the peasants’ product — their ability to realize a rent (no matter how much demesne land they held) would tend to require “overpopulation”. Lordly incomes would thus be subject to drastic threat in the event of population drop-off. Indeed, at successive junctures in the later medieval period different sections of the European feudal ruling class suffered from (a) an inadequacy of land (demesne) to take advantage of the population increase (the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), and/or (b) a drop-off in population which made it difficult to derive an income from the land they did hold (the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). These situations revealed the lords’ ultimate dependence upon the institutions by which they could extract a surplus by extra-economic compulsion, and forced the lords to attempt, in different ways, to rebuild and/or reshape these institutions.

In sum, pace Le Roy Ladurie, it is imperative to “assimilate the economic and the political” precisely in order adequately to charac-

terize the "surplus extracting or ruling classes" in feudal society, and to understand the basis of their domination. For throughout the medieval and into the early modern period, the existence and reproduction of the feudal ruling classes depended upon "extra-economic" ("political") arrangements by which the requisite surplus ("economic") was extracted from the peasant producers. Initially embodied in jurisdictional rights over the customary tenantry which sanctioned the extraction of a rent, these arrangements later took the form of property in office which gave rights to a share in centralized exactions, state taxation.

Furthermore, it is impossible to grasp the evolution of the feudal economy as a whole simply by means of the so-called "economic" formula proposed by Bois. According to this formula, the "structural contradiction of small-scale production and large-scale property" led inexorably towards the "fall in the rate of [the feudal] levy". In Bois's view, the very fact that the system of production was set in motion by small peasant possessors ("small-scale production") directly ("economically") determined the decay of the system of surplus extraction by extra-economic compulsion ("large-scale property"). It did so, specifically, by determining the long-term "disintegration" of the lords' ability to realize returns from the "various rent-paying holdings within the framework of the seigneurie". Nevertheless, the heavily one-sided character of this formulation makes it ultimately misleading.31

In particular, as I shall try to show, just as the feudal system of class relations was "politically" constituted, it tended to impose an "extra-economic" dynamic on the course of feudal economic evolution. Naturally, what the lords could extract was limited by what the peasants could produce, and in this sense peasant-based production profoundly shaped the feudal economy, as Bois says. But the fact remains that the system of surplus extraction tended to develop according to its own logic, so to speak, and, to an important degree, without reference to the requirements of peasant production — as a function, in particular, of the lords' growing needs for politically-motivated consumption, arising from their needs both to maintain a dominant position vis-à-vis the peasantry and to protect themselves vis-à-vis one another. If it is true that lordly surplus extraction was ultimately restricted by peasant-based production, it was also the case that the system of lordly surplus extraction could limit, even govern, the development of peasant production itself. As a result, feudal economic development manifested a two-sided, conflictive interaction: between a developing system of production for subsistence through which the class of peasant possessors aimed to reproduce themselves

31 Bois, "Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy", pp. 61-3, esp. n. 7. For a full discussion of Bois's approach, see pp. 41-5 below.
and provide for the continuity of their families, and a developing system of surplus extraction by extra-economic compulsion for non-productive consumption, by which the class of feudal lords aimed to reproduce themselves as individuals and as a ruling class.

(II.1.2) Lords, Peasants and Declining Productivity

I would, therefore, begin by maintaining, as against Postan and Hatcher who appear to deny this, that the overall class structure of production (property structure) — based on extra-economic compulsion by feudal lords in relationship to peasant producers who possessed their means of subsistence — was at the root of declining productivity and, ultimately, the forms of feudal crisis. Instead, Postan and Hatcher assert that the causes of declining productivity are to be found in the “backwardness and stagnation of prevailing technology and above all the insufficiency of manorial investment”.

This is only to pose the question which, in my view, they do not fully face: what accounts for these inadequacies? Postan and Hatcher attribute the lack of technological innovation to the “insufficient supply of technological possibilities”. But, if it were true, as they say, that capital-using technologies capable of increasing agricultural productivity were unavailable, then their complementary contention that agricultural investment was insufficient would not make sense. For, in that case, even a low level of investment would have been sufficient to maintain production at the highest possible level. This is, indeed, the position of J. Z. Titow, who argues that lordly investment, though low in proportion to their total income, was adequate to the low level of existing technology. Nevertheless, it has been convincingly shown by Eleanor Searle and others that technologies capable of significantly raising agricultural productivity by means of relatively large-scale investments were indeed available in medieval Europe — and they included some of the central components of what was later to constitute the agricultural revolution of the early modern period. What is more, these technologies were actually used, on at least some occasions, during the thirteenth and fourteenth century, even in England. The question which needs to be asked, therefore, is why were they not more widely applied. The problem in other words was not, as Postan and Hatcher contend, the “insufficient supply of technological possibilities”, but rather the feudal economy’s inability to make use of the possibilities which existed. Given the low capacity to apply

33 J. Z. Titow, English Rural Society, 1200-1350 (London, 1969), pp. 49-50. As Titow puts it, “The technical limitations of medieval husbandry seem to have imposed their own ceiling on what could be spent on an estate”. 
existing capital-using technologies/innovations, the low level of investment in agricultural production is immediately understandable.  

How, then, did feudal property or surplus extraction arrangements limit the capacity for the adoption of more productive methods and in this way reduce the potential for productive investment — thereby turning the economy towards “extra-economic” or “political” forms of development? To begin with, they did so (like other pre-capitalist economic arrangements) by making the direct producers, both lords and peasants, independent, to an important degree, from the imperative to respond to market opportunities by maximizing returns from exchange. The economy thus remained “patriarchal” in its central aspects. In general, peasant producers possessed (more or less) direct, non-market access to their means of subsistence (land, tools). This meant that they were not compelled to sell on the market to acquire the means to buy what they needed to subsist and to produce. In consequence, they did not have to deploy their means of production so as to compete most effectively with other producers. They could, instead, orient production directly to reproducing their family labour force. Similarly, since the lords had immediate access to their peasants’ surplus, thus direct access to their means of reproduction, they were under no directly economic compulsion to produce competitively on the market and therefore were relieved of the direct pressure to cut costs.

This is not, of course, to deny that the development of trade created important incentives to increase output in order to increase returns from exchange so as to meet growing consumption needs; for of course it did — especially for the lords, who could potentially dispose of large surpluses. Nevertheless, even to the extent that the lords did attempt to maximize production for exchange, their relations with their tenants tended to induce them to try to do so, not through the application of fixed capital and increased skill to improve labour productivity, but through the intensification of peasant labour, the increase of levies in money or kind on the peasant producers, or the expansion of the area of cultivation.

Where feudal lords were able to retain significant direct, extra-economic controls over a dependent peasantry, as in early thirteenth-century England, it was only natural that in so far as they tried to increase output through increasing demesne production, they turned to intensifying villein labour. Yet, in so doing, the lords had necessarily to eschew the application of new techniques and fixed

capital. For labour by villeins, in possession of the means of subsistence, was necessarily forced labour; and such "non-dismissable" labour was notoriously difficult to adapt to methods of production requiring the careful application of fixed capital or high skill (or necessitated very high supervisory costs). Thus, the lords' reliance on their "costless" labour made economic sense, but this labour could not be combined with investment in new techniques to provide the basis for agricultural transformation. Of course, as population increased (especially as the thirteenth century wore on) wages dropped so low and land prices rose so high that lords were induced to commute labour rents for money rents, and to cultivate their demesnes using wage labour or to lease them on the market (because they could profit by this shift). But low wages and high land prices also reduced the incentive to opt for capital-using, labour-saving innovations, in favour of maintaining the old labour-intensive, labour-squeezing methods — although now on the basis of hired labour rather than villein services — and channelling investment funds into land purchases (rather than capital improvements).

There were, in addition, other obstacles to improvement on the demesnes, caused by their entanglement with village-organized agriculture. Demesne parcels were often scattered throughout the open fields, and were, moreover, subject to community-regulated cultivation. Attempts by the lords to consolidate or engross could therefore run into significant barriers — the resistance of the peasant community as a whole, or the refusal of the individual peasant to sell his land. It is somewhat puzzling that Postan and Hatcher accuse me of implying that the "mass eviction of villeins was a practice in which landlords could regularly engage", when I referred, in this regard, precisely to "the difficult and costly processes of building up large holdings and investing, of removing customary peasants and bringing in new techniques". In any case, to the extent that the strength of community controls or peasant possession limited the lords' ability to reorganize agricultural production, their attempts to increase revenues were, once again, channelled towards squeezing rather than improvement.

Where the lords tried, and succeeded, in increasing their income

In my original essay, I implied that the lords did not improve production because they had the alternative of squeezing the peasants by extra-economic compulsion. This formulation is misleading. I believe it is more correct to say that because the lords had no choice but to rely upon surplus extraction by extra-economic compulsion, they were largely prevented from improving, because the former could not be combined successfully with the latter. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe", p. 48. Cf. M. Mate, "Profit and Productivity on the Estates of Isabella de Forz, 1260-92", Econ. Hist. Rev., 2nd ser., xxxiii (1980), pp. 326 ff.

through increased levies on the peasants in money or kind (rather than in labour) they undercut the chances for development on lands possessed by peasants, through reducing the peasants’ funds for investment. In England such levies appear to have increased during the thirteenth century. But it was also the case that the peasants’ potential for developing the forces of production was itself definitely limited. Given the small plots available to most of them and their limited investment funds, the peasants’ possibilities for accumulation and innovation were sharply restricted. Given, in turn, the uncertainties of the harvest, the giant oscillations of food prices and the related vagaries of the market for cash crops, the peasants naturally wished to avoid the risk of dependence upon the market for sales or purchases. They attempted, therefore, to orient their production directly towards insuring immediate subsistence needs. This required diversifying, in order, so far as possible, to produce on their own plots the full range of their necessities, marketing only physical surpluses. This tendency to “production for subsistence” naturally constituted a strong barrier to commercial specialization and ultimately to the transformation of production, even when market opportunities developed. It also posed a major barrier to those rural accumulators, richer peasants and lords, who wished to collect land; for the peasants would not easily part with the plots which were the basis for their existence, unless they had to. On the contrary, there was every tendency on the part of the possessing peasants to subdivide their holdings among their children. Indeed, the peasants’ morcellement of parcels under population growth tended to overwhelm any counter-tendency to accumulation in the agricultural economy as a whole, further undermining the potential for development.37

(II.1.3) Forms of Feudal Development: From Colonization to “Political Accumulation”

The inability to improve labour productivity beyond a certain point, a consequence of feudal class-productive or property relations, thus imposed certain limits and possibilities, and conditioned specific overall patterns of feudal economic development — patterns which were, in the long run, typically non-productive and “extra-economic”. The major exception proves the rule. Major capital expenditures on production are to be found above all on new agricultural “plant” (on the infrastructural conditions which formed the basis for the extension of existing forms of production) rather than on the equipment of labour with more and better means of production. Col-

onization, the opening up of new land to cultivation, was indeed the archetypical form of feudal development and feudal improvement. So long as new lands were available and population grew, lords could increase their income simply by planting peasants. Potentially at least, in this situation, output could grow and lords and peasants improve their condition, with a minimum of conflict. For lords might avoid the costs of coercion, while benefiting from the multiplication of tenures at, say, constant rents (which is not to argue that they would or could always choose this option).

Nevertheless, the potential for this form of development was obviously limited. For the possibilities of extending the cultivated area, and for supporting in this way additional rent-paying peasants, were clearly restricted by the finite supply of land. Beyond colonization, therefore, especially given the limited possibilities of increasing output via investment and improvement, feudal development tended to take inward-looking forms — forms of redistribution of wealth, rather than its creation.

Postan and Hatcher point out that there was a strong predilection on the part of feudal lords to purchase land, rather than invest in fixed capital improvements, and they attribute this to a “preference” which “was deeply rooted in the mode of life and scale of values of feudal nobility”. But this is only a partial answer. For the preference for land must itself be understood, at least in part, as an outcome of the established class-productive relations; it made sense from an economic point of view. Because investment in fixed or human capital to improve demesne production could, as noted, be expected to yield only the most limited returns, it was reasonable for the lords to use their surpluses simply to increase the size of their holdings thus extending their control over rent-producing land and peasants. Moreover, because the barriers to improvement extended to the peasant sector as well, the peasants showed the same bias towards the purchase of land, partly as speculation, as well as to help further ensure subsistence. In other words, in the feudal context, land was a good investment. Indeed, it showed itself to be that much better an investment to the degree that population growth propelled a long-term tendency towards rising land and food prices — and as the economy proved incapable of responding to these market signals by proportionally increasing output.

Beyond opening up new land or purchasing cultivated land, the lords, as a rule, could systematically increase their income only by taking from one another or by squeezing more from their peasants. Thus, the long-term tendency, prevalent throughout the feudal epoch (from circa 1000-1100), to “political accumulation” — that is, the

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build-up of larger, more effective military organization and/or the construction of stronger surplus-extracting machinery — may be viewed as conditioned by the system’s limited potential for long-term economic growth, and, to a certain extent, as an alternative to extending or improving cultivation. Given the difficulties of increasing production, the effective application of force tended to appear, even in the short run, as the best method of amassing wealth.

But to what extent could individual lords, or groups of them, gain access to more of the social surplus through “political accumulation”?39 This problem was posed especially sharply because the very prerogatives (force/jurisdiction) required by every individual lord to ensure his reproduction (as a lord) vis-à-vis the peasants constituted a threat to the other lords, and made for a generalized tendency to intra-lordly competition and conflict which made “political accumulation” necessary. On the other hand, this “parcellized sovereignty”, and its potentially anarchic effects, had to be neutralized, if “political accumulation” was to be pursued successfully.

In the first instance, of course, military efficacy versus other lords or improved jurisdictional powers over the peasants required the collecting and organizing of followers — recruited, naturally, for the most part, from within the ruling class, normally from among its lesser elements. But to gain and retain the loyalty of their followers, the overlords had to feed and equip them, and in the long run reward them. Minimally, the overlord’s household had to become a focus of lavish display, conspicuous consumption and gift-giving. But beyond this, it was generally necessary to provide the followers with the means to attain or maintain their status as members of the dominant class — that is, a permanent source of income, requiring a grant of land with associated lordly prerogatives (or, later, an office). Naturally, if paradoxically, such grants tended to increase the followers’ independence from the overlords, leading to a renewed potential for disorganization, fragmentation, anarchy. As a result, in the long run, further grants tended to be necessary. Successful “political accumulation” therefore required that increased military power and/or jurisdictional authority yield returns which more than covered their increased costs, and such costs tended to grow over time. As a result, “political accumulation” tended to become self-perpetuating and escalating — the amassing of more land and men to more effectively exert force in order to collect the resources for the further application of power.

“Political accumulation” is, nevertheless, quite incomprehensible merely in such quantitative terms. It was, in addition, a qualitative

process requiring the increasingly sophisticated self-organization of the feudal ruling class. In the first place the lords needed broader, more elaborate forms of political co-operation in order to extract a surplus from increasingly well-organized peasant communities, and to counteract the effects of peasant mobility. Especially since the scope of peasant organization tended to be geographically limited to the village or region, the effectiveness of the lords' surplus-extracting administration would tend to depend on the degree to which intra-lordly organization could be extended, and intra-lordly competition correspondingly reduced. Secondly, more developed political forms were required to facilitate the reciprocal protection of the lords' property against one another — the establishment of rights through the promulgation and enforcement of law. Finally, intensified competition between groups of lords tended to require increasingly sophisticated forms of military organization and weaponry. Speaking generally, the organization of groups of lords around a leading warlord for "external" warfare (for defence or conquest) most often provided the initial source of intra-lord cohesion, and this served, in turn, as the basis for building more effective internal collaboration for the mutual protection of one another's property and for controlling the peasantry. Throughout the feudal epoch, then, warfare was the great engine of feudal centralization.

All this is merely to say that an essential long-term basis of feudal accumulation was the development of feudal states — by which is minimally meant the various forms of association for self-government of groups of feudal lords, each of whom maintained, in the last analysis, direct access to, or private property in, the means of applying force. This is not to say that a high level of lordly organization was always required. Nor is it to argue that state building took place as an automatic or universal process. One might argue, for example, that at the frontiers of feudal society, to the east and the south, so long as colonization remained an easy option, there was relatively little (internally generated) pressure upon the lordly class to improve its self-organization — and that the opposite tended to be the case in the older, long-settled regions. At the same time, just because a strong feudal state might become "necessary" did not always determine that the lords could successfully avoid anarchy (witness western Germany after the twelfth century). What is being argued, however, is that to the degree that disorganization and competition prevailed within groups of feudal lords, they would tend to be vulnerable not only to depredations from the outside, but to the erosion of their own dominance over the peasants — to their decay as a ruling class. The economic success of individual lords, or groups of them, did tend to depend on feudal state building, and the long-term trend, overall, does appear to have been towards greater political centralization for "political accumulation".
It seems to me, therefore, that those historians who have insisted upon a narrowly "political" definition of feudalism as a "form of government" and who have, in turn, focused upon the broad range of relationships of obligation and exchange which were constructed to bind man to man in feudal society (not only the relations of vassalage strictly speaking, but also the more loosely defined associations structured by patronage, clientage and family) have grasped an essential driving force of the system. Yet, in the same way that some Marxists have failed to draw all of the necessary "economic" implications of the specifically "extra-economic" ("political") nature of the feudal surplus-extracting relationship, those historians who have stressed the heavily "political" nature of feudal dynamics have tended sometimes to forget that much of feudal government, feudal "state" building was about "economics", indeed "accumulation" — the extraction, circulation, redistribution and consumption of peasant-produced wealth.

In this context, trade expanded largely in relationship to growing ruling-class consumption needs, fuelled especially by the expanding requirements of "political accumulation". It facilitated a circuit of production essentially involving the exchange of artisan-produced luxury and military goods for peasant-produced necessities (food), extracted by the lords. In the first instance, the growth of this social division of labour, founded on the rise of urban-based industry (concentrated classically in Flanders and north Italy) further benefited the lords, for it reduced costs through increasing specialization, thus making luxury goods relatively cheaper. Nevertheless, in the long run, the growth of this form of social division of labour on a European scale was disastrous. It meant a growing disproportion between productive and unproductive labour in the economy as a whole (for little of the output of the growing urban centres went "back into production" to augment the means of production or means of consumption of the direct peasant producers). Over time, moreover, the tendency to "political accumulation" was intensified by the growing needs for conspicuous consumption (which went along with the growing availability of luxury goods) and by the increasing requirement for military supplies (which grew up with the escalation of the size of armies and the growing complexity of weapons). As the agricultural economy thus saw its foundations progressively sapped, the weight of the urban society upon it continued to grow, inviting serious disruption.


If it is true, then, that the effectiveness of lordly “political accumulation” was, in the last analysis, limited by the weakness of the underlying feudal-productive base, it is still the case that increasingly powerful, increasingly well-organized feudal class states could be, and were, constructed through concentrating energy and centralizing organization, even in the face of the declining capacity of the agricultural forces to support the population. As a result, the self-propelling tendency to increasing political centralization for political accumulation not only tended to accelerate the long-term tendency of the productivity of labour to decline, but to disrupt the “normal” Malthusian mechanism for bringing population into line with production. Indeed, as real output tended to reach its limit, the buildup of more powerful instruments to redistribute it via coercive surplus extraction and warfare tended to quicken, thereby creating the conditions for catastrophic crises of the economy and society as a whole.

(II.2) DEMOGRAPHY AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE GROWTH PHASE OF THE ECONOMY CIRCA 1150-1300

Inability to come satisfactorily to terms with the “fusion” between the “political” and “the economic”, that profoundly marked the feudal productive system, is the central weakness of the approaches of both Bois and the demographic interpreters. This problem is, indeed, manifested in the analyses by both Bois and the demographic interpreters of the “growth phase” of the European medieval economy in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries and, as we shall see, of the long period of crisis which followed. Their approaches are, of course, quite different. Nevertheless, their interpretations suffer from a similar difficulty — a failure adequately to take into account the divergent evolutions, in both character and strength, of those mechanisms of extra-economic compulsion improvised by the feudal lords in different regions to ensure the extraction of a surplus in the face of peasant opposition. By counterposing the analysis of Bois to that of the demographic interpreters, it is possible to see the force of this objection and to begin to indicate the sort of alternative required.

(II.2.1) The French Economy in the Thirteenth Century: A Falling Rate of Feudal Rent?

The guiding conception of Bois for his analysis of the feudal economy as a whole is what he terms “the tendency to a falling rate of feudal levy”. In the “up-phase” of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the feudal ruling class was able to take only a decreasing proportion of the total output, as compared to the class of peasants. This was, in the first instance, because the rents levied by the lords tended to be fixed in money, while population growth led to rising relative
land prices, rents and food prices. A process of economic growth was facilitated by this tendency of the rate of rent to decline, for declining rates of rent, says Bois, allowed population growth and the multiplication of peasant tenures, especially through the opening up of new lands (assarts). For a time population growth and new tenures gave the lords enough new income to compensate for declining returns from their established customary tenures. Still, the end point had to come sooner or later: the potential for colonization was used up, peasant productivity declined, and, with continually growing population, there was a quickening rise in prices. At a certain point, therefore, the absolute size of the rent going to the lords had to drop, for increasing cultivated surfaces and rising population could no longer make up for the accelerating decline in the rate of rent, and a crisis would ensue.42

Now there is no reason to dispute the foregoing trends, presented by Bois, as they apply to medieval Normandy. Indeed, as I observed in my original article, they seem to hold good beyond Normandy throughout much of northern France in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By this time, the cens were everywhere fixed and hereditary. Moreover, not only Normandy but the neighbouring provinces of Ile-de-France and Picardy also experienced the important trend towards fixing tallages, eliminating their arbitrary character, at least by the end of this period (1250-1300). The same tendency is evident, in these provinces, for entry fines: these also seem to have been generally set at a fixed and steady rate.43 Finally, and of paramount importance, throughout most of this region, the demesnes (where an adjustable, economic rent could be levied) were of very restricted scope in relation to the peasant sector (where rents were fixed in money). By Bois's survey, the demesnes seem to have covered 10 per cent or less of the cultivated surface in thirteenth-century Normandy. G. Fourquin obtained an analogous result (10-12 per cent) for the area around Paris. And the findings are apparently similar throughout the region, although quantitative data is hard to come by.44 Thus, through much of thirteenth-century France (particularly the north), the situation was as Duby has summarized it: labour services were inconsequential; there was a generally light incidence

42 Bois, Crise du féodalisme, pp. 203-4, 354-60.

of customary rent from the *cens*, as inflation left money rents absurdly unadjusted. As a result, the lion’s share of the lord’s income was made up of returns from the demesne, since, unlike customary levies, these could be adjusted to prices. But the inability, or the loss of ability, to dispose of the requisite powers to extract adequate (or even significant) rents from their customary lands (*cens*) seems to have left large sections of the French feudal class with an insufficient landed economic base. In consequence, first indebtedness, then widespread land sales became endemic. It is no wonder that historians of medieval France besides Bois have found declining rents leading to a crisis of seigneurial revenues from various points in the thirteenth century. The question, however, is the source of this trend.

Why was there a falling rate of feudal levy in northern France in the thirteenth century? Bois tells us it was built into the very structure of feudal production. The peasant, Bois asserts, “disposed, with the usufruct of the land and the control of the process of production, a *trump card*, while the seigneur, excluded from this process, exercised his levy only by virtue of acts of an extra-economic origin”. “There resulted in the long run, an evolution of relations of economic forces favourable to the peasant and generative of an erosion of the rate of levy”. This balance of forces was clearly manifest in the principle of *tenure chassée* — hereditary holding at fixed and customary charges.

Nonetheless, the insufficiency of this reasoning should be evident. We have also, of course, argued that in view of production by peasant possessors, the lords’ ability to exact a rent through extra-economic compulsion was critical for their reproduction. But, the question which must be asked of Bois is why such a set of arrangements should necessarily have been favourable to the peasants, as far as income shares is concerned, especially over the long run. Why could not the lords, in the face of peasant possession, have maintained, or even proportionally increased, their manifold charges (fines, tallages, labour rents and so forth) by coercive means? We can agree that the lords might at first grant favourable conditions to peasants in order to induce them (and allow them) to open up new land for cultivation. But this would not explain what would have prevented the lords from subsequently adjusting established levies or introducing new ones in

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47 See the summary of research in Neveux, “Déclin et reprise”, esp. the section on the “difficultés de la seigneurie”, pp. 35-9.
49 Bois is aware of this possibility, but in my view gives no satisfactory explanation as to why it could not be realized. See, for example, Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*, pp. 203-4.
order to protect or improve their incomes. What is required, but missing, is an explanation of the lords' ostensibly inherent, long-term structural weakness as surplus extractors by extra-economic compulsion from peasant possessors.

This difficulty is made all the more acute, since Bois points (somewhat contradictorily) to a secondary tendency within feudalism towards the accumulation of land by lords (and big peasants) at the expense of the mass of the peasantry, which he sees as characteristic of the growth phase of the feudal economy. Yet, Bois does not explain why this trend, which potentially opened the way to increasing "economic" rents from growing demesnes, could not have counteracted the tendency to a declining rate of "feudal" levy from the customary holdings. For, especially under the conditions of increasing population, which would obviously have pushed up returns from each unit of demesne land, increasing land to the lords would have meant increased rents and thus a counter-trend in income distribution to the falling rate of feudal levy.

The question is, then, why the lords could not have expanded their demesnes enough to be able to counteract declining returns from the customary plots? They could have accomplished the latter either through appropriating newly assarted land to their demesnes, or through transforming old, customary tenures to leaseholds. It will be noted that this question is analogous to the first. For it poses, once again, in a different form, the problem of the distribution of property and of class power, and its determinants. The insufficiency of Bois's reasoning is indeed manifest when it is simply noted that there would have been no decline in the rate of feudal levy had the lords been able to add sufficiently large new seigneurial levies to the old ones or to increase the relative size of their demesnes, or had they merely been capable of taking their rents in kind (rather than money) and/or extracting it as a proportion of the harvest (rather than as an absolute amount). In fact, Bois provides instances of all of these phenomena in thirteenth-century France.

Finally, Bois speaks as if the lords were content to maintain a steady absolute income, and to allow the peasants to take an increasing share of the output. But this is to assume away the problem of the lords' needs as a ruling class in relationship to the income they were receiving. Without an analysis of the lords' changing consumption requirements, and the processes affecting these, we cannot determine the economic demands they would have wished to place upon the peasants, had they been able. But Bois fails to consider this problem and, as a result, he ends up by proceeding as if the lords' needs were

50 Ibid., pp. 167-8, 217, 342-6, 361 ff.
constant. This assumption cannot be justified empirically or conceptually. The requirements of the feudal lords, and their actual consumption, undoubtedly rose throughout the medieval period. Moreover, their growing consumption needs were not accidental, nor can they be dismissed as "superstructural". They expressed certain imperatives, deriving from the processes by which the lords were compelled to reproduce themselves as individuals and as a class — above all, the necessity to build up, increasingly, the means for political accumulation.

In sum, even were we to discover a universal tendency to a declining rate of feudal rent throughout the medieval period, we would still have to explain why the lords allowed it and/or could not prevent it.

(II.2.2) The English Economy in the Thirteenth Century: Demographically Determined Lordly Prosperity?

While the model of Bois seems to "fit" the French evidence, it appears to be contradicted by the radically different English data for the same period. First, in the later thirteenth century (1279), a good third of the cultivated land in England was held in unfree tenure, and these villein holdings were subject to arbitrary and potentially increasing dues of all sorts. In contrast, the French cens tenures, which yielded derisory returns by the middle of the thirteenth century, appear to have covered some five-sixths to nine-tenths of the cultivated surface (they should, indeed, be seen as somewhat analogous to the lightly taxed English freehold tenures, which covered about a third of the cultivated land). On average, according to Postan's estimates, some 50 per cent of the villein tenants' total produce was extracted by English lords, while in comparison, Bois's conclusion is that the French lords' take was only 9-10 per cent of their customary peasants' output. In turn, English demesnes covered a third of the cultivated surface, perhaps thrice the proportion covered by the demesnes of northern France (and naturally yielded increasing rents with the thirteenth-century population increases). Finally, and relatedly, villein labour services were very much alive in later thirteenth-century England. Duby has described the English situa-

51 Thus he tends, for example, to see the lords moving to intensify their surplus extraction only when there is an absolute decline in their incomes. It should be emphasized that the problem of evaluating the extent to which the income of the lords as a class is "adequate" — that is, the sufficiency of their income — is a very complicated one indeed, even leaving aside the question of their changing consumption needs. For one has to determine, first, the absolute amounts going to the ruling class in relationship to its changing size and, second, the distribution of the surplus within the ruling class.


53 Bois, Crise du féodalisme, p. 191.
tion at this point with respect to labour services as analogous to that on the Continent in the ninth century.\textsuperscript{54}

Bois's response to this divergence is curious, but follows inexorably from his theory of the declining rate of feudal levy. He tells us that thirteenth-century England — with its large demesnes, its labour services, and arbitrary levies on customary land (villeinage) — "exhibits an evident backwardness" with respect to French development.\textsuperscript{55} It was behind, having some catching up to do. In time, English developments would have gone the same way as the French, with an inevitable tendency to falling levies and shrinking demesnes; they simply required more time to do so.

Nevertheless, long-term trends in medieval England actually ran counter to Bois's interpretation. Not only did England fail to catch up to France, it sometimes travelled in the opposite direction. Indeed, the fact that income in England appears to have gone increasingly to the lords during much of the growth phase of the medieval economy has been used by the demographic interpreters and by Postan and Hatcher to argue against me that it was not feudal power, but increasing population, operating through the laws of supply and demand, which was determinant of income distribution.\textsuperscript{56} To complete this argument they feel obliged to assert once again that the strengthening of lordship which took place in England in this period was itself a function of population increase.\textsuperscript{57} I would simply respond that it never occurred to me to deny that population growth leading to rising demand for land would have distributed income in favour of the lords — if they had established enough power to vary rents in accord with prices on customary lands and/or if they possessed ample demesnes.\textsuperscript{58} But I do deny that population increase, in itself, could endow the lords with either of these.

As Postan and Hatcher themselves point out, even though population was increasing through the twelfth century, much of this period witnessed a trend towards fixed payments from the peasants to the lords, a tendency which favoured the peasants.\textsuperscript{59} (This is perhaps what Bois's theory would lead us to expect.) Nonetheless, from the

\textsuperscript{54} Duby, \textit{Rural Economy and Country Life}, pp. 210-11.
\textsuperscript{55} Bois, "Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy", p. 65.
\textsuperscript{56} Postan and Hatcher, "Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society", pp. 32, 34, and passim.
\textsuperscript{57} Thus they argue that the fact that rents were high for freely negotiated leases in the thirteenth century shows that the high and mounting payments on unfree customary lands reflected market forces, rather than "mere excesses of feudal power": Postan and Hatcher, "Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society", p. 32. See also n. 10 above.
later twelfth and especially the thirteenth centuries, there developed, with continuing population growth, a reversal of the previous trend. The lords successfully reasserted their rights to make increasing exactions from the peasants. This had its legal expression in the hardening of the lines between free and unfree peasants, with a large part of the rural population consigned to unfreedom. With unfreedom went liability to increasing payments and (very much contrary to what Bois would lead us to predict) this was especially the case, apparently, in the longest settled regions. Finally, throughout the thirteenth century the lords seem to have expanded their demesnes, partly through assarts and partly through converting to demesne customary tenures upon which they found it difficult to raise levies. Thus, although population rose consistently through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in England it could, in itself, determine no consistent pattern of income distribution. The latter depended on the changing character of the social-property relationships and the changing balance of class forces. These seem to have underpinned a reversal of mid-twelfth-century trends which were apparently favourable to the peasants, so as to shift the distribution of income during the thirteenth century in favour of the lords, over and against the unfree peasants (while leaving the free peasants in a relatively favoured position).

To clarify this point it is necessary to take exception to the puzzling statement made by Postan and Hatcher, that “The close definition of villein status and obligations in the late twelfth and the thirteenth centuries may have . . . helped to protect the villeins against arbitrary exactions”. They quote Bracton to the effect that the lords’ authority over their peasants “once extended to life and death, but is now restricted to civil law”. But this is beside the point. For the lords hardly required such untrammelled physical powers over their peasants to exercise economically effective lordship. What was unquestionably critical in this respect was the exclusion of the villeins from the protection of the royal courts against the lords’ arbitrary exactions, and this result was precisely the upshot of the legal developments of this period. It was enough for the lord to establish the fact that his tenant was a villein (unfree) to have him denied legal protection; to have thrown out of court any appeal by the tenant that the

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60 “In much of the ‘anciently settled core of medieval England’ . . . the trend seems to have been for the outgoings of the customary tenants to rise . . . seigneurial charges were augmented”: Edward Miller and John Hatcher, *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change, 1086-1348* (London, 1978), p. 151, and also pp. 111, 131, 213-24. See also Hilton, who speaks of “a counter attack by estate owners . . . waging a successful battle against their customary villein tenants”: Hilton, *Decline of Serfdom*, pp. 16-17.


lord’s exactions were unjustified; and to force the peasant back upon his own and the community’s resources in any conflict with the lord.\(^\text{63}\)

If we do not understand that villein tenure opened the peasants to potentially arbitrary exactions, while free (or freer) tenure could give them legal protection and fixed dues, backed up by the king’s courts, we cannot comprehend why there was such intense conflict in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries between lords and peasants concerning the status of the tenure of individual peasants or groups of them. As Postan has elsewhere concluded, “in general it remains true that the enhanced power over tenants which landlords acquired as land grew scarcer and dearer lay lightly on the censuarii and lighter still on the freeholder. The chief sufferers from the twin processes of growing land shortage and manorial reaction were again the villeins”\(^\text{64}\).

It is therefore hard to see how Postan and Hatcher can argue as if certain cases which they cite — where unfree tenants (particularly heirs) inside the community were subjected to lower fines on taking over a plot than freemen from outside, or where unfree peasants paid lower dues on their customary plots than were paid for (similar) demesne leases — constitute evidence that “villein tenure in the thirteenth century could provide a measure of protection”\(^\text{65}\). For there was no legal basis for such protection. On the contrary, the instances they refer to would seem to provide evidence that the unfree peasants could sometimes protect themselves against their lords, even in the absence of legal rights. That the peasant community was often better prepared to defend its own members than strangers is what we would expect. Nor is it surprising that, on some occasions, the fact that land was held in customary tenure (even if unfree) could provide a basis for peasant resistance to the lords’ demands (whereas demesne land

\(^{63}\) See Hatcher’s own recent summary: “The unfree tenant . . . enjoyed a possession regulated by a private manorial court and held his land . . . merely in villeinage at the will of the lord . . . To the extent that the villein in fact held at his lord’s will, uncertainty did lie at the heart of villeinage . . . and uncertainty extending to both the security of tenure and terms on which he held his land. The king’s courts would not afford him protection against eviction nor award him damages against his lord; the villein had no standing in the public courts against the lord unless the latter’s actions went beyond all reason (e.g., maiming and killing) . . . . The logical conclusion is that the lords could regard the custom that governed villein tenures as ‘but a revocable expression of their own wills’ ”: Miller and Hatcher, Medieval England, pp. 116-17 and, in general, ch. 5.

\(^{64}\) For examples of conflict between lords and peasants over the status of the peasants’ tenure, and of their critical economic effects on income distribution, the ability or inability of the lords to collect rents (in this case their inability, due to the peasants’ successful proof of free legal status), see Searle, Lordship and Community, pp. 154-66. See also E. Searle, “Seigneurial Control of Women’s Marriage”, Past and Present, no. 82 (Feb. 1979), p. 17. For quote from Postan, see his “Legal Status and Economic Condition in Medieval Villages”, in his Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy (Cambridge, 1973), p. 289, and passim.

\(^{65}\) Postan and Hatcher, “Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society”, pp. 34, 36.
might be conceded to be outside the community's purview). Such resistance could, in turn, lead to lower payments for customary plots than for similar demesne lands subject to the market. But none of this means that villein status gave protection. It only points to the fact that the community of villein peasants could on occasion enforce its custom against the lords' rights to arbitrary levies (which is a very different thing). Indeed, such cases reveal once again the inadequacy of accounts like that of Postan and Hatcher which attempt to comprehend the rate of feudal levy as a function of market forces, and show the need to investigate the evolution of feudal rent in terms of the sources of class power, and as the outcome of class conflict.66

In light of the foregoing, it is difficult, finally, to understand how the observation of Postan and Hatcher, that through the thirteenth century increasingly "high fines seem to have been supported by market forces"67, undermines my view that the increase of these levies rested on feudal powers, as they seem to think. For what, after all, were such fines, but incidents of feudal lordship? Indeed, the point made by Postan and Hatcher that increased entry fines were sometimes used in this period as a substitute for increased tallages only emphasizes the connection with the lords' jurisdictional rights over their peasants.67 Without such lordship, neither tallages, nor entry fines, nor the whole range of other feudal levies (labour dues, heriots, fines on marriage, and so on) could be exacted, let alone increased. Where lordship had been firmly secured, population pressure could perhaps at times make it easier for the lords to collect dues from unfree tenants (whose economic options were severely restricted by the scarcity of land). But, as we have seen, such demographic conditions could, in themselves, in no way establish such lordship, nor automatically make possible such levies (let alone endow demesne lands). It was, on the contrary, only because the English seigneurs succeeded, on the whole, in imposing and maintaining such lordship over and against the peasants and in holding on to broad demesnes, that they were able to prosper from the apparently favourable, but

66 At the same time, we should perhaps beware of exaggerating the effectiveness of peasant resistance or of underestimating the powers of lordship in thirteenth-century England. For example, it has recently been demonstrated that on the very ample estates of Westminster Abbey rents on villein holdings were systematically higher throughout the whole of the medieval period than those for contractual tenancies of any sort, in particular demesne leases. On the Westminster Abbey estates the monks succeeded throughout the thirteenth and into the fourteenth century in turning the screw more or less continuously against the villeins, using entry fines, tallages and ultimately a sophisticated method of commuting labour dues to money rents at increasingly high rates of conversion (money per work unit). B. H. Harvey, Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1977), pp. 236-8, and appendix 9. See also E. Miller's observation that for the Abbey's villeins, "total charges were higher than anything that could have been got for their land on the free market": E. Miller, review of ibid., in Times Lit. Supplement, 3 Feb. 1978.

67 Postan and Hatcher, "Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society", p. 34.
potentially disastrous, market conditions of the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

To take the argument a small step further: without the powers that accrued to lordship — expressed in legal rights which allowed variable, indeed arbitrary exactions — the lords were in danger of losing their property, in any meaningful sense, in their customary land. In other words, by assuring that they could adjust levies (especially fines), feudal powers tended to give the English lords ultimate control over the land. Indeed during the thirteenth century, English lords went a significant distance towards establishing their proprietorship of villein land. This helped enable them to maintain their position not only in the favourable conjuncture of the "up-phase" in the feudal economy, but, as we shall see, over the very long run.

That population growth, in itself, could in no way ensure such powers is finally confirmed when we merely recollect developments in northern France at this time. Here in the face of rapidly rising population, prices and rents per acre from the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the lords lost their prerogatives of lordship, as the peasants succeeded in getting their feudal dues fixed — tallages and fines, as well as rent. (As an indirect result, moreover, the lords' demesnes tended to contract.) By the early fourteenth century, the peasants of northern France had achieved effectively full property rights to the customary land (fixed, minimal dues and right to inherit). This outcome was in stark contrast to that of England in the same period, and it too was to have important long-term consequences. In any case, in this French context, it is hardly surprising that Bois has discovered a tendency to "a declining rate of feudal levy". But in the same way that the French developments charted by Bois (and others) highlight the shortcomings of the model of the demographic interpreters, so the English trends presented by the demographic interpreters (and others) highlight the shortcomings of the model of Bois. The evidence adduced by each undermines the theory of the other.

(II.2.3) Feudal "States" and "Economic" Evolution: England versus France

Now Bois cautions us that the "various mechanisms whereby the class struggle is dominant in the historical process are normally so complex and unexpected that it is very rare that such a unilateral approach [as Brenner's] leads to anything other than ideological short-cuts". But in light of the foregoing discussion we are perhaps

68 For illustrations of the connection between rights accruing to lordship and effective control over property, and vice versa, see Searle, Lordship and Community, pp. 154-66, 184-94.
69 On the English aristocracy's long-term ability to maintain control over the land, and the role of feudal powers in assuring this, see pp. 82-6 below.
70 Bois, "Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy", p. 63.
entitled to ask whether the mechanisms by which class organization and class struggle have affected economic developments are not, at times at least, less obscure than Bois would have us believe. To what else, indeed, are we to attribute the divergent dynamics of distribution in the French, as opposed to the English, rural society of the thirteenth century, with their powerful, differential effects on ruling-class fortunes? The fact is that for quite some time historians of medieval France have been describing the period culminating in the latter part of the thirteenth century as one of “peasant conquests”. Meanwhile, historians of medieval England have been describing the same period as one of “seigneurial” or “manorial reaction”. Whereas in thirteenth-century France the generally observed trend has been towards seigneurial revenue difficulties, in England the same period has been understood as a golden age for the lordly class. Is there not at least an apparent basis for concluding that we are registering the effects of different balances of power, a consequence of divergent processes of class-political organization and class conflict? And is the attempt to pose the problem of this difference a retreat into historical “voluntarism”, the inexplicable and lawless realm of “politics”, as Bois asserts. Or must we not recognize that to analyse the evolution of an economy in which the dominant class relies “economically” for its very existence (its reproduction as the dominant class) upon arrangements for extracting a surplus from the direct producers which are specifically “extra-economic” (that is, “political”), it is necessary to offer a systematic account of the development of these arrangements, as they are conditioned by class conflict.

What may, therefore, be at issue in the divergent evolutions in England and France in the thirteenth century — there is at least a basis for the hypothesis — is not so much the backwardness of England’s “economic” evolution relative to that of France, as Bois would have it, but rather England’s relative advance in terms of feudal “political” ruling-class organization. What may have been responsible for the superiority of the English lords as extractors of a surplus from their peasants was their superior self-organization — their superiority vis-à-vis the French lords as feudal centralizers and feudal accumulators. Indeed, it seems to be a matter of a difference in the development of the feudal state. In this context we should perhaps beware


of using Bois's terminology of "unequal development", especially as he links this to the notion of the "age" of the system. This is not because these phrases are entirely inapplicable, but because they tend to lead Bois in the direction of unilinear evolutionary conceptions, whereby each region is bound, sooner or later, to experience the same developmental pattern as its neighbours (declining rate of rent), unaffected either directly or indirectly by previous evolution elsewhere. In fact English feudal class self-government appears to have been "ahead" of the French in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, not only because its starting point was different, but because it built upon advances in this sphere already achieved on the Continent, especially in Normandy. In turn, when French centralization accelerated somewhat later, it was influenced by English development, and was indeed, in part, a response to direct English politico-military pressure. But French feudal centralization did not follow the English pattern and, over time, radically diverged from it. Thus, the development of the mechanisms of "feudal accumulation" tended to be not only "uneven" but also "combined", in the sense that later developers could build on previous advances made elsewhere in feudal class organization.

Thus the precocious English feudal centralization around the monarchy was, of course, no mere legacy of the Anglo-Saxon kings. It owed its strength in large part to the level of feudal "political" organization already achieved by the Normans in Normandy before the Conquest, which was probably unparalleled elsewhere in Europe. The emergence of this organization was undoubtedly associated with the Normans' career as warriors and conquerors. It was evidenced especially in the establishment of effective supremacy by the duke in settling disputes among his tenants, as well as in the duke's ability to control the building of castles by his nobles and his capacity to confiscate their lands in case of rebellion. Nevertheless, the efficacy of the duke's administration was not simply the result of the duke's imposition, but emerged largely as an expression of the high level of solidarity of the Norman aristocracy as a whole — and this set the pattern for subsequent feudal evolution in England. Of course the requirements of organizing the Conquest, occupying England and

74 Ibid., pp. 66-7. Bois is quite aware of such "external" interactions — indeed he charges me with neglecting them — but this does not, in my opinion, free his interpretation from a tendency to unilineality.

75 See, for example, F. M. Stenton, English Feudalism, 1066-1166 (Oxford, 1932), ch. 1; D. C. Douglas, William the Conqueror (Berkeley, 1964), pp. 133-55. "It is misleading . . . to dissociate the reassertion of ducal power in Normandy under Duke William from the rise of the feudal aristocracy at that time . . . [The] rapid increase in Norman strength is not to be explained by reference to a continued opposition between the Norman duke and the Norman magnates . . . [The] interests of the greater Norman families were seen to be becoming ever more notably linked with those of the duke": ibid., p. 137.
establishing their class rule there brought the Norman aristocracy's self-organization to an even higher pitch. Feudal centralization in England was spectacularly expressed in the outlawing of private warfare, a development previously inconceivable on the Continent. It was manifested, too, in the novel procedure whereby all undertenants were required to swear allegiance not only to their immediate overlords, but also to the king, as well as in the more highly evolved system of military obligation and organization. The monarch, as leading lord, was of course the focus of all these processes; but monarchical strength in this case was the expression of the breadth and depth of lordly collaboration.

Subsequent developments, especially during the reigns of Henry I and Henry II, by and large manifested the same centripetal tendency towards increasing the capacities of the crown. But growing monarchical power reflected growing aristocratic coherence. This is not to dispute, of course, that the monarch, with his patrimony, played a critical initiating and constructive role in feudal centralization, or to deny that he could, for various reasons, find himself in serious conflict with his aristocratic followers, as individuals or as a group. Nor can the king's actions be understood, in any simple or direct way, to reflect the will of his aristocracy, which, in any case, was rarely united. It remains true, nonetheless, that the development of the English feudal government, through a sort of homeostatic mechanism, was made to conform closely with the interests of the English aristocracy. For in every area of governance the crown remained profoundly dependent upon the aristocracy's support. The feudal lords, led by the magnates, operated all levels of English royal administration, from the immediate entourage of the king (the Curia), on down through the perambulating courts, to the county sheriffs; they provided the core of the monarch's military organization; and they ultimately guaranteed the crown's financial wherewithal. As a result, the construction of an increasingly effective feudal state required the aristocracy's acquiescence and backing, and reflected their interest. For the king to build his power it was required that he organize and cohere his aristocracy around him; it was thus unavoidable that he build their strength in the very process.

As has often been recognized, it thus makes little sense systematically to counterpose the English monarch as chief lord with the bar-


77 Stenton, *English Feudalism*, pp. 11-14, 23. In France, of course, the reigning principle was "the vassal of my vassal is not my vassal". Correlatively, the elaborate attempts to regulate private warfare attest to its acceptance as a fact of life.
ons who surrounded him, supported in turn by their own followers. An unusually strong monarchy reflected an unusually strong aristocracy, hierarchically organized in the most highly developed feudal state in Europe. Monarchical government was indeed a manifestation of the lords’ more or less conscious recognition of the commonality of their interests, and of the need to regulate their mutual interrelations in order successfully to exploit the peasantry, as well as to profit handsomely, as they did, from exerting their military might against other aristocratic groupings on the Continent. The growth of a powerful monarchical state in England, therefore, expressed no “merely political” evolution, but the construction of social-class relations which made possible the most effective “accumulation” in the economic realm.

Thus one of the initial results of the occupation of England by the highly cohesive Norman aristocracy appears to have been the tightening of feudal controls and the imposition of increased levies upon the peasantry. It is perhaps notable in this respect that from early Norman times the seigneurs “enjoyed the assistance of the royal administration and royal courts to recover their ‘fugitive’ villeins”. In turn, it may be no accident that the temporary disorganization of the feudal class during the civil wars of King Stephen’s reign was accompanied by the significant peasant gains of the middle of the twelfth century.

Finally, the restrengthening of the monarchy during the latter part of the twelfth century seems to have been reflected in the reconstitution of lordly power over the peasants from about the same time. The growth of monarchical authority found its highest expression in the development of royal justice and the common law. Especially with the “legislation” of Henry II, the feudal aristocracy registered its common interest in allowing the monarchical courts to adjudicate disputes among them over privileges and property (although it goes without saying that the royal administration never escaped aristocratic control). In this way the ruling class secured the private rights of its individual members. On the other hand, the obverse side of precisely this legal advance — no less important because it was inexplicit — was the development in law which led to the restriction of access to the king’s law to freemen and thereby the exclusion of the unfree peasantry. In granting the monarchical administration the task of pro-

78 On feudal monarchical centralization under Henry I and Henry II, its aristocratic character and dynamic, see Stenton, English Feudalism; W. L. Warren, Henry II (London, 1973); J. C. Holt, Magna Carta (Cambridge, 1965; repr. 1969). Note also R. H. Hilton’s comment that “there was no European aristocracy which, as a class, had the same power in the state as the English Barons”: Hilton, A Medieval Society, p. 2.


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The English aristocracy in the process came to define that property to include their arbitrary rights over their peasants. The unfree peasants with "their" lands were consigned to the courts of their lords, so that in the eyes of the law the lords could dispose "at will" over both peasants and lands. This provided the lords an indispensable lever to raise dues arbitrarily on customary lands and tenants. The extraordinary intra-class cohesion of the English aristocracy was thereby manifested simultaneously in its formidable military strength, in its ability to regulate intra-lord conflict, and in its capacity to dominate the peasantry. The inextricable interdependence of "the political" and "the economic" in the course of feudal class-productive evolution could not have been more clearly manifest.

The foregoing development in England is in marked contrast to that in France of the same period, which was characterized by a multitude of conflicting feudal jurisdictions, dominated by competing feudal lords. Whereas late eleventh- and twelfth-century England witnessed the growth of monarchical centralization, these years in most of France were characterized by the extreme fragmentation of authority, expressed in the lack of effective political organization at the level of the monarchy or even the principality. Through much of France in this era, power was effectively in the hands of the so-called "banal lords" or "castellans". The emergence of these potentates seems to have depended on the creation of relatively broad political organization — the buildup of a powerful following around the overlord and his castle, and the construction on this basis of a wide ranging and effective administrative-judicial apparatus. Effective judicial authority, backed by the magnates' knightly military machine, appears to have provided the critical foundation for the successful extraction of what came to be understood as customary rent from the peasantry. Meanwhile, those whom Duby calls "domestic lords" (lacking banal powers) appear to have found it difficult to maintain feudal levies in the face of direct resistance by increasingly coherent peasant communities, while peasant mobility in the face of lordly competition made things worse. Their control over the peasants eroded from below, the domestic lords were wide open to attack from above by the castellans, who, in turn, absorbed lesser landlords into their administration. Once again, therefore, the extra-economic

forms of feudal development came to "govern" feudal economic evolution, though in a different way from England. As Duby puts it, the "dominant force influencing the direction in which the manorial economy developed came from the changed distribution of the powers of authority", which occurred with the rise of banal lordship.  

It may not, then, be unreasonable to attribute the relative incapacity of the French feudal lords as surplus extractors during the growth phase of the medieval economy, to a significant extent, to its lack of political coherence. If this is so, the trend towards declining seigneurial revenues in France in this period is incomprehensible in Bois's terms, as an inevitable outcome of a mechanical tendency towards a "declining rate of feudal levy". It was rather the manifestation of peasant conquests, achieved through the resistance of highly cohesive French peasant communities. What appears, however, to have been critical for the French peasants' success was the relatively extreme disorganization of the French aristocracy. For apparently comparably well-organized and rebellious English peasants could not make comparable gains against a much more unified English ruling class.

The full significance of the process of class formation and class conflict specific to later medieval France can be seen particularly clearly in the Paris region during the first part of the thirteenth century. There the seigneurs, facing rising prices, moved sharply to reverse the prevailing trend towards the fixing of peasant dues by attempting to depress the peasants' condition back towards serfdom. They did so, in particular, by insisting upon the peasants' liability to arbitrary levies, notably the seigneurial taille, which was the acknowledged token of serfdom. But the lords were ultimately thwarted by peasant revolt. Less dramatic but equally effective processes of resistance have been charted through the villages of much of France in this same period. Now, Bois taxes me for making the decay of serfdom — that is, the decline of the lords' ability to extract a surplus from peasant possessors by means of extra-economic compulsion

84 Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life*, pp. 113 ff. Note Duby's contrast of French developments with those of the same period in England, where there were essentially no castellans and no banal lordships, and where the "king recognized the personal authority of the lords of the manors and thus helped to consolidate 'domestic lordship'": *ibid.*, p. 195.

85 Fourquin, *Campagnes de la région parisienne*, pp. 166-8, for the slide towards serfdom in the region in the mid-thirteenth century and its reversal. On successful peasant resistance elsewhere at this time, see also R. Fossier, *La terre et les hommes en Picardie*, ii, pp. 555-60.

86 Bois, "Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy", pp. 61-2, n. 7. Bois at this point deepens the confusion when he speaks as if I have equated serfdom with labour services. In reality I went out of my way to deny this equation, to state that labour services were not of the essence, and to argue that it was the system of surplus extraction by extra-economic compulsion which was critical. "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": Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial (cont. on p. 57)
— central to my account of feudal development. But it seems clear, especially in comparative perspective, that it was precisely the French lords' inability to prevent the decay of serfdom (lordship) — expressed directly in the lords' loss of ability to impose arbitrary (that is, variable) levies and to adjust dues on customary land in the face of inflation — which was responsible for the French aristocracy's declining feudal rents and, in turn, their declining incomes, especially in the thirteenth century. It should be recollected, in contrast, that the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries were precisely the period in England when the aristocracy as a whole — also in part reacting to inflation — succeeded in excluding their villein tenants from the king's courts and assigning much of the customary tenantry to villein status, thus opening much of the peasantry to arbitrary exactions.

Finally, the same line of reasoning may be seen to support my original argument that the key long-term basis for the development and consolidation of effective centralized monarchy in France, especially from the later thirteenth century, was the relative superiority of its centralized system of surplus extraction (especially state taxation) over the decentralized, competitive lordship of the castellans and other great magnates. In this context I emphasized the highly conflicted processes of monarchical development in France, its contradictory character, which stands in sharp contrast to the parallel evolution in England. For the Capetian house began as one lordship

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87 It should be noted that those relatively few French lords (generally to be found among the greatest) who did retain the requisite strength vis-à-vis the peasantry were able consciously to impose levies in a way which allowed them to counteract the effects of inflation. See J. R. Strayer, "Economic Conditions in the County of Beaumont-le-Roger", Speculum, xxvi (1951), pp. 279-80.

88 Note that the erosion of lordship (serfdom) with the resultant loss of revenues appears to have led, indirectly, to the lords' loss of land. Declining revenues from their customary tenants was, in turn, one of the forces which compelled the lords to sell off their lands throughout the period, shrinking their demesnes. Fossier, La terre et les hommes en Picardie, ii, pp. 622-3; Bois, Crise du féodalisme, pp. 196-7; Fourquin, Campagnes de la région parisienne, p. 151.


90 Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe", pp. 69-71. For problems, however, with the formulations I made there, see p. 58 and n. 94 below.
among many, one feudal "political accumulator" among many. It emerged and established itself as a greater lordship over and against, in competition with, the more localized, more individualized lordships. The distinctive character of this development was initially evidenced in the absence, indeed exclusion, of the greater French lords from the king's household and administration — its staffing by lesser knights — which stands in sharp contrast to the Anglo-Norman government, led from the first by the magnates with their lesser lords around them. The competitive process through which the monarchy evolved was also manifested in the development of royal justice as a mechanism to fill the royal coffers at the expense of the seigneurial courts, and above all in the rise of (arbitrary) royal taxation which threatened the collection of lordly dues of all sorts. It was, finally, tellingly expressed in the French crown's propensity to recognize peasant appeals against arbitrary levies by local seigneurs at a time (the later thirteenth century) when, in stark contrast, the English monarch was recognizing the lords' rights over their peasants' persons and property by refusing them access to the royal courts. This divergent evolution of peasant legal status — towards property sanctioned by monarchy in France, towards serfdom backed by the crown in England — appears to provide a significant index of the divergent patterns of class formation and class conflict and of the divergent evolutions of the systems of property in the two regions at this period.

Nonetheless, although I believe this formulation to be essentially correct, I think that Bois, in his reply, has pointed to an important lacuna in my account, which could, as he says, open the way for misunderstanding. As Bois indicates, local lords were vulnerable to royal penetration of their territory in part because they had already experienced the erosion of their power to extract rents from their tenants. Weakened by the prior decline in their income, they were less able to fight the imposition of royal taxation. On the other hand, as Bois rightly emphasizes, it is also true that at least some of these very same lords could take up office in the new state machine. They

94 Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*, pp. 204, 264; Bois, "Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy", pp. 63-4. In this context, my reference to the state as an "independent", "class-like" surplus extractor could, as Bois says, be misleading. I used the terminology (cont. on p. 59)
would, in this way, become its beneficiaries, and its supporters. The monarchy's development thus occurred within the context of the disorganization of the French feudal aristocracy and, in important respects, in conflict with it. Yet, ironically, the long-term, unintended consequence was to reorganize and recompose the French ruling class on a stronger basis.

In sum, there was a gradual accretion of power by the French monarchy by means of conquest and alliance. Especially from the later thirteenth century, the decline of seigneurial revenues — a product of lordly disorganization and peasant conquests — appears to have allowed for significant steps towards a new form of monarchical centralization. There began a general, long-term reorientation on the part of individual lords around the royal administration, opening the way towards the construction of the tax/office state — with a concomitant strengthening of peasant property by the monarchy. By the early fourteenth century this evolution had only just begun, and had a very long way to go towards completion. There was, of course, as yet nothing resembling a unified "absolutist" rule. Long-established banal potentates remained strong; the creation of new appanages further threatened unity. Nonetheless, in retrospect, the basic pattern of subsequent development had been established. In the long run, the growth of centralized surplus extraction served to reorganize the aristocracy: it brought the lesser lords into dependence on royal office

(n. 94 cont.)
to emphasize the novelty of the new form of centralized surplus extraction (tax/office) associated with the development of French absolutism and its conflict with the established decentralized form — and I still believe this emphasis is vital to grasp the specificity of the French socio-economic evolution. Nevertheless, the aforementioned phrases can lead to a one-sided formulation: over-emphasizing the points of separation and conflict between the systems of surplus extraction and between the monarchy and the aristocracy, while passing over the points of interconnection and interpenetration — and the way the rise of the one helped compensate for the decline of the other. In connection with the consolidation of the monarchy's original base in the Paris region, Fourquin concludes: "Between the middle and end of the thirteenth century, the Ile-de-France was freed of serfdom ... The 'French' rural community ... was indubitably strengthened by the struggles of the thirteenth century to gain the fixing of the taille and other charges. Its power was already clear when ... it pushed the mother of St. Louis to arbitrate the differences dividing the peasants from the seigneurs, and the death of serfdom in the Paris region represented its victory ... From its side, the crown moved more and more to reinforce the cohesion of the rural groups. For the rural communities were a remarkable counterweight to seigneurial authority": Fourquin, Campagnes de la région parisienne, pp. 189-90. In turn, says Fourquin, from the end of the reign of St. Louis, the seigneurs "no longer have enough revenue to live from their lands, the more so as the fixing of peasant taxes makes of the seigneur more and more a rentier of the soil. They make a massive entry into the royal administration in full expansion". Fourquin here emphasizes rising expenditures, as well as declining incomes, as the source of seigneurial financial difficulties: ibid., pp. 151-3. In the Maconnais it was also both peasant resistance eroding incomes and increased expenditures which undermined lordship and opened the way to monarchical penetration. See Lemarignier, France médiévale, p. 250, summarizing Duby's work. For the same processes in Picardy, see Fossier, La terre et les hommes en Picardie, ii, pp. 598 ff., 708 ff., 732-5.
and induced the greater ones to come to court and ally themselves with the monarchy.

By contrast, in England, the more advanced organization of the ruling class as a whole, the centralization of the barons around the monarchy, permitted the reintensification of seigneurial powers and institutional rights over and against the peasantry through the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In this way, lordly political coherence ensured successful decentralized feudal surplus extraction, that is serfdom. The lords thus secured their property, broadly conceived, in both the short and the long run. As a result, there is no sign of the crisis of seigneurial revenues evident in thirteenth-century France and, in turn, there is no tendency to substitute an emergent system of centralized surplus extraction for an eroding decentralized system — no embryonic rise of an absolutist form of rule.

(II.3) THE ONSET OF FEUDAL CRISIS AND ITS FORMS

Feudal class or property relations determined a long-term tendency to declining productivity, and this formed, as it were, the basic structural limitation on the overall development of the feudal social economy. At the same time, in light of the foregoing discussion, it will perhaps be clearer why systematic reference to divergent processes of feudal class formation in different regions is required in order to understand the different ways in which the feudal crisis actually manifested itself from the later thirteenth century through the mid-fifteenth century: its appearance at different points in time; its somewhat disparate immediate causes and characteristics; and its differing results.

(II.3.1) The “Output-Population Ceiling”, its Class-Relative Character in Pre-Plague Europe

Postan and Hatcher berate me for an exaggerated preoccupation with surplus extraction relations between lords and peasants, and with a corresponding neglect of the economic limitations of production by small peasant producers. In particular, Postan and Hatcher point out that population growth leading eventually to poverty was a phenomenon not only of the regions of entrenched lordship, but those where the manor was weak or non-existent. I must express a certain amazement at this charge, for a central concern of my essay was precisely the barriers posed to real economic develop-

96 The tendency to declining productivity on which Bois and I are in agreement (cf. my "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe", pp. 48-50) is not, of course, the same thing as a tendency to declining rate of feudal rent.

ment by an agriculture based on small "parcellized" peasants. This was hardly a subterranean theme, nor could it have been obscurely expressed, for (as we shall see) I have been attacked by several other critics on the grounds that I have underestimated the economic-productive potential of the small peasantry.

On the other hand, although the peasant-based agriculture which characterized medieval and much of early modern Europe could not, in my view, sustain a qualitative breakthrough to economic development, it was certainly capable of supporting a substantial degree of quantitative economic growth. For this reason, pace Postan and Hatcher, I would argue that the variable strength of lord-peasant surplus extraction relations could be a significant factor in limiting or increasing the potential for peasant-based economic and demographic expansion. Indeed, the facts cited by Postan and Hatcher actually serve to undercut their own argument. The regions of weaker lordship and heavy population to which they refer could not, as they say, support unending demographic expansion. Continuing population growth had eventually to result in widespread poverty and famine. It is, nonetheless, notable that the levels of population which these freer regions could and did support were far greater than those to be found in the highly manorialized areas in the same period. According to one recent survey of thirteenth-century conditions, "the density of population computed for Normandy [where lordship was very weak] . . . was very much higher than can possibly be ascribed to any major province in contemporary England [which was, of course, highly manorialized]". Similarly, the figures given by Postan and Hatcher for the amount of land per person on the average plot in the non-manorialized English fenland region are something between two-thirds and one-half that considered to be the subsistence minimum in manorial England. These are results perhaps understandable in view of the fact that the average villein peasants in the areas of established lordship normally gave up 50 per cent of their income on rent.

It is worth noting that the very historian whose results concerning peasant population and poverty are employed by Postan and Hatcher in order to play down the significance of feudal powers in relationship to economic and demographic development has gone rather far in drawing quite the opposite conclusions from theirs. H. E. Hallam argues, in fact, that the region of relatively "advanced agriculture . . .

100 The minimum plot capable of providing subsistence for the average peasant family (4.5 members) is calculated by Titow to run from 13.5 to 10 acres (3 to 2.5 acres/person): Titow, English Rural Society, pp. 78-83 ff. Titow's minimum subsistence plot had to be doubled in size to cover an average rent assumed to confiscate 50 per cent of the peasant product: ibid., p. 81.
was also the region of heavy population and free institutions, where lordship was at a discount”. In other words, the peasants in the areas of weak lordship not only appear to have had greater consumption possibilities due to lower seigneurial levies. In turn, they seem to have achieved greater production per acre than their counterparts in the manorialized regions because they had significantly more of their surplus at their disposal to reinvest. In result, it is not surprising that their demographic growth potential was also correspondingly greater. Indeed, in this light it does not seem far-fetched to interpret the relatively high population densities of much of thirteenth-century France compared to those of England precisely in terms of the relative weakness of French lordship and surplus extraction compared to England in this period.

(II.3.2) The Crisis of Seigneurial Revenues and its Results

The crisis of the feudal economy, when it came, did not take a simple Malthusian form. It does appear that almost everywhere in western Europe, at various points in the later thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, there was, eventually, an end to population growth. Indeed the plagues of the mid-fourteenth century and after seem to have marked the catastrophic denouement to a process of demographic decline already well under way. According to strict Malthusian reasoning, this demographic downturn should have cured the system’s ills by bringing population into line with resources, setting off another period of demo-economic growth. But instead, there ensued a long period of economic and demographic decline — stagnation and, in some places, catastrophe.

The demographic interpreters are certainly aware of this difficulty. Nonetheless, despite the contention of Postan and Hatcher, it is difficult to see how it can be resolved within their basic framework, whether this be dubbed “Malthusian” or “Ricardian”. Postan and Hatcher argue, “If we accept that Ricardo’s irreversible trend of diminishing returns operated only so long and as so far as it remained unchecked by investment and innovation, then the absence of innovation and paucity of investment in medieval agriculture would go a long way to explain why the late-medieval recovery was so slow and tardy”. Yet, this seems to me to beg the question. For population


102 As Neveux argues, “The survival of an abundant peasantry thus flows also from village conquests, a positive weakening of the seigneure ... [The decline of seigneurial exactions thus] diminished the peasants' costs and contributed to maintaining a relatively dense population in the countryside, despite the exiguity of many plots. Consequently, the seigneurs submit to an economic impoverishment”: Neveux, “Déclin et reprise”, pp. 36, 39 (my italics).

103 Postan and Hatcher, “Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society”, p. 29. Le Roy Ladurie does not make this argument, but simply refers to the factor of disease.
drop-off should have brought cultivation back off the marginal on to the good lands and, by this very process, to have raised agricultural productivity. Correspondingly, the higher per capita income of the peasantry should have facilitated greater agricultural investment. Both of these mechanisms did take effect and did ultimately power a new demo-economic upsurge — but only in the very long run, after a lag of at least a century. The question is, why the delay?

This difficult problem is not yet fully resolved. Nonetheless, I would agree with Bois that the later medieval European-wide crisis of seigneurial revenues and its effects will have to be a central component of any adequate interpretation. Declining aristocratic incomes, sooner or later, brought determined efforts everywhere on the part of the seigneurs to recoup their fortunes through aristocratic reorganization to squeeze the peasants and to wage intra-feudal warfare more effectively. This was the so-called "aristocratic reaction", to which I referred at length in my original essay. It tended to cause further disruption of the peasant productive forces, leading to additional demographic downturn — thus a downward spiral reflecting the disequilibrium between the conflicting needs of conflicting social classes, not just between population and resources.

On the other hand, the seigneurial crisis was not, as Bois claims, a simple and direct outcome of a more or less automatic and continuous process of "declining rate of feudal levy", but was bound up with the divergent evolutions of class relations. In some places the crisis of seigneurial incomes preceded population decline and was a more or less immediate outcome of peasant conquests and the resultant decline in the rate of rent. But elsewhere, where seigneurial powers and property had remained intact or been strengthened, a declining rate of rent and the seigneurial incomes crisis occurred only after the

104 The persistence of the plague through much of the fifteenth century must also be central to any attempt at explanation. But even accepting that the plague was undoubtedly one important factor in preventing the reflux of population, is it proper to regard it as wholly exogenous? This is at least questionable. For, as has often been pointed out, the outbreak of plague epidemics tended to be closely correlated with the onset of famines. In the fifteenth century, famine itself was generally the result of the ravages of war. The fact that the plague appears to have struck so lightly in fifteenth-century Flanders, which enjoyed unusually advanced agriculture and which largely avoided the disruptive effects of warfare, is one piece of prima facie evidence for this connection. That the strength of the plague appears to have declined with the improved nutrition of the masses and the end of the disruption caused by warfare in later fifteenth-century France is another. On the other hand, it seems also to be true that the plague struck fiercely in certain places and on certain occasions where there appears to have been no particular sign of malnutrition. Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*, pp. 278-80; Le Roy Ladurie, "Masses profondes: la paysannerie", pp. 488-97, 511-14; Neveux, "Décin et reprise", p. 91.

105 Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe", p. 51; Bois, "Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy", p. 62, n. 7. I do not fully understand why Bois accuses me of neglecting the decline of seigneurial incomes and insisting on a difference between us on this point (even if we are not fully in accord on the causes).
downturn in population, which was itself the result partly of the
tendency of productivity to decline and partly of the persistence of
bubonic plague. At the same time, because feudal surplus extraction
systems had taken different forms and operated with differing degrees
of effectiveness in different places, the methods to which the seigne-
urs could resort in order to counteract their income problems varied
— with variable consequences for short-term production trends and
long-term economic development.

In northern France, the decline of seigneurial revenues began as
early as the mid-thirteenth century, if not before. From the end
of the thirteenth century, this decay was paralleled by — and in part
conditioned — the rapid rise of centralized monarchical taxation. The
latter was radically intensified with the onset of the Hundred Years
War. War itself met with the approval of many of the seigneurs, both
large and small, because it could, in various ways, offer a way out of
their economic difficulties through office in the state apparatus, or
from the fruits of battle, especially the ransoming of wealthy pris-
onders. Thus the state apparatus grew, became more effective and
increased its exactions, with some of the revenues being used to offset
the intensified seigneurial revenue crisis. Rising taxation, however,
struck a peasant economy which was already stretched to the limit.
By the early fourteenth century, precisely the weakness of seigneurial
levies appears, as noted, to have allowed peasant population to ap-
proach what were close to the highest possible levels, given the landed
resources and level of technique (in any case levels not to be attained
again, in some places, until the eighteenth century). As a result,
the rising centralized levies had the effect of disrupting production
and undermining population. During the middle third of the four-
teenth century, decline became precipitate, with the invasion of for-
eign troops, followed closely by plague, then further invasions leading
to demographic devastation.

Nevertheless, demographic drop-off failed to restore equilibrium.
For it meant fewer taxpayers, so lower overall revenues to the seigne-
ers, and thus an ever-greater need to recoup. In some places seign-
eurs attempted to respond after 1350 by tightening seigneurial con-
trols and increasing decentralized levies, that is by restrengthening
serfdom. But, in general, French lords did not have this option.
The basic response was therefore to encourage, and try to take ad-

106 See Neveux’s comment that “The malaise of the seigneurie is long term . . .
going back at least to the second quarter of the thirteenth century”: Neveux, “Déclin
et reprise”, p. 35. See also Bois, Crise du féodalisme, pp. 200, 240; Fourquin, Campagnes
de la région parisienne, p. 152.
107 Le Roy Ladurie, “Masses profondes: la paysannerie”, pp. 483-5. See also n. 102
above.
108 For seigneurial reaction in France via the intensification of decentralized
lordship/serfdom, see references given in Brenner, “Agrarian Class Structure and
vantage of, the interconnected development of intensified warfare, the growth of monarchical taxation, and the buildup of the state machine (offices). In consequence, during the latter part of the fourteenth century and the earlier part of the fifteenth century, increasing taxation and increasingly destructive military campaigns, in relationship to the shrinking peasant productive base, set off an "infernal cycle" (Bois) of disequilibrium and decline, which repeated itself at intervals for a century, and reached catastrophic proportions in the 1430s and 1440s. The acceleration of political centralization for political accumulation thus short-circuited the needed Malthusian adjustment, and plunged the system instead into long-term and generalized crisis. 109

In England, in contrast to France, signs that seigneurial revenues were under pressure, stagnating or falling, apparently began to appear only several decades into the fourteenth century, if then — another indication, perhaps, of the relatively well-entrenched position of the English lords vis-à-vis their peasants. 110 This was about the same time that population seems to have reached its limit and begun to decline, and it is possible that the two phenomena are related. Even so, it is hardly certain that a broad threat to feudal incomes appeared before the plagues of the mid-fourteenth century and after, which brought a drastic population drop-off, and thus downward pressure on rents of all kinds. Not surprisingly, these took the form of endeavours to strengthen lordly political organization in order to use the already existing machinery of decentralized surplus extraction by extra-economic compulsion. Efforts were made to hold down peasant mobility, to set wage ceilings, and to control intra-lord competition for labour — in order to increase, or at least maintain, old rent levels. 111

Thus, contrary to what the demographic interpreters might lead us to expect, population drop-off in England after 1349 did not in many places bring about an immediate, corresponding decline in levies. It is, indeed, in connection with increasing seigneurial extra-economic pressures on and controls over the peasants, that historians have tended to account for the maintenance of rents at old, pre-plague levels, sometimes well into the 1380s on various estates around the country — despite the drastic demographic decline. 112 This partially

109 Bois lays bare the foregoing interconnected processes superbly well in Crise du féodalisme, esp. chs. 10-13. I am greatly indebted to his account. See also Neveux, "Déclin et reprise", pp. 55 ff.
110 Hilton, "Crisis of Feudalism", pp. 12-13, n. 18. The timing should once again be compared to that of France.
111 Hilton, Decline of Serfdom, pp. 35-42.
112 See, for example, J. Ambrose Raftis, Tenure and Mobility: Studies in the Social History of the Medieval Village (Toronto, 1964), pp. 139-44 ff.; Hilton, Decline of Serfdom, pp. 35-42. In Harveys's words, "Many of the tenurial arrangements . . . defied the economic realities of the time. Rent did not fall equally with the demand for (cont. on p. 66)
successful attempt to maintain old rent levels in the face of rapidly declining population may have caused some dislocation of peasant production, undermining its ability to recover economically or demographically despite the more favourable land/labour ratio. This may have set in motion, to some extent, the same sort of downward spiral as was charted in France, at least for a time.

Nevertheless, economic disruption appears to have been significantly less severe in England than in France. Population density had not in general reached such high levels as were attained in France: very likely, the high levels of seigneurial levy through the early fourteenth century prevented the same degree of demographic expansion. Nor did the rate of feudal levy (rents plus taxes) increase in England after 1350 to anything like the extent it appears to have done in France, and certainly not for any extended period. Nor did the English countryside suffer the devastations of war experienced in France, since the Hundred Years War was fought on French soil.113 Moreover, by the early part of the fifteenth century the seigneurial reaction had failed, broken by peasant resistance, as well as peasant mobility. (This is an indication perhaps of the inferiority of the English decentralized form of surplus extraction, however well-organized and unified, in comparison with the newly emergent French centralized system of surplus extraction (tax/office) — especially under the conditions of relative depopulation of the later middle ages.) The lords could extract only much lower, now basically economic, contractual rents. There was no development of a centralized state tax machine. The ruling class as a whole was forced to recoup their incomes by other means — by foreign military interventions and ultimately (relatively small-scale) civil war. Ironically, it may have been the long-term inability of the English aristocracy to step up surplus extraction by extra-economic force vis-à-vis the peasantry by intensifying serfdom, combined with the English lords’ merely short-term success in solving their financial crisis by military means abroad, which prevented the sort of economic catastrophes that were experienced in some places on the Continent in this period.

In east Elbian Germany, there is still another pattern. Medieval demographic and economic development in this area appears to have been strongly influenced by west European trends, due to its heavy reliance on colonization from the west. As a result, the timing of the crisis in east Germany appears to have been somewhat delayed; it took a somewhat different form; and it had a very different outcome from that in the west. Demographic stagnation and ultimately down-land after 1348, if they fell at all; villeins continued to be asked for, and to pay, rents that the monks of Westminster had no hope of exacting from tenants holding on contractual terms": Harvey, Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages, p. 268, and also pp. 262-4.

113 Bois, "Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy", p. 65.
turn in east Germany seems to have followed upon the end of population growth in the west, and it manifested itself rather clearly in the later fourteenth century with the drying up of colonization. This naturally posed a great threat to seigneurial incomes. For, in the east, development had taken place on the basis of what was perforsc a highly attentuated form of lordship. The problem for the lords was to make profitable unsettled lands. They had had little choice, therefore, but to offer peasant settlers favourable terms: fixed dues and free status (the so-called "Germanic Law"). Still, so long as population grew, both lords and peasants could benefit in a situation of plentiful land. Under these conditions, there appears to have been little incentive for the development of the lords' self-organization, centralization for purposes of "political accumulation". States remained, by and large, extremely weak and the nascent aristocracy was notoriously disorganized, incoherent, undisciplined.

But from the later fourteenth century, population growth sharply decelerated. In contrast with the west, the explanation for this appears only to a slight extent connected with problems of declining productivity; for in the east there were still masses of unsettled land to colonize. It was in part the plagues, but apparently above all the sharp slow-down of immigration, consequent upon the generalized demographic downturn in the west, which set off in the east the same sort of cycle of decline which was already taking place in the west, with correspondingly disruptive economic and demographic consequences. Lords experienced declining revenues, and they attempted to respond by taking "extra-economic" measures. Lacking any well-developed centralized state apparatus to turn to (for enhanced income from offices and taxation), the lords of eastern Europe tried to increase their exactions from the peasantry by intensifying serfdom. At the same time, they stepped up their attacks upon one another, while largely dismantling what little there had been of monarchies or unified states (the decay of the Teutonic Order in the fifteenth century is only the most spectacular case in point). Finally, they organized for war externally, and the devastations of the military campaigns appear to have had particularly disruptive effects on pro-


duction and population. Their revenues further threatened, the lords made renewed attempts to recoup at the expense of the peasants and one another — leading to the familiar downward spiral of eco-demographic disequilibrium and decline.\textsuperscript{116}

III
THE OUTCOME OF FEUDAL CRISIS AND SUBSEQUENT PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENT

From the middle of the fifteenth century, in much of western Europe, the conditions making for crisis finally receded, and there was a new period of economic upturn. Peasant cultivation had drawn back on to the better lands, making for the potential of increased productivity; the incidence and destructiveness of civil and external warfare seems to have abated somewhat, reflecting perhaps the exhaustion and temporary disarray of the nobility; the levels of ruling-class exactions from the peasants appear to have declined correspondingly, at least temporarily; and the impact of the plagues appears to have diminished. There occurred a new period of population increase and expansion of cultivation, leading to the growth of production with a concomitant increase in the incomes of both the lord and peasant classes. The consequent growth in demand provided the basis for a new era of expansion of European commerce. The latter reached far beyond its previous limits, especially to the Americas and over the sea route to the east. In important respects, however, the European commercial economy of the early modern period retained much of its medieval character. It remained heavily focused on the production of high-quality textiles (now made especially in England and Holland), as well as wine (from France), supplemented by silks and spices brought in from the east. These goods, which were heavily, though not solely, oriented toward ruling-class consumption were, \textit{grosso modo}, exchanged for basic food products, supplied by a radically expanding grain market, now profoundly involving the agriculture of eastern Europe.

It was my argument that the divergent economic responses, in different European regions, to the opportunities and dangers opened up by the new period of economic expansion were critically condi-

tioned by the agrarian property settlements, the systems of surplus extraction, which emerged from the crisis of seigneurial incomes of the later medieval period. These settlements themselves represented, to a significant degree, the outcome of divergent long-term processes of agrarian class formation and class conflict — processes in which the peasantry of the different regions of Europe had been able to limit, to a greater or lesser degree, the form and the strength of the structures which could be developed by the ruling class to extract a surplus to ensure their reproduction. At the same time, it appears that in every case — the rise of serfdom in eastern Europe, the rise of absolutism in connection with the consolidation of peasant property in France, the development of classically capitalist relations on the land in connection with the emergence of a new form of unified state in England — the newly emergent systems of surplus extraction manifested a significantly higher level of ruling-class self-organization, of self-centralization, than had previously been attained in that region — and may thus be seen, at least from one angle, to mark a continuation, if not a culmination, of the general feudal tendency in this direction. Finally, the different systems of property which were established were responsible, in my view, for structuring widely divergent patterns of economic evolution in the different regions — the impositions of different forms of agricultural involution and ultimately “general crisis” on most of the Continent, the critical breakthrough to self-sustaining growth in England.

(III.1) THE ROOTS OF THE DIVERGENCES

(III.1.1) The Rise and Decline of Serfdom: East versus West

For some reason Postan and Hatcher deny that the population drop-off, especially from the fifteenth century, and the accompanying threat to seigneurial incomes, was a critical inducement for the movement towards enserfing the peasants in east Elbian Germany — the use of “extra-economic” jurisdictional rights in order to extract a surplus in the face of demographically induced downward pressures on rents and upward pressure on wages. Nonetheless, it is no coincidence that in Prussia, for example, the first in a long series of governmental ordinances aiming to strengthen lordly controls over the peasantry (especially by limiting mobility in various ways), so as to buttress lordly rent exactions, was issued in the wake of the first sharp demographic losses that came with the wars of the first decades of the fifteenth century. These ordinances explicitly refer to the shortage of labour as their justification and explanation.

117 Postan and Hatcher, “Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society”, p. 27; see also n. 16 above.
118 Carsten, Origins of Prussia, ch. 8; Geremek, “Manpower Problem in Prussia”, passim.
Moreover, despite what Postan and Hatcher imply, there seems to be agreement among historians that during the second half of the fifteenth century the lords began to succeed in subjecting the Prussian peasants to more severe controls and heavier dues in the face of, and despite, sharply reduced population levels. Certainly, the rise of serfdom in eastern Germany did not depend upon a new period of population upturn; serfdom had been firmly established long before population began to rise again, towards the middle of the sixteenth century. Precise data is difficult to come by. But, for example, in Samland, where the seigneurial offensive was pursued early and vigorously, we know that the population in 1525 remained approximately one-third below its level of 1400. Yet, in the intervening period, serfdom had been intensified and had become a fact of life for a large section of the peasantry of the region.\footnote{Heide Wunder, who in her critique (see below) is concerned to emphasize the similarity between east and west German developments at the end of the middle ages, nonetheless summarizes the evolution in the east from the later fifteenth century in a way which brings out its distinctiveness: “All groups [among the peasantry] saw themselves confronted by a social levelling of the previous rural social order, which brought with it social insecurity. The tendency of this social levelling was downwards, the reverse therefore of the upward levelling tendency since the fourteenth century . . . The peasants and freemen sought by means of their rebellion [1525] to reverse this levelling process . . .”; H. Wunder, “The Mentality of Rebellious Peasants: The Samland Peasant Rebellion of 1525”, in B. Scribner and G. Benecke (eds.), The German Peasant War of 1525: New Viewpoints (London, 1979), p. 155 (my italics). For further material on population decline and the deterioration of the peasants’ position in the later fifteenth century, see H. Wunder, “Zur Mentalität aufständischer Bauern: Möglichkeiten der Zusammenarbeit von Geschichtswissenschaft und Anthropologie, dargestellt am Beispiel des samändischen Bauernaufstandes von 1525”, Geschichte und Gesellschaft, Sonderheft 1, Der deutsche Bauernkrieg, 1524-1526 (1975), pp. 22, 32; H. Wunder, “Der samändische Bauernaufstand von 1525: Entwurf für eine sozialgeschichtliche Forschungsstrategie”, in R. Wohlfell (ed.), Der Bauernkrieg, 1524-1526: Bauernkrieg und Reformation (Munich, 1975), pp. 153, 162-3; Geremek, “Manpower Problem in Prussia”, pp. 231-2 ff.} It was, of course, this installation of serfdom in east Germany under conditions of demographic slump which led me to call into question the widely held view that the corresponding population drop-off in western Europe could, in itself, have accounted for the accompanying decline of serfdom.

To begin to explain why the lords of late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century western Europe were unable to respond to the seigneurial revenue crisis by strengthening serfdom, despite their attempts to do so, while their counterparts in east Elbian Europe were indeed able to succeed, my account focused on the relatively recent development of the latter region, and especially its colonial character. The lords of north-east Europe — eastern Germany, as well as Poland — had led and controlled from the start a belated process of agrarian development, imposing “artificial”, rationally laid out forms of peasant settlement. In contrast, their counterparts in western Europe had to impose their power “from the outside”, against peasant communities which were longer established and better organized — with
established traditions of (often successful) struggle for their rights. As a result, the eastern lords had the possibility of solving their revenue problems through enserfing the peasants, whereas this option was foreclosed to those in the west by the relatively greater strength of the western peasants. The eastern lords actually were able to accomplish this task largely by means of politically reorganizing themselves, especially through developing new forms of feudal state.  

Heide Wunder finds this account contradictory. If the east Elbian German peasants were, at the start, by my own admission, the freest in western Europe, how could they also be so ripe for enserfment? Wunder points especially to the fact that the east Elbian peasants received from their lords, upon their settling, very broad grants of liberties.

There is in my view, however, nothing inconsistent about arguing that peasants could gain initially excellent conditions, yet remain essentially weak as a class over and against the lords. The lords were obliged to offer favourable terms to induce colonists to settle, and it was in their interest to do so. Indeed, so long as they could attract a steady flow of new settlers to open as yet uncultivated land, they could, over an extended period, take a relaxed approach to their peasants, benefiting from increased lands in production and perhaps improved productivity, while avoiding the costs of coercion. Yet this does not gainsay the fact that these conditions were granted by the lords (for their own reasons), that the peasants received them from the lords. This was a very different process from that which occurred in many places in the west, where the peasants often extracted their gains from the lords by means of successful resistance, requiring the self-organization of the community over a very long run. In consequence the peasants in the east were at a disadvantage when the lords changed their policy in the direction of greater exactions and controls, in order to deal with their problem of labour scarcity.

121 Wunder, "Peasant Organization and Class Conflict in East and West Germany", p. 48.  
122 For cases in the west where the lords successfully made similar reversals in policy, see Searle, Lordship and Community, pp. 45-68; Duby, Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West, pp. 113-14.  
123 In this light, Wunder's reference to the Handfeste — the original settlement contracts which granted the east German peasants their freedoms — seems to miss the point; for it appears to confuse the question of formal rights (granted to attract settlers) with actual social and power relations. The Handfeste manifested the lords' initial need for labour, but they tell us little about the subsequent evolution of forces. A historian of the region has dryly remarked of the Handfeste: "their content is of an almost barren similarity, and the last one that one reads says hardly more about the legal relationships of the village community than does the first one". By contrast, the granting of the peasant charters of the west, the Weistümer, reflect in general the outcome of a process of struggle, constituting direct evidence that the peasants had won their demands. Wunder, "Peasant Organization and Class Conflict in East and West Germany", p. 49; H. Patze, "Die deutsche bäuerliche Gemeinde", in T. Mayer (ed.), Die Anfänge der Landgemeinde und ihr Wesen, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1964), i, p. 150.
As to the long-term basis for the relatively weaker position of the peasants vis-à-vis the lords in east as compared to west Germany, Wunder has rightly pointed out that my reference to the spread in the east of the particular Waldhufen type of village community — in which peasant production was organized on a significantly more individualistic and less communally regulated basis than elsewhere — can provide at best part of the explanation. For, as she states, these were far from universal in the region. Nonetheless, Wunder does seem to agree that settlement in the west was far denser than in the east. Nor does she appear to dispute the fact that in the west there was quite commonly a lack of correspondence between village and lordship, while, in contrast, a one-to-one lord-to-village relationship was the norm in the east. This disparity between lordship and village in the west led to divided authority and gave the western peasants certain potentials for manoeuvre apparently unavailable to their eastern counterparts. The west European peasants could stand united as a village against a lord who could claim jurisdiction over only part of the village — or, put another way, against lords whose jurisdiction over the village was divided and perhaps competitive. In addition, the peasants could, and did, more easily develop solidarity across villages than could the various lords of these villages, who might be frustrated and disorganized by the maze of separate jurisdictions through which they, individually, dominated the villagers. These differences which put the east European peasantry at a disadvantage relative to their west European counterparts do seem to be connected with the later development of the region and its development as a colonial area. Indeed, the lords direct operation of the colonization process in the east appears to have allowed them, consciously or unconsciously, to establish a pattern of settlement which in the long run facilitated their domination over the region’s economy.

I attempted to give further indications of the possible significance for subsequent development of the differential evolutions of lord-peasant relations in east as compared to west Europe by showing that the only area in eastern Germany where there was a significant peasant outbreak at the time of the Great Peasant Wars in 1525 — that is, east Prussia — had experienced an agrarian evolution which distinguished both its lord and peasant classes from those of the rest of the region. The Teutonic Knights who settled east Prussia carried out a highly distinctive policy of colonization and development. As much as possible they aimed to build their regime directly upon peasant producers and to forestall the emergence of a lordly or knightly class which might prove competitive. It seems likely that this made for a peasantry in the Teutonic lands which was more strongly entrenched

124 Wunder, “Peasant Organization and Class Conflict in East and West Germany”, pp. 49-50.
than those of the other regions of east Elbian Germany. When, during the fifteenth century, the Teutonic Order gradually disintegrated and a new class of knightly landowners began to establish themselves in its place, this peasantry may have found some temporary room to manoeuvre unavailable to its counterparts elsewhere in eastern Germany.

Furthermore, pace Wunder, it appears to me no accident that the Peasant Revolt of 1525 in east Prussia was centred in Samland, for this area was dominated by Prussian peasants, with cohesive communities which had a long history that preceded the Germans' colonization process, and which remained relatively unaffected by that process. Wunder does admit that the Prussian communities were the most thickly populated in the east. However, she argues that they cannot be considered strong, for the political liberties granted to the Prussian peasants by the Teutonic Order were less far-reaching than those which were granted to the German settlers in the same territory. But this is again, in my view, to confuse *formal* rights with evidence of actual social relationships — of social power. The Prussian communities retained some of their old solidarities at the communal and extra-communal level, and this gave them resources for resistance. In particular, there seems to be evidence that the older organizational forms were maintained by the Prussian peasants, not only the Prussian freemen (the big "peasant" élite between the Prussian peasants and Teutonic knights to whom Wunder wishes to call special attention). In any case all evidence, including that offered by Wunder (see below), indicates that the German settlers barely penetrated the Samland region. As Wenskus concludes, "the German colonization had only very little influence, so that the old Prussian relationships were long able to remain undisturbed".

Continuing her criticism along the same line, Wunder argues that "all sections of the peasantry in this multi-ethnic region [Samland] took part in the rising — the German peasants, the Prussian peasants, and also the Prussian freemen . . .". But surely this is misleading.

127 Wunder, "Peasant Organization and Class Conflict in East and West Germany", pp. 51-2.
130 Wunder, "Peasant Organization and Class Conflict in East and West Germany", p. 51.
Wunder has elsewhere analysed the participants in the revolt. By her evidence, there seem to have been about 2,500 who took part in the peasants’ army. It seems likely, she says, that almost all of the 300 or so Prussian freemen resident in Samland where the revolt was mostly based were active. On the other hand she also points out that “the number of German peasants participating cannot have been altogether that great, in that relatively few German new settlements were present, [and those] primarily in the easterly territorial area” (whereas the revolt was centred in the western part of Samland).  

This leads unavoidably to the conclusion that the majority of the activists in the revolt were mere Prussian peasants. I see no reason to contest Wunder’s view that the Prussian freemen — who constituted a distinct layer in the population with unusually broad political and commercial connections beyond the villages — played a key organizing role in the rising. Nevertheless, I do not see how the position of leadership they apparently assumed in any way runs counter to my argument concerning the significance of relatively strongly organized Prussian communities; it seems merely to amplify it.

But the main point is that Wunder’s critique fails almost entirely to come to terms with the central issues at stake. In 1525 there were massive peasant revolts throughout much of west Germany, but none in east Germany, with the one exception (Samland) to which I referred. Why was there, relatively, so little opposition in the east, as compared to the west? Why did opposition develop in the Samland Prussian peasant communities, but virtually nowhere else? After all, at this time the free German peasants of the east Elbian region in general and Prussia in particular — the peasantry both big and small — were also undergoing a significant deterioration in their position. Why did they not rebel? Finally, the key question: why was it that in west Germany the long-term trench warfare of peasant communities with the lords left the peasantry with some 90 per cent of the land and only minor dues owed to their immediate lords, while in the east the tables were turned and serfdom rose with a vengeance?

Wunder refers to the grain trade as the basic condition for the rise of serfdom in eastern Germany. She also points out that from the later middle ages the seigneurs’ problems of declining revenues forced them to seek new solutions. However, she does not explain why enserfing the peasants was a viable option for the east European lords, when it does not appear to have been one for their counterparts in the west, who had similar problems and similar incentives. After all,
the opportunities arising from the developing grain market, as well as the problems of declining seigneurial revenues, presented the same powerful incentives from Normandy to Poland and beyond. Yet, despite their attempts, the lords of western Europe nowhere succeeded in re-establishing serfdom. Indeed, in some places it was the peasants, and not the lords, who consolidated their position and who thereby gained access to the expanding grain export markets. It is odd that in his contribution Postan could also fall back upon the grain trade to explain the different developments in east and west Europe, since he has devoted so much of his own work to demolishing the notion of a direct correlation between the development of commerce and either the emergence or the decline of serfdom — and since he has only very recently explicitly denied that the distinctive evolution in the east can be explained by the world commerce in grain.134 Economic needs or desires cannot explain their own satisfaction, nor can opportunities account for the capacity to take advantage of them. As Postan writes, "The divergence between East and West . . . was not, however, the result of spontaneous economic change; it was brought about by the exercise of the landlords' power".135

In fact, the lords of eastern Europe were, in the end, able to enserf the peasants only by means of stepping up the level of their own political organization. The crisis of seigneurial revenues had led, sooner or later, to the disintegration of even the strongest monarchies of medieval eastern Europe, leaving no potential for the growth of absolutism in the east. Instead, we find a dual development taking place throughout the region from the later medieval period. First, there was a long-term development of intra-lordly cohesion at the local and provincial levels. This was classically manifested in Poland, with the growing strength and importance of the local and provincial diets. Secondly, there was the consolidation of lordly power at the national level through the rise of the estates, a phenomenon which was nearly universal in eastern Europe. In creating these governing institutions, the lords of eastern Europe constructed a form of state peculiarly appropriate to their rather simple needs. It was a form in which they could represent themselves in the most immediate and direct way, and through which they could make certain that their rights over their land and peasants were protected, while ensuring that the costs of any state administrative apparatus could be kept to a minimum (a task naturally complicated by their tendency to involvement in warfare).136 It was, finally, a form of state which differed significantly from those which were emerging throughout most of

134 See n. 16 above.
western Europe. Nonetheless, it was similar to the states of the west in one crucial respect: that is, in manifesting a qualitative advance in the self-consciousness and self-organization of the aristocracy, an advance apparently everywhere necessary to ensure the aristocracy’s continuing dominance and capacity for reproduction, in the wake of the seigneurial crisis and peasant resistance of the later medieval period.

The eastern lords’ political reorganization allowed them to benefit from the trans-European economic upturn of the sixteenth century. But their increased capacity for surplus extraction by means of extra-economic compulsion and for “political accumulation” created the potential, over the longer run, for economic disruption. Agricultural growth on the basis of expanding demesnes and increasing labour services offered only the most restricted possibilities for development. By the 1560s and 1570s, Poland’s national output appears to have reached its outer limit (not to be attained again until the eighteenth century). From this point onwards, the growth of the lords’ product depended upon redistributive measures and was achieved largely by increasing the size of the demesnes directly at the expense of the peasants’ plots, thereby eroding the system’s chief productive forces (peasant labour and animals). Poland’s experience, moreover, appears to have typified that of the north-east European region. Precipitately declining productivity everywhere called forth the familiar “political” remedies. Increased levies on the peasantry, intensified struggles within the ruling classes, and external warfare issued in economic regression and the east European version of the “general crisis of the seventeenth century”.

(III.1.2) The Rise of Capitalist Property Relations on the Land: England versus France

Bois, for all his disagreements, accepts my argument that the emergence of different class-productive structures in England and France lay behind their divergent patterns of economic evolution in the early modern era — and he accepts, in part, my account of the historical roots of these developments. Bois appears to agree that a successful drive towards undermining the possessing peasantry and establishing capitalist class relations lay behind the transformation of agriculture and rising agricultural productivity in early modern England. He also agrees that the consolidation of production based on small peasant possessors, especially in relationship to now-centralized

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surplus extraction by the absolutist state (as well, we should add, as the “squeezing” by landlords of tenants where the former owned the land), was responsible for continuing agricultural stagnation and eventually agrarian crisis in France. The thrust of his criticism, however, is that these divergent evolutions become comprehensible only when interpreted in light of his overall schema for feudal development, centred on the tendency to a falling rate of feudal rent.

France. As I did in my essay, Bois links the failure of French agriculture to respond more successfully to the rise of prices and of markets in the early sixteenth century largely to the entrenched position of the peasantry. But Bois’s interpretation of the latter reveals, in my view, the mechanistic tendency of his overall approach. He says, “the peasants resisted expropriation here better than elsewhere, because the tenants were already beginning to appear as proprietors (an effect, in the final analysis, of the long-term fall in the rate of levy)”. It seems to me that Bois’s causal chain is here set out back to front. The falling rate of feudal levy which the lords were unable to counteract in the first part of the sixteenth century was the result, not the cause, of the peasants’ increasingly effective proprietorship in the land. This proprietorship was not, of course, a new development in the sixteenth century, but represented the outcome of a long process whereby the lords’ various levies were fixed and the peasants’ tenure became hereditary. Indeed, already by the latter part of the thirteenth century, cens tenure had been recognized as tantamount to full property through much of the north of France. And what of the sources of this proprietorship? Bois professes disdain at my accounting for it, in part, through reference to the long history of struggles of peasant communities on the Continent against an initially disorganized feudal ruling class. Yet, can he really propose a “falling rate of feudal levy” apart from this history of struggle and its effects?

Bois implies that the security of tenure of the French peasantry in the sixteenth century may be explained further by a certain laxity on the part of the lords, attributable, in turn, to the benefits some of them could derive from the absolutist state. He says that “the lords, who had found some measure of salvation in the service of the state, were less inclined than elsewhere to explore new economic avenues”. Nonetheless, this formulation is misleading. For the lords’ “inclinations” were structured by their class position — in particular, by their limited capacity to exert class power against the peasants.

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138 Bois, “Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy”, pp. 61-2; Bois, Crise du féodalisme, p. 347, and “Conclusion générale”.
139 Bois, “Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy”, p. 66 (my italics).
140 Fourquin, Lordship and Feudalism, pp. 189-92; Fourquin, Campagnes de la région parisienne, pp. 175-6, 179.
141 Bois, “Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy”, p. 66 (my italics).
Whatever their access to revenues from state office, the French lords would, in any case, certainly have wished to expropriate their peasant tenants. For this was the only way they could position themselves to raise rents from their land. As it was, powerful peasant tenure determined hereditarily fixed dues, thus exiguous and, in the face of inflation, declining customary rents — "a declining rate of feudal levy". As Bois himself points out, during the early sixteenth century the lords made systematic and powerful attempts to evict their tenants. Yet, as a rule, they were unable to succeed, in large part because of the strength of the peasantry, sometimes manifested in successful peasant revolts.142

It was precisely the ensconced position of the peasantry which compelled the lords to turn to the state for revenues. Many of them had only small demesnes. And they could not, locally and individually, successfully raise levies on customary tenures. To extract a surplus from the customary peasantry, the lords had to turn to the concentrated power of the state apparatus (tax/office).

The lords' involvement with state office and taxation had, however, further important implications for the strength of the peasantry in the localities (especially the security of peasant tenures), thus for the lords' abilities to expel them from the land, and ultimately for the economic potential of peasant production. For as the lords turned to state office and state taxation, they tended through that process to strengthen the overall power of the monarchical administration, and thus monarchical jurisdiction. The result was to clip the wings of the lords' local jurisdiction, further reducing their ability to move against peasant possessors. As Bois is obliged to admit, although "the state remains, for the most part, the instrument of feudalism", it is also the case that the "use to which this instrument was actually put served in the long term to weaken feudalism by competing with direct seigneurial extraction".143 This was, of course, the point I tried to make (and for which I was nevertheless chastised by Bois).

Now, Croot and Parker deny that the French monarchy was a significant force for peasant protection and go so far as to deny that French peasants had stronger property rights than their English counterparts. But rather than offering evidence for their position, they

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142 Cooper is therefore wrong to attempt to use evidence gathered by Bois to prove that lords could indeed expel their tenants. He confuses the desire to do so with the ability to do so. Cooper, "In Search of Agrarian Capitalism", p. 37. As Bois states: "What I was able to observe in Normandy fully accords with his [Brenner's] analysis: from 1520-30 one can see the beginnings of a tendency towards the expulsion of peasant farmers (a faint echo of the British enclosure movement), which in the end encountered fierce peasant resistance . . . This is the same class struggle as occurred in England, but the result is different because the peasantry in France proved to be very strong": Bois, "Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy", p. 62. For a nearly identical statement, see Bois, Crise du féodalisme, p. 347.

143 Quote from Bois, "Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy", p. 12 n. 12.
content themselves with pointing out that, in the long run, royal taxation of the land had the effect of ruining part of the French peasantry. This is just what I myself asserted. But it simply does not follow that because monarchical taxation undermined peasant property (especially over the long run), that monarchical judicial intervention did not also enforce peasant rights, thus protecting peasant property.

In fact, Croot and Parker never begin to come to terms with the various ways in which the state intervened to support peasant property in France (which is odd, in view of their willingness to believe implicitly in the state’s action to support the peasantry in England). In the first place, throughout the medieval period, notably during the epoch of demographic devastation and land desertions of the fifteenth century, the monarchy appears to have played a powerful role in affirming the integrity of the cens. Great masses of customary land were left unoccupied at this time. But it was difficult for the lords to absorb them to their demesnes, for the monarchy would, in effect, stand up for the rights even of long-absent peasants who could prove they had once been occupants of the tenures, or even legitimate heirs of former occupants. Indeed, it was necessary for the crown to pass a series of acts in the fifteenth century, merely to provide enough assurance to the lords to allow them to resettle the land — as before on the basis of fixed hereditary cens tenures (the so-called reaccessments). In the period of reconstruction, the peasants’ position as holders of cens tenure was further consolidated, as for the first time there was a cens contract which was universally set in writing, thus providing for even stronger protection in the courts.

Secondly, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the state moved to abolish the remnants of serfdom, and in particular the seigneurial taille, thus preventing the exaction of arbitrary rents. By this time, of course, such burdens were in many parts of France a thing of the past. Nevertheless, the monarchy did have a real impact where serfdom survived strongly into the fifteenth century, notably in the centre (for example, Nivernais) and the east. Here, the monarchy played a significant part by recognizing and thus consolidating gains won by direct peasant action.

145 For the complex and extended procedure of “criées”, necessary for the lords to recover land vacated by the peasants and, more generally, for the lords’ difficulties vis-à-vis the land in this period, see Fourquin, Lordship and Feudalism, pp. 218-22; Fourquin, Campagnes de la région parisienne, pp. 430-2 ff.; A. Plaisse, La baronnie du Neubourg (Paris, 1961), pp. 366-8.
Thirdly, from the mid-fifteenth century, the monarchy issued a series of ordinances supporting local customs and, in particular, published for province after province the so-called "customs", which fixed peasant rights and gave them full backing in law, definitively consolidating peasant property through much of France. It also became a good deal easier in this period to make appeals from the seigneurial to the monarchical courts, as the royal administration effectively invaded the countryside — a trend manifested, for example, in the establishment from the 1550s of a new layer of royal courts, the presidiaux courts. 

Finally, and perhaps most symptomatic of the overall evolution, the monarchy moved to place full responsibility for the collection of the royal taille in the hands of the peasant villages. It thus reinforced the community over and against its old rival the seigneurie. But, of course, as it did so, it prepared the ground for the increasingly effective and increasingly heavy imposition of royal, centralized surplus extraction, in place of the decaying decentralized seigneurial levies.

The fact is that despite the enormous incentives provided by rapidly rising prices in the early sixteenth century, which drastically devalued returns from fixed rents from the cens tenures, there is little evidence of an effective seigneurial reaction. The seigneurs simply did not have sufficient feudal powers at their disposal — expressed especially in rights to make arbitrary levies — to allow them to establish their ownership of the land in order to charge economic rents.

The absolutist state, based on taxation and office, thus developed, to a significant degree, in conflict with and at the expense of, the old decentralized forms of seigneurial extraction, and many individual feudal lords were losers in this process. As a result, the rise of absolutism provoked systematic, though sporadic and ultimately ineffectual, opposition from the seigneurial class. The "seigneurial reactions" against the monarchy which periodically interrupted the long-term expansion of French absolutist state organization are the most obvious expressions of the real competition which prevailed between the old and the new modes of extraction. On the other hand,

150 See Le Roy Ladurie’s comment on this period: "The very popular notion of ‘seigneurial reaction’ or refeudalization has for neither the sixteenth century nor the eighteenth century any real significance": Le Roy Ladurie, “Les paysans françaises du XVI’ siècle”, p. 346. As Jacquart points out, the saisie féodale for failure of hommage was practised, but it never brought about the confiscation of the fief: Jacquart, Crise rurale en Ile-de-France, p. 102. See also Bois, “Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy”, p. 62.
French absolutism could develop *more or less* continuously, because it could absorb into state office many of those very same lords who were the casualties of the erosion of the seigneurial system. Meanwhile, through its entire development, the absolutist monarchy had no choice but to ally with, and simultaneously incorporate, the greatest feudal lords — magnates who kept their political autonomy right into the seventeenth century, even as they penetrated the heart of the state machine, especially the army. If the absolutist state machine thus helped to corrode the old *structure* of surplus extraction, it also benefited many of the *personnel* who had lived off that structure.

In sum, the absolutist state was no mere guarantor of the old forms of property based on decentralized seigneurial extraction. Rather, it came to express a *transformed* version of the old system. It should be emphasized, however, that as the French monarchy built up its absolutist organization, it could not but, in that very process, reconstruct ruling-class power, if on a very different basis. It was officers of the crown, many of them "new men", who most assiduously went about building up the monarchical state. But, in turn, actually to consolidate its power, the crown had to ensure the allegiance of these servants. This could only be done, in what was, in its essentials, the old manner: the crown had no choice but to secure service and loyalty by granting assured private property rights in part of the surplus extracted from the peasantry. This had been classically accomplished in the medieval period through the endowment of a fief (although many other sorts of grants were also made to the same purpose in that epoch). Now, archetypically, there was the grant of an office, at first for life, later hereditarily (although, again, other sorts of endowments, such as pensions and land, were also given). In short, a more effective system of surplus extraction against the peasantry required a more effective, tightly-knit political association of the ruling class, a stronger "state". This was, in fact, constructed in large part through the re-creation of "private property in the political sphere" for the benefit of the crown's servants — and this meant, paradoxically, the renewal of the crown's ultimate dependence upon a (reconstructed) independent ruling class (heavily, though only partially, based in office). The evolution of the office-holders' independence was expressed in the declaration of the full heritability of office in 1604 (which went along with the imposition of the the *paulette*, or tax on office), and was manifested throughout the early modern period in the increasing self-organization of the office-holders in their *parlements* and, in turn, in their periodic resistances and revolts.

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154 Ibid., pp. 46-51.
155 Ibid., p. 51.
This new crystallization of class relationships was to prove disastrous for economic development. Peasant possession was further strengthened, and its old limitations remained in force: the failure to specialize or to improve and the tendency to morcellation rather than accumulation. To make matters worse, the new system of surplus extraction was more effective than the old and was oriented even more single-mindedly to conspicuous consumption and war. It developed to an even greater extent without reference to the requirements of the peasants’ productive forces and, in the long run, more fully at odds with them.

From the second half of the fifteenth century, the French “middle peasants”, assuming powerful control over the land, set in motion the developmental pattern familiar from the medieval period: demographic growth leading to the pulverization of holdings, accompanied by declining productivity, leading ultimately to stagnation and decline. For a time the lords could benefit from this process: their incomes could grow merely through the reopening of deserted land and the multiplication of peasant tenures (even with fixed rents). But after a while, as cultivation was spread to more marginal lands, and as productivity began to fall in the face of rising population, accelerating inflation began to eat away at fixed rents. This signalled the beginning of the end for the period of “growth”, and the onset of economic problems of all sorts — not only for the peasantry, but for the local lords, who once again found their incomes failing to keep up with growing needs.156

During the second half of the sixteenth century France appears to have reached the old ceilings of population and production it had attained in the early fourteenth century.157 Correspondingly, as in the later medieval period one witnesses the outbreak of every sort of struggle to redistribute by extra-economic means the relatively fixed national income. But now the tendencies to “political accumulation” through taxation and warfare were realized to an unprecedented degree.

Before 1550, taxes had not risen as a proportion of peasant output. But the situation was then transformed. Taxes on a family of four rose from an equivalent of seven days’ output per year in 1547 to the equivalent of fourteen days’ output per year in 1607 and to an equivalent of thirty-four days’ output per year in 1675.158 Meanwhile, the depredations accompanying the Wars of Religion directly undermined production to a disastrous degree. From the stagnation and decline which were already evident in the middle of the sixteenth

157 Ibid., pp. 576-85.
century, the French economy descended by fits and starts into the “general crisis of the seventeenth century”. After decades of destruction by troops and taxation, the sixteenth century “ended in catastrophe marked above all by a fall in population and production”. After a brief period of subsequent recovery, there was after 1630, once again, near-perpetual disruption of the economy, resulting from external war (the Thirty Years War), compounded by civil war (The Fronde) and the continuing build-up of the absolutist tax state. As in the fourteenth and earlier fifteenth centuries, the intensification of every form of “political accumulation” had undermined the operation of the classical Malthusian mechanisms of adjustment and forced the economy as a whole into protracted, systemic crisis.

England. To explain the emergence of capitalist property relations on the land in England Bois asserts that the nobility “was faced with a peasantry whose rights had been too well established for a return to serfdom to be possible, but not sufficiently established to enable it to maintain control of the land when faced with seigneurial pressure”. The lords could, therefore, proceed over time to undermine and eliminate the peasant possessors. This was precisely my analysis. On the other hand, Bois once again accounts for this situation in terms of his unilineal “declining rate of rent” schema. As he argues, “the relative backwardness of [England’s] social evolution as compared to that of France was to prove its trump card in the transition from feudalism to capitalism”. In his view the falling rate of feudal rent had not played itself out in (backward) England to the extent it had in (advanced) France, so that the English lords remained well enough placed to recover their positions. We have already stated our reservations concerning this approach. In contrast, we have argued that precisely the advanced self-organization of the English ruling class in the medieval period had allowed them to make their decentralized forms of feudal surplus extraction work well during the growth phase of the feudal economy; that, with the collapse of population in the mid-fourteenth century, they had naturally attempted to fall back on these tried and true forms in order to recoup, initiating “the seigneurial reaction” after 1350; but that these decentralized methods of surplus extraction had proven inadequate in the long run to counteract peasant resistance and mobility, to prevent the decline of serfdom or to stop a long-term fall in rents, especially from the later fourteenth century. The English aristocracy may, for a certain period, have compensated to some extent through war overseas, benefiting perhaps for the last time from its superior

159 Morineau, “La conjuncture ou les cernes de la croissance”, p. 994.
160 Quotations from Bois, “Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy”, p. 66. One should recall in this regard that Bois also explains the greater success of the English lords vis-à-vis their peasants in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in terms of English “backwardness”.

feudal class organization and coherence. But once war ceased to pay when waged against an ever more cohesive French aristocracy and French state, they were thrown back on their own resources.

As a result of the class-wide crisis of seigneurial revenues, neither the crown in relation to its magnate followers, nor the magnates in relation to their lesser landed class followers, possessed the economic resources, the necessary “glue”, to cohere the old intra-aristocratic alliances which had formed the basis for aristocratic and, ultimately, monarchical strength and stability in England. For the heightened demands made upon financially straitened overlords by needy followers with collapsing rents were simply too great. The result was the rise of faction, aristocratic incoherence and the intra-class conflict which led to the breakdown of government and the descent into civil war which marked the middle part of the fifteenth century.

It was the English lords’ inability either to re-enserf the peasants or to move in the direction of absolutism (as had their French counterparts) which forced them in the long run to seek novel ways out of their revenue crisis. With the decline of their own self-discipline and self-organization under the pressure of the later medieval crisis of seigneurial revenue, the English ruling class was impelled, for a time, to turn the instruments of feudal “political accumulation” in upon itself. But the resulting zero-sum game within the ruling class, in the context of declining overall ruling-class incomes, could not constitute a stable solution. Lacking the ability to reimpose some system of extra-economic levy on the peasantry, the lords were obliged to use their remaining feudal powers to further what in the end turned out to be capitalist development. Their continuing control over the land — their maintenance of broad demesnes, as well as their ability to prevent the achievement of full property rights by their customary tenants and ultimately to consign these tenants to the status of leaseholders — proved to be their trump card. This control of landed property was, above all, an expression of their feudal powers, the legacy of the position the lords had established and maintained throughout the medieval period.

Now here again Croot and Parker demur: just as they think that I have overstated the security of the French peasants’ possession, they believe I have underrated the hold of the English customary peasants on the land. In particular, they raise the question of the security of


163 See Storey’s comment: “Baronial revolts abroad were provoked by the increasingly despotic nature of royal government, but here [in England] civil war came for the very opposite reason, for what contemporaries called the ‘lack of politic rule and governance’”: Storey, End of the House of Lancaster, p. 28.
the tenure enjoyed by the English copyholder, implying I have underestimated it.\textsuperscript{164} This is an important question. But the security of copyhold was only one of a whole series of factors which affected the hold on the land which could be exerted by the English peasants in the early modern period, and it needs to be evaluated, therefore, within a broader context.

First, it is necessary to recall that already by the end of the thirteenth century, the English lords held outright in demesne a much greater percentage of the cultivated land than did their French counterparts, something like one-third as compared to one-eighth or one-tenth. Secondly, and equally important, another third of the land in England was in villein tenure, thus subject to arbitrary levies from the lords (tallages, fines and so forth), with the (unfree) tenants having recourse only to themselves to protect their rights to it. (In the eyes of the king’s courts, this was the lords’ land, whatever the varying realities of local custom and the local balance of power.) By contrast, in France (at least in the north), some 85-90 per cent of the land was under \textit{cens} tenure, thus effectively free from arbitrary levies and essentially owned by the peasants.

The period of population drop-off only accentuated this difference. In France, as noted, the peasants’ unoccupied customary lands were largely protected from takeover by the lords. As a result, around 1450-1500, just about the same amount of land remained under demesne, subject to economic rents, as in the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{165} In England, by contrast, the process of assimilating unoccupied customary (unfree) lands to the demesnes went on apace (there was certainly no law to prevent it). It is difficult to make quantitative estimates, but in study after study there is evidence that at least a significant portion of formerly customary (villein) land — considered by the lords to be theirs (especially because the law said it was) and with no one to challenge them — was simply added to the demesnes, that is to the leasehold, economic rent sector.\textsuperscript{166}

This brings us to the question of the evolution of the (formerly


villein) land which remained in customary tenure into the later fifteenth century — the issue of copyhold per se. We now can see that at the beginning of the early modern period a good deal less of the surface was held in this form of tenure in England than in France, and a good deal more was fully in the hands of the lords (demesne). What was the future of the customary land which was left? Did it, like the French customary tenure (cens), evolve into virtual freehold? Or did it revert eventually to the lords, so that they could charge economic rents?

This problem ultimately boils down to the question of what rights of the copyholder the courts were prepared to back up, assuming now that the copyholders could get recognized in court (as both Kerridge and Gray agree they could from the early decades of the sixteenth century).167 This seems to come down to the question of the customary conditions under which the peasants held their land. Where they had established heritability and fixed fines as the custom they could become essentially freeholders. But, as Kerridge points out, over significant areas of the country the peasants had established no such customs. They held for a given number of years or lives, subject to arbitrary fines. According to Kerridge, copyholders could be charged with arbitrary fines particularly through the west of England and on the northern borders, where especially insecure tenures prevailed. A further proportion of the land was thus subject to essentially demesne conditions; that is, copyhold under these conditions was equivalent to economic leasehold of landlord property, since adjustable fines could be used as economic rents. Finally there is the anomalous case which has aroused so much controversy, where copyholders did hold by inheritance, but where fines were arbitrary. This situation was prevalent especially in East Anglia, the Midland Plain, the Fens, the South Downs and south-coast regions.168 Croot and Parker present evidence that by the early years of the seventeenth century the courts had begun to resolve this situation by setting fines at “reasonable” rates.169 But this fact actually undercuts their case. For it shows that protection for copyholders by inheritance without fixed fines began to be established only very late in the day — after a century of rising prices and rents. During this time there appears to have been no legally established limit to which fines could be raised, and be supported in court on appeal. Those copyholders who had survived to


the late date must very often have been rather substantial figures, capable of paying the rising rents (through higher fines) or buying up the property themselves.

In sum, it seems hard to deny that the direct feudal rights and powers, maintained by the English lords throughout the whole of the medieval epoch, gave them a powerful basis for establishing, holding on to and extending their control over the land in the subsequent period — and that, in this respect, they enjoyed a far stronger position vis-à-vis their peasants than did their French counterparts. Of course, the English lords' property in the land only gave them rights to lease their holdings at competitive rates; and at the start, in the fifteenth century, rents must have been very low. Nonetheless, so long as there was the potential for increased competition for the land, the market in leases provided the basic condition for differentiation among the tenants.

The initial processes of differentiation, resulting in the rise of larger capitalist tenant farmers, were perhaps facilitated, in the fifteenth century, by the maintenance of wool exports (in either raw or manufactured form) at roughly fourteenth-century levels, in the face of a 50 per cent drop-off in population; that is, half the number of farmers in England were now producing the same amount of wool as before. This differentiation was probably given an impetus by the generalized commercial upturn, marked by the rapid growth of cloth production for export from the third quarter of the fifteenth century, and accelerating rapidly from the 1520s.170 Ultimately, the growing shift of population into industrial employments, supplemented by a powerful demographic upturn, determined a long-term increase in the demand for agricultural products, leading to a rise in food prices, which called forth the growth of agricultural production and productivity.171 Agricultural development took place through characteristically capitalist processes conditioned by the new system of social relations in which the organizers of production and the direct producers (sometimes the same persons) no longer possessed their full means of reproduction (especially the land) and were therefore compelled to produce systematically for the market. The resulting competition among tenants for the land and among landlords for tenants stimulated cost-cutting,

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thus specialization and improvement, leading over time to the replacement of small, inefficient peasant tenants by larger capitalist tenants, thus underpinning an agricultural transformation.

As opportunities in agricultural production and commercial landlordship grew and the economic potential of the old feudal affinities and their marauding activities declined, the balance of forces was tipped increasingly against any sort of successful attempt at feudal reorganization for "political accumulation". Growing numbers of landlords and tenants thus turned to the monarchy as the source of the peace and stability requisite to ongoing commercial productive activity. During the early modern period, the long-term tendency towards the increasing self-centralization of the English landed classes was thereby extended, although now in a qualitatively different form which corresponded to the transformed character of the property or surplus-extraction relations through which the landed classes were coming to reproduce themselves. An increasingly centralized state, rooted ever more firmly in broad landed layers, could thus more effectively undermine the disruptive behaviour of those decreasing numbers of landed elements whose economies still depended upon the application of "extra economic" methods (at this point focused mainly upon banditry, raiding and the spoliation of monarchical administration and justice). In turn, as even the greatest magnates saw their localized political strength eroded by the state, many of them were obliged to turn to economic landlordship.\footnote{See L. Stone, "Power", in his The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641 (Oxford, 1965), ch. 5; M. E. James, Change and Continuity in the Tudor North (Borthwick Papers, no. 27, York, 1965); M. E. James, "The First Earl of Cumberland and the Decline of Northern Feudalism", Northern Hist., 1 (1966).}

The affirmation of absolute private property by the landlords over and against peasant possession went hand in hand, therefore, with the gradual rise of a different sort of state, one which attained a monopoly of force over and against the privatized powers of feudal potentates. The state which emerged during the Tudor period was, however, no absolutism. Able to profit from rising land rents, through presiding over a newly emerging tripartite capitalist hierarchy of commercial landlord, capitalist tenant and hired wage labourer, the English landed classes had no need to recur to direct, extra-economic compulsion to extract a surplus. Nor did they require the state to serve them indirectly as an engine of surplus appropriation by political means (tax/office and war).

What they needed, at least on the domestic front, was a cheap state, which would secure order and protect private property, thus assuring the normal operation of contractually based economic processes. This goal they were able to achieve in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (through processes far beyond the scope of this
essay to describe) by means of the strengthening of parliament as their special instrument of centralized control over the government and through an increasing stranglehold on state office, above all at the local level. Two experiments in royal absolutism were aborted, and no tax state came to prey on a developing English economy. Characteristically, although the new state was operated at all levels by the landed class, it offered only restricted opportunities for the fruits of office, and local administration was typically not paid at all. In turn, although it monopolized force, the new state levelled only minimal taxes. It is indeed symptomatic that when taxes did begin to be raised significantly from the later seventeenth century, these were levied upon its own members by a landlord class now unambiguously in control of the state, thanks to its victories over the crown. This is in contrast to the situation in France where a mark of membership in the ruling class was exemption from state taxation — and naturally so, since the state was centrally conceived as a political, wealth-generating mechanism for the aristocracy. In England, the landlord class, having uprooted the peasantry, could depend largely upon the operation of "impersonal", "economic" processes: the exploitation by capitalist tenants of free wage-labourers and, in turn, the operation of intra-capitalist competition in the agricultural sector and the economy as a whole.

To sum up, by the end of the seventeenth century the English evolution towards agrarian capitalism had brought about the end of the age-old "fusion" of the "economic" and the "political", and the emergence of an institutional separation between "state" and "civil society". With the breakthrough to economic development, manifested above all in the increasing productivity of labour, the achievement of wealth ceased to be essentially the zero-sum game it had been under feudal social productive relations. In turn, the amassing and direct application of force in order to redistribute a strictly limited social product ceased to be the sine qua non for the success of the ruling class. English development had distinguished itself from that in most places on the Continent in two critical, interrelated aspects. It was marked by the rise of a capitalist aristocracy which was presiding over an agricultural revolution.

(III.2) RESULTS OF THE DIVERGENCES: LORDS, PEASANTS AND CAPITALIST AGRICULTURE 1450-1750

Just as my account of the roots of the divergent evolutions of property or surplus extraction relations in different European regions in the wake of the later medieval crisis of seigneurial revenues has been called into question, so has my understanding of the implications of these property settlements for the subsequent course of economic
development. This is particularly the case with regard to my view of the different significances, for the distribution of wealth and the development of the productive forces, of the consolidation of peasant proprietorship in relationship to the rise of absolutism — classically in France — in comparison with the rise of the classical landlord/capitalist tenant/wage-labourer relationship — above all, in England.

(III.2.1) Property Forms and the Evolution of Landownership

To begin with, Croot and Parker contend that even if the peasantry did emerge in later medieval France with far stronger rights to the soil than did their counterparts in England, this could have had little real significance; for “economic” forces, most especially the market, must have been determinant in the long run. As they state, “in both France and England economic rather than legal considerations were instrumental in determining the pattern of landholding”. They maintain that “the rights of the French peasantry were an obstacle to more rational farming . . . but these would not have been an insuperable obstacle if the economic incentives and determination to override them had existed”. According to Croot and Parker, the general problem with my approach is specifically manifested in my failure to come to terms with the “lack of any equivalent in France to the celebrated class of English yeomanry, which was itself the product of a process of [economic] differentiation within the ranks of the peasantry, a process not experienced by their French counterparts”.173

But Croot and Parker beg the central question. There is no disagreement between us as to the special significance for economic development in England of “the rise of the yeoman” — that is, the emergence of a class of larger commercial farmers out of a process of economic differentiation of the peasantry, in contrast with the pulverization and levelling of the peasantry which was the predominant trend in early modern France. The problem is to explain these different trends. The point is that the purely “economic” starting point for these divergent processes was roughly the same in both England and France. In the later fifteenth century, in both places, a “middle peasantry” on relatively quite large holdings appears to have held a strong position.174 The difficulty arises because, despite what Croot and Parker imply, the peasantry — and especially peasant property — subsequently underwent radically different evolutions in the two places, even though market forces, above all rising food prices, made themselves strongly felt in both places throughout the early modern period, creating more than ample incentives for profit making through the ac-

cumulation of land leading to differentiation. It is to explain these diverging evolutions that it is indispensable to make reference to the different property systems in which the peasantries were enmeshed in France and England. For these allowed and/or compelled the peasantry in each place to respond to roughly similar economic (market) conditions in different ways.

The differentiation of the English peasantry was thus critically conditioned by the fact that, under the newly emergent social-productive relations, they had no choice but to respond to the rising market by competing with one another as effectively as possible — by cost-cutting, and thus by specializing, accumulating their surpluses, and innovating. But this compulsion to compete was only the result of the fact that they were separated from possession of the land, thus deprived of direct (non-market) access to their means of subsistence, correlative consigned to leasehold status, and, as a result, subjected to the system of competitive rents. In this system the larger farmers, who could produce more efficiently and more profitably on the market, could use their competitive edge to accumulate land directly at the expense of the smaller farmers — superseding them when their leases ran out by offering a higher and more secure rent or outbidding them for those tenancies which came on to the market. In turn, the landlords had to compete for the best tenants if they wished to get the maximum rent from leasing their land — in particular by offering larger, consolidated holdings, sometimes enclosed and improved. It was not, as Croot and Parker imply, the rise of the market in itself which made for the rapid differentiation of the peasantry in England and the rise of the yeoman (almost always larger commercial tenants), but rather the social-property relationships which made the English agricultural producers fully dependent upon competitive production.

In contrast, as virtual owners of their plots French peasants did not face the falling in of their leases, rising fines or direct competition for their tenures. So long as they held a plot which could produce enough to feed their families and pay their taxes they were, as a rule,

175 As Genêt, puts it, during the fifteenth century, “The position of the peasants was strengthened . . . Their tenures were vast, their liberty no longer challenged and . . . at least they had imposed a retreat upon the landlords so far as rents were concerned . . . But was it a decisive, irreversible progression? In the last decade of the fifteenth century, the seigneurs were able to impose on the peasants an increase, light it is true, in their rents. They had not given up the essential mechanism of their domination. They preserved the rights they had on their lands and . . . they maintained the means of taking a profit from them . . .”: Génét “Économie et société rurale en Angleterre au XVe siècle”, pp. 1468-9.

176 Paradoxically, Croot and Parker, on several occasions, refer to precisely these competitive processes as lying behind the economic differentiation of the peasantry which took place in England, but they do not make the appropriate comparison with the quite different situation in France. See Croot and Parker, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development”, pp. 40-1, 43.
compelled to sell and compete effectively on the market to survive. Most had little possibility of accumulating. They had little choice but to follow the familiar pattern of producing with the aim of directly supporting themselves and their children, and of subdividing their land on inheritance. Croot and Parker should not be surprised that in this context of social-property relations any tendency to differentiation leading to the rise of a yeoman class was overwhelmed by the tendency to morcellation.

It was thus from the latter part of the fifteenth century that the institutionalization of different property or surplus-extracting systems in England and France began to condition a definitive parting of the ways for their respective economies. This was manifested first of all in a dramatic divergence in the subsequent evolutions of the distribution of landed property in the two places. The latter was the result, firstly, of an apparent difference in the demographic regimes which came to prevail in each country and, secondly, of the new rise of the market, which though powerfully felt in both places had different effects in each. Both of these causes were traceable back, in turn, to the different institutionalized property arrangements.

In France, from various points after 1450, there was a sharply accelerated upturn in population, as in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Indeed, already by the mid-sixteenth century, in some regions a little later, French population had already equalled and in some places actually exceeded the record levels of the early fourteenth century.177 The contrast with England is remarkable. There, population stagnated until perhaps the 1510s. Moreover, even when it began to grow, its pace appears to have been significantly slower than that of France, reaching fourteenth-century levels only in the middle of the seventeenth century, or perhaps only by 1700.178

It is hard to avoid the temptation to see in this demographic contrast an initial and definitive effect of the divergence in property systems, as well as a critical cause of the divergent evolutions in the distribution of property. In France, the reaffirmation, even the strengthening, of peasant property from the mid-fifteenth century made possible a renewal of the old peasant-based demographic regime. This was apparently set in motion by the (relatively) early age of marriage, rooted in turn in the easy and early accession to a plot, based finally on strong peasant property which allowed for the subdivision of holdings. The rapid demographic advance which was thereby made possible, led to the extreme parcellization of property. In England, by contrast, we

can at least hypothesize that due to the loss of firm possession by the direct cultivators and the correspondingly enforced rise of commercial tenantry, holders of plots (leasehold farmers) had little choice but to treat their holdings as commercial investments, as a source of profit (if they wished to keep them), and could no longer view them as the directly self-sufficient basis for a continuing family. This tended to preclude subdivision, for smaller plots were uneconomic. As a result, children could no longer count on receiving a plot on coming of age. On the contrary, the number of children in the family, so far as possible, had to be adopted to the economic-productive requirements and potentials of the commercial holding. The result appears to have been later marriages, smaller families, the sending of children outside of the household into other occupations. The interrelated outcomes were slower population growth and, in general, the prevention of the subdivision of holdings.179

In this same period of generalized, Europe-wide commercial up-turn, the impact of the market upon different social-property systems constituted a second powerful force conditioning the divergent evolutions of the distribution of property in England and France. This can be brought out especially well by comparing developments in the most commercialized areas of France with those in England in the period from the mid-fifteenth into the second part of the sixteenth century. For these purposes, the Paris region is exemplary, for it would be difficult to specify an area of France where market forces had a greater impact. The city itself grew rapidly in this period, and exercised a huge pull on its hinterland. Moreover, population increased in the agricultural region around Paris at a tremendous pace. The result was especially fast rising prices, particularly for food and land. Not only the incentives for accumulation but the potential accumulators (in the persons of local lords, courtly office holders, city merchants and well-off peasants) were present. Those who failed to accumulate land missed an enormous opportunity to profit; those landholders who stayed with their customary tenures saw their rents, in real terms, dwindle into insignificance.180

What were the actual results? We can get a remarkably good idea on the basis of Jacquart's massive study, which encompasses seven seigneuries covering some 4,699 cultivated hectares in the Paris region. Even in this area, by 1550-60, after close to a century of urban development, demographic growth, expansion of the market and skyrocketing prices, some 2,567 proprietors, each with holdings of less than 60 acres, still held 69 per cent of the cultivated land, in com-

179 The previous paragraph is derived from Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*, pp. 353-4, and Howell, "Stability and Change".
180 See Fourquin, *Campagnes de la région parisienne*; Jacquart, *Crise rurale en Ile-de France*. 
parison with 17 proprietors with more than 60 acres (including the seven seigneurs seated on the large, ancient demesnes) who held 31 per cent of the cultivated surface (the demesnes themselves covering 18 per cent). Presenting the same results slightly differently: 2,516 proprietors with holdings of less than 24 acres (10 hectares) owned 55 per cent of the land, while 75 proprietors with 25 acres or more held 45 per cent of the land.\(^{181}\) There had clearly been some significant build-up of properties; but very few proprietors benefited from accumulation, and a massive peasantry remained seated on the land.

The limited undermining of peasant property which had taken place in the Paris region had been conditioned by processes beyond the market. By 1550, population growth and morcellement already had led to a situation in which 88 per cent of the properties (2,273 holdings) were under 6·2 acres (2·5 hectares), thus too small to support a family without supplementary sources of income. Pressured by rapidly rising prices, which meant higher subsistence costs and lower wages, combined with the weight of taxation, many peasants were forced to sell out.\(^{182}\)

Even where some accumulation of property took place, the basically peasant organization or production remained as yet unaffected. Indeed, the pattern of ownership fails to reveal just how restricted were the potentials for accumulation for the purpose of more effective production, for market farming and for improvement. For the units of property were themselves broken up into many, many parcels of cultivation, scattered through the fields, miniscule in size — an unambiguous testimony to the continuity of the peasant dominated system. On one of the seven seigneuries studied by Jacquart, not a single parcel reached 12½ acres in size! Indeed, if we exclude the seigneurie of Trappes (where both units of ownership and cultivation were exceptionally concentrated), there was a total of only ten parcels in all which exceeded 12½ acres in the entire area covered by the survey. Engrossment thus proceeded apart from, indeed often in contradiction with, the needs of production. Ironically, larger units of property might mean smaller units of cultivation.\(^{183}\)

The contrast between the evolution of even this most precociously-developed French region and that of England is, it

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\(^{181}\) Calculated from chart in Jacquart, *Crise rurale en Ile-de-France*, p. 118, with clarifying information in ch. 3.

\(^{182}\) J. Jacquart, "Immobilisme et catastrophes", in Duby and Wallon (eds.), *Histoire de la France rurale*, ii, p. 265.

seems to me, clear. For in many areas of England — by no means all of course — there occurs a continuous process of build-up of larger holdings and units of cultivation at the expense of small ones, at least from the second part of the fifteenth century. In the closely studied community of Chippenham (Cambridgeshire), in the thirteenth century, the half-virgate holding (15 acres) was predominant, as almost everywhere else. By the second third of the fifteenth century, still only a fifth of the holdings were more than 30 acres. By 1540, however, 22 out of 42 holdings were 27 acres or more. Indeed, 12 of these holdings (including the demesne) were 50 acres or more, and they constituted 1,560 acres (of which the demesne counted 780 acres) out of a total of 2,265 cultivated acres, or some 64 per cent.  

In the Wiltshire chalk lands, moreover, we learn that already "by the early sixteenth century, most of the land was in the hands of capitalist farmers, and by the middle of the seventeenth century capital farms occupied most of the farmland".  

In the west midlands, it has been found that from the fifteenth century, "The trend . . . towards the diminution of the smallholding group and the increase in the number of large holdings [30-100 acres of arable] seems fairly certain".  

Even in Leicestershire, ostensible hold-out of English peasant farming, the average and typical unit was already 45 acres in the second part of the sixteenth century.  

This is almost four times the size of the representative peasant holding in the medieval period or the representative French holding of the sixteenth century. As early as 1500, half-yardlanders were already becoming rare in Leicestershire.  

Now Cooper appears to argue that agrarian structures in France and England were not, by the later sixteenth century, significantly different. In contrast, I would conclude that while the pattern of agrarian evolution in France from 1450 did not break fundamentally from that of the medieval period because it was, as before, dominated by peasant possessors, that of England did experience a breakthrough. This difference had, moreover, profound implications for the development of production.

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184 M. Spufford, *Contrasting Communities* (Cambridge, 1974), ch. 3. Spufford, however, denies that the peasants' lack of property rights was important in conditioning their loss of the land.  
187 W. G. Hoskins, "The Leicestershire Farmer in the Sixteenth Century", in his *Essays in Leicestershire History* (Liverpool, 1950), pp. 137-8. However, this figure does not include either the many cottagers' farms or the demesnes.  
189 Cooper, "In Search of Agrarian Capitalism", esp. pp. 44-6.
(III.2.2) Property Relations and Productivity

The foregoing divergence in property settlements in England and France was, by the latter part of the sixteenth century, conditioning not only distinctive patterns in the evolution of property distribution, but different paths of development of the agricultural productive forces. Croot and Parker, as well as Cooper and Le Roy Ladurie, argue that I underestimate the capacity of the peasantry to increase agricultural productivity when I insist that the productive systems based on small peasants in possession of their means of subsistence were a barrier to the qualitative agricultural development required for sustaining economic growth in the early modern period, while the "English system" provided the ground for a definite breakthrough in this era. Nevertheless, it appears to me that these propositions are well-supported by the economic experiences of both England and France through the early modern period, as well as that of western Europe as a whole.

(III.2.2.a) Peasant Possession in France versus Capitalist Tenantry in England

In the face of the massive growth of demand, expressed in rising food prices which affected broad areas of France, especially the north, from the early sixteenth century, the peasant grip on production was clearly responsible for stifling the growth of output. As we learn from case studies of Normandy and Cambresis, areas exposed to especially heavy pressures from the market, the high point of production for the market, both local and overseas, came early in both places — in the first decade or two of the the sixteenth century. After this point, as population grew, peasants with increasingly smaller plots were forced to devote greater and greater proportions of their land to production for immediate subsistence to ensure their survival. We find, therefore, a decrease in the production of such commercial crops as hemp, flax and the like. Animal production was, moreover, continuously cut back in favour of production for the peasants' own consumption. By the 1540s in both places, not more but less grain was actually being sent to market, even though grain prices were rising precipitately. Meanwhile, the potential for improving agricultural productivity, dependent upon increased animal production, was definitely undermined. 190

There is no sign whatsoever of innovation or advance in peasant farming in the sixteenth century, or at any time through to the end of the seventeenth century. Productive techniques stagnate through-

out France, no less in the north than elsewhere. As Jacquart summarizes recent local research throughout the various regions of the country, "one finds no trace of decisive technical progress and the results of peasant activity remained sensibly the same in their mediocrity".191 In consequence, almost everywhere in France, productivity per head was declining significantly by the early decades of the sixteenth century, leading to new subsistence crises, skyrocketing prices and, as noted, absolute ceilings on agricultural output (not to be reached again until the eighteenth century).192 Well before the onset of the devastations of the Religious Wars, therefore, French peasant-based agriculture had in the course of its own unimpeded development sunk into stagnation and decline.

The contrast with England is clear. There, over the course of the early modern period, one witnesses an agricultural revolution. Given the technology available to the mixed agricultural production of medieval and early modern Europe, qualitative improvement which would make for significant cheapening in basic food production required that animal and arable husbandry be more tightly bound together and made more mutually reinforcing; in particular, animal production had to increase in relation to arable in order to provide manure and ploughing to counter the tendency to declining fertility of the soil. Whereas peasant production for subsistence tended to make animal and arable production mutually competitive, and thereby constituted an immediate barrier to the foregoing sort of transformation, the rise of the capitalist property system facilitated it. It did so not only by conditioning a tendency to specialization and improvement enforced by competition, but by giving rise, via the aforementioned processes of differentiation (instead of morcellation), to a class of capitalist farmers who could take the risks, make the investments and carry out the larger-scale farming which was required.

These mechanisms are laid bare in Eric Kerridge's close study of agricultural arrangements and developments in early modern Wiltshire. Here there was a system of capitalist farms in operation from the early sixteenth century. The impact of the market was also felt from very early on. There ensued a process of economic differentiation, with concomitant specialization and improvement. Everywhere grain farming came to predominate on the chalk soils where it was particularly appropriate. Moreover, by the mid-seventeenth century,


large farms had entirely taken over specialized grain production, for
the small farmer could not compete in the application of the favoured
sheep-corn methods. On the other hand, if they wished to survive,
the smaller farmers, as tenants, were themselves forced to specialize
for the market. They had to abandon grain production, but in the
so-called Cheese Country, which was quite suitable for dairy farming,
they were able to hold their own. For in this line the large producer
enjoyed relatively little competitive edge.193

The developments in Wiltshire represent a microcosm of the pro-
cesses which occurred in England as a whole in the early modern
period. Joan Thirsk refers to “the predominance of large farmers in
the specialized corn growing areas” and she concludes that, “In
specialized corn areas, the successful men were always yeomen farm-
ers or gentlemen with substantial fortunes”. “As for the small farmer
in the arable areas, he had little hope for survival”.194 The reasons
for this are not far to seek. In the first place, in grain production there
were significant economies of scale to be had in the use of basic in-
frastucture and of farm animals and implements, as well as in the
application of labour. Secondly, especially with the requirements for
large sheepfolds, a great deal of capital was required. Thirdly, the
cost of perhaps the most potent innovation applicable to the tradi-
tional sheep-corn area, the “floating of the water meadows”, was
beyond the reach of the small farmers.195

Similarly, where lands were turned from arable to the revolutionary
system of up-and-down husbandry — which allowed for the inter-
dependent growth of both animal and arable output — it was nearly
always capitalist farmers who were responsible. As Kerridge puts it,
“making an up-and-down farm was not a thing any one could do. It
took boldness, patience, and plenty of capital”. This was because big
changes were required in the layout of the farm, in its equipment,
and in the time required to yield returns. Not surprisingly, therefore,
ine those areas where up-and-down husbandry was adopted during the
early modern period, accelerating especially from the later part of the
sixteenth century — the Midland Plain, the Vales, the north-east
lowlands — these developments were accompanied by the massive
decline of small farmers.196

It appears that small farmers were also at a disadvantage in cattle

193 Kerridge, “Agriculture, c. 1500-1793”, pp. 61, 49, 54, 57-9, 63-4.
rearing. The graziers, it seems, tended to be big capitalists who had plenty of investment funds and could afford to wait. This was, at any rate, the case on those lands which were turned over to permanent grass from permanent arable, a specialization carried out to bring the husbandry into closer accord with the suitability of the soil. In these areas a great deal of capital was applied for enclosure and restructuring of the farms.\(^\text{197}\)

On the other hand, small men could and did survive in particular lines where they could be as efficient as large — above all in dairying, but also in market gardening close by the towns. The small farmers maintained a stronghold in the pastoral regions, where they carried on a multiplicity of small commercial agricultural (for example hemp, flax) and industrial activities. Even so, the restricted range of agricultural possibilities open to these highly commercialized small farmers must be emphasized. In turn, they owed their very existence to the increases in productivity of the grain producing areas, which allowed them to export their growing food surpluses.\(^\text{198}\)

Finally, it needs to be emphasized that the advantages of the system of capitalist agriculture, in comparison with a system based on peasant possessors, is not merely a question of the advantages of larger versus smaller farmers in particular agricultural lines, their superior capacity to make this or that “once and for all” specialization or improvement. Perhaps most significant is the tendency of capitalist property relations to enforce, by way of competition, a systematic drive towards specialization and improvement as an ongoing process in the economy as a whole — to a social and geographic division of labour. Thus we find in England not only the early development of a complex system of interdependent regional specialization, in which the development of one specialized area fed off and fed into the development of the next, but a continuing evolution and transformation of this system as new techniques became available. This is exemplified with the rise of the very potent systems of “mixed farming” in which, schematically


\(^{198}\) In the foregoing context, national averages of farm sizes like those put in evidence by Cooper hide more than they reveal about the transformation of agricultural production in England; for, as we have seen, this was the opposite of an homogeneous process. It was, on the contrary, characterized by the greatest variation in farm size, by region, terrain and crop. The survival of numerous small farmers — leading to a relatively low national average size of farms — is explained in ways which in no way contradict our argument: by the competitiveness of small farmers in pastoral regions and in horticulture; by the disinterest of big farmers in areas of poor soils; by the security of tenure enjoyed by peasants in a few regions. It should be noted, moreover, that the weight of small farming in agriculture is exaggerated when it is measured in terms of the proportion of small farms out of the total number, rather than the proportion of the total cultivated surface covered by small farms — or better still, the proportion of good corn-producing land covered by such farms. See Cooper, “In Search of Agrarian Capitalism”, pp. 25-6. Cooper makes many of these same points himself.
speaking, the increased cultivation of fodder crops was used to support the production of animals, which in turn fed back into ongoing grain production, with fallows abolished. This system was much more adaptable to the light sandy soils than to the heavy clayey ones which had hitherto provided England with much of its grain. As a result, during the seventeenth century one witnesses a wholesale transformation of formerly grain producing areas, particularly Midland England, towards animal production. The accompanying "depopulation" and freeing of labour opened the way for the rise of new industries in the adjacent locales, among them leather goods (connected with animal raising in the area), lace, hosiery and clothmaking. Meanwhile, the light-soil areas of the southern part of the country became even more fully devoted to grain. Consequently, demand for agricultural labour in the arable areas intensified, and industrial production in these areas tended correspondingly to decline. Instead, these regions exported grain to support industry and non-food commercial agriculture elsewhere.199

(III.2.2.b) Large Tenant Farms in France and England

What, then, is to be said about the fact, brought against me by both Croot and Parker and by Cooper, that large tenant farms using wage labour did ultimately become preponderant in some regions in France, especially in the later seventeenth century, yet do not appear to have been associated with improvement or to have brought progress to their regions? Does this invalidate the interpretation? In my original essay I pointed to the same phenomenon and advanced an explanation: that despite its similarity in outward form, the system of production characterized by large demesnes which emerged in parts of France in the early modern period expressed in reality the existence of very different social-productive relations from those which obtained in England.200 The underlying point I tried to make was that to analyse the productive potentials associated with a given system of property relations — indeed, to fully define that system — it is not enough to focus on individual units of production; their place within the economic system as a whole must be specified. One needs, in this case, to comprehend the larger individual units in their interrelations with the other agricultural productive units, as well as with those in industry. In fact the large tenant farm in seventeenth-century France tended to function very differently than did its English counterpart, not only because it represented the outcome of a very

different historical evolution, but especially because it operated within a very different overall property system — one which remained in its basis dynamic peasant-dominated.

Thus, larger tenant farms as a rule represented the outcome of processes whereby the French landlords were able for the first time to assert their property over what had formerly been peasant land. Just as the original process of dispossessing the peasantry in England had depended to a large degree upon the operation of the system of surplus extraction by extra-economic compulsion (in particular, the feudal right to levy variable fines), so it did in France. In France, however, it was growing royal levies of taxes, combined with the devastating direct effects of military conflict on the villagers’ properties, which made it possible for accumulators of the land to undermine the peasants’ position (often already weakened by the extreme fragmentation of holdings). The first significant wave of expropriations came during the Wars of Religion, and they were concentrated especially in areas directly exposed to fighting, notably Burgundy and the Paris region. A second significant wave of engrossment accompanied the internal and external conflicts of the second third of the seventeenth century, especially the years of the Fronde. Again, it was the undermining effect of rising fiscal pressures, exacerbated by military depredations, which forced peasants into debt and ultimately to sell out to local proprietors.201

The large units of property which emerged in France from the foregoing processes appeared similar to those of England. However, they arose within an environment in which they remained surrounded — in their immediate environs and throughout France — by a massive, albeit semi-landless peasantry. As a result, they took on an economic dynamic very different from that of their English counterparts. The appropriation of peasant land by village engrossers — which only exacerbated the effects of the subdivisions of holdings, consequent on peasant population growth — left masses of peasants on holdings too small to provide subsistence, having to seek leases and supplementary employment to make ends meet.202 Meanwhile, the weakness of agricultural productivity, bound up with peasant-based production, restricted the French home market and the industrial sector, leaving few alternative employments outside agriculture. In the last


202 For the maintenance of large numbers of mini-peasant producers, alongside the great farms, see Jacquart, Crise rurale en Ile-de-France, pp. 721, 724-7, 741-2; Le Roy Ladurie, “De la crise ultime à la vrai croissance”, in Duby and Wallon (eds.), Histoire de la France rurale, ii, pp. 414, 428.
analysis it was the demand for land for subsistence by peasants confined to the countryside which thus continued to determine the level of rents, despite the rise of large units of property and production.\textsuperscript{203} This was manifested in the secular rise in rents through much of the seventeenth century, as the continuing erosion of the peasants' share of the surface determined a continuing growth in demand for land, even after population had reached its peak.\textsuperscript{204}

In the foregoing economic context, the best returns obviously could be made simply by squeezing the tenants (directly by raising rent). Correlatively it made sense for the proprietors to desist from investment in fixed capital and to plough their receipts back into the purchase of more land. This squeezing sometimes took place directly through leasing the demesne in small bundles to peasant tenants. Very often, however, the demesne was taken over by a large farmer. But these big tenants tended to play more the role of financial intermediaries between the lord and the mass of the peasantry than that of independent capitalists. They did provide some investment funds, especially for large ploughs and for animals. But other capital expenditures appear to have been restricted, and labour-intensive techniques favoured. The big tenants appear to have been, in the last analysis, the lords' dependants: more or less "stuck" on the land, they had few economic alternatives and were allowed relatively little scope to accumulate surpluses. They relieved the lords of direct responsibility for managing the lands, while carrying out myriad seigneurial administrative tasks such as collections and justice for them.\textsuperscript{205} In turn the lords, recruited increasingly from the ranks of the high officials and urban bourgeoisie, appear to have adopted a largely passive approach to their estates, making few improvements while buying ever more land. But this "rentier mentality" had a good and sufficient material basis — the profitability of rent-squeezing methods of surplus extraction in the face of endemic peasant land hunger.

I did indeed argue that a more productive and more collaborative relationship had by this time emerged between lord and tenant in

\textsuperscript{203} For the upward pressure on rents from small, often sub-subsistence peasants who would pay significantly higher rates per acre than big tenants, see J. Jacquart, "La rente foncière, indice conjuncturel", Revue historique, ccliii (1975), pp. 372-4. See also B. Veyrassat-Herren and E. Le Roy Ladurie, "La rente foncière autour de Paris au XVIIe siècle", Annales. E.S.C., xiii (1968), pp. 549-55; Cooper, "In Search of Agrarian Capitalism", p. 48.

\textsuperscript{204} For the fluctuations in rent in the north of France — its rise through the period of the Religious Wars; its fall-off after that; its recovery to its old high levels rather early in the seventeenth century; and its accelerated increase from around 1640 — see Jacquart, "Immobilisme et catastrophes", pp. 251-2; Jacquart, "Rente foncière, indice conjuncturel", p. 365.

\textsuperscript{205} See Jacquart's comment: the labourers "were never anything but the mandataires [representatives], at the heart of the rural world, of those who held the true elements of power" : Jacquart, Crise rurale en Ile-de-France, pp. 756-7.
significant areas of England, helping to underwrite continuing development. Cooper considers that in so doing I have somehow attributed distinctively charitable motives and productive intentions to English landlords ("Professor Brenner sounds like a Tory defender of the Corn Laws"). But no such thing is contained in my argument (nor do I imply that French lords were somehow backward or anti-entrepreneurial). My point is simply that the different social-productive conditions which had come to prevail in England and France by the later seventeenth century made for different strategies to best protect and improve landlord incomes. In England, especially in the grain growing regions, capitalist farmers controlled a highly capital-intensive husbandry, and the numbers of landholding peasants had declined drastically. In this situation, landlord incomes depended upon the tenants’ ability to farm effectively on the basis of capital investment. Capitalist profits were, in short, a condition for landlord rents. To the degree that the landlords attempted to squeeze tenants, preventing them from making a reasonable profit on their investment, the latter might cease to invest, and ultimately give up their leases, moving to another farm or perhaps even another line of production. On the other hand, there existed no mass of semi-proletarianized peasantry on the land — let alone one which could afford to pay a rent equivalent to that paid by the capitalist tenants. Economic success, in brief, depended on accumulation and innovation and, in this context, when the tenant was short of funds it was at times in the interest of the landlord to take over, to some degree, the function of capital investment (in which case the landlord would take part of his return in the form of profit). Thus the sort of landlord-tenant symbiosis to which I referred had a good economic rationale and tended to condition a dynamic agricultural development. Cooper is in the end obliged to acknowledge that its existence has been verified again and again for the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The qualitative difference between the anatomically similar English and French large farms is strikingly evidenced in their manifestly different functioning in the period of low grain prices of the later seventeenth century. Excellent profits could still be made in English agriculture in this period, provided that the appropriate steps were taken to make farms more efficient. On lands suitable for grain this meant an intensification and expansion of the advanced forms of sheep-corn husbandry — the greater use of fodder crops, enclosure, the build-up of larger farms. On formerly arable lands appropriate to pasture, good returns were possible through the transformation to

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206 Cooper, "In Search of Agrarian Capitalism", pp. 53, 55-6.
permanent grass, or to up-and-down husbandry, usually requiring enclosure and the construction of essentially new farm operations. The build-up of productive units, the input of capital and the acceleration of innovation were what was required in both cases. That this was, indeed, what took place provides convincing evidence for the grip of capitalist production relations on English agriculture in this period, as well as the superiority of these relations.\textsuperscript{208}

The response of the French proprietors to the low food prices of the period from the 1660s was in marked contrast to that of their English counterparts, as Cooper himself points out. In the face of a declining market for agricultural products, a market which "indicated" that rents "should" be lowered to correspond to lowered prices, they insisted on raising them. As a result, a great number of their tenants, including their larger tenants, were caught in a squeeze between high rents and low prices, were pushed into debt and ultimately were forced to yield up their farms to their lord, as well as much of their accumulated property, including farm implements and even household furnishings.\textsuperscript{209} This did not, however, indicate that the French landlords were more or less rational, more or less charitable than their English counterparts; they simply faced a different situation. When the bad times hit after 1660, it made sense for the French lords to shift the burden to their tenants, because they could get away with it and still profit handsomely. Rents appear to have been kept up, on the one hand, by the demand from semi-landless peasants, who were apparently willing to intensify their labour to be better able to pay more to the lords. On the other hand, the big tenants appear to have been unable to avoid continuing to pay high rents because they had no place else to go. They ended up, in many cases, handing over to the lords every last bit of their accumulated capital in order to hold on to their leases, before going under. Jacquart thus refers to the "lamination" of the farmers and rural merchants in this period.\textsuperscript{210} Of course, in the end market forces were bound to assert themselves. But they did so only in the long run. In many cases, landlords were able to sustain high rents in the face of low prices for a generation. While rents were kept up in the north of France until 1700,\textsuperscript{211} the French agricultural base continued to be eroded.

\textsuperscript{208} Thirsk, "Seventeenth-Century Agriculture and Social Change", pp. 155-7; Cooper, "In Search of Agrarian Capitalism", pp. 53-6. Thus the fact that many landlords adopted a draconian policy towards their small tenants does not controvert my argument, as Cooper suggests, but further supports it.

\textsuperscript{209} Jacquart, \textit{Crise rurale en Ile-de-France}, pp. 742, 744-8; Jacquart, "Immobilisme et catastrophes", pp. 254-5, 261-5.

\textsuperscript{210} Jacquart, \textit{Crise rurale en Ile-de-France}, pp. 747-8.

\textsuperscript{211} Jacquart, "Rente foncière, indice conjoncturel", p. 365.
(III.2.2.c) Agricultural Production: The Long-Term Results in England versus France

The long-term outcome of the operation of these very different systems of social-property relations in England and France was only to intensify the sharp disparity in their respective agricultural performances. This conclusion has recently been disputed by a revisionist school (apparently supported, although inconsistently, by Cooper), which has sought to deny what was for long an accepted orthodoxy. Thus Cooper implies that it was the greater exposure to the devastations of warfare which explains any weakness of French agriculture relative to English agriculture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.212 Other historians have argued in turn that especially from the early eighteenth century, with the end of the worst excesses of absolutism, French agriculture experienced an impressive growth which compared quite favourably with that of England.213

The revisionist case depends, however, on the findings of Toutain, contained in a large-scale macro-study of French national income. Toutain’s data have been largely discredited.214 Certainly they are accepted by few students of the French agricultural history of the eighteenth century. On the basis of their studies of tithe returns — as well as less direct evidence — almost all have concluded that agriculture stagnated at least to 1750.215

The evidence for England is less direct than for France, but the results are fairly clear. English population was about 2.2 million in 1450; it exceeded 5 million by 1700. At the same level of population in the fourteenth century, there had been chronic famine and crisis. By 1700, subsistence crisis had already been, for a long time, a thing of the past. The last even relatively severe one had occurred in 1597, but even this was not serious by Continental standards. Meanwhile,

212 Cooper, “In Search of Agrarian Capitalism”, p. 59. It seems to me that his position on this question in this article is profoundly contradictory, and I have made use of the evidence he himself offers against this view.
215 Le Roy Ladurie thinks that I do not in my essay sufficiently appreciate French agricultural progress in the pre-industrial period, but I am perfectly in accord with his own summary: “On the whole, from the fourteenth century to the first part of the eighteenth century, the agricultural product was without doubt agitated by fluctuation . . . but it was not animated, in the very long run, by a durable movement of growth . . . A true growth takes form . . . only after 1750, and then often in a hesitant fashion”: Le Roy Ladurie “Masses profondes: la paysannerie”, p. 575. See also Le Roy Ladurie, “De la crise ultime à la vrai croissance”, p. 395.
by 1700, perhaps up to half the population was in non-agricultural pursuits, having to be supported by agricultural producers. At the same time, England had become Europe’s largest grain exporter.

What about the eighteenth century? For this period, approximations of English and French agricultural growth have been based largely on an assumed constant per capita consumption of grain. On this assumption population growth can provide, in gross terms, a good indicator of the rate of growth of the food supply. As Cooper explains, the case of the revisionists that English agricultural growth in the first part of the eighteenth century was not relatively greater than the French is based on outmoded demographic data (the Bowley-Rickman estimates). More recent figures supplied by the Cambridge Group, on the basis of data from parish registers, show that (while food prices were relatively stable) English population was growing much faster than earlier estimates indicate. This evidences a much more rapid growth in agricultural output for the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century than had been previously thought. Cooper ends up by concluding that “there probably was appreciable growth of agricultural output in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when French output was stagnant or falling, and the English rate of growth would have been much faster than the French until 1750”. “By 1760”, he says, “the differences between English and French agricultures were certainly much greater than in 1560, even if the comparison is restricted to the predominantly arable regions of open-field France”.

(III.2.2.d) French and English Agriculture in European Comparative Perspective

The development of agriculture elsewhere in Europe in the early modern period tends to confirm the foregoing relationships and patterns.

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217 Cooper, “In Search of Agrarian Capitalism”, pp. 23, 24, 59. Looking at the eighteenth century as a whole, and using analogous methods, E. L. Jones has come to similar conclusions. He finds that whereas in England and Wales in 1700 one person employed in farming fed 1.7 persons, in 1800 one person fed 2.5 persons, an increase of 47 per cent. In France the equivalent calculation is that in 1701 one person fed 1.2 persons, and in 1789 one person fed 1.3 persons, an increase of only 8 per cent: Jones, “Introduction: Industrial Patterns and their Rural Backgrounds”, pp. 27-9.
The Dutch Case. Cooper and Le Roy Ladurie refer to the rise of progressive Dutch agriculture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as if it exemplifies their argument that a peasant-dominated agricultural economy could, in the early modern period, provide the foundation for agricultural breakthrough. Yet, what is most significant about the Dutch agrarian structure at the start of the early modern period is its systematic difference from the typical west European feudal-peasant pattern. There had never been a strongly-rooted lordly class capable of extracting a surplus by means of extra-economic compulsion, and by 1500 the landed class received exclusively economic rents. Equally significant, there had never been a traditional "patriarchal", "possessing" peasantry, with direct, non-market access to its means of subsistence. Agriculture could be established, apparently, only on the basis of small dairy and livestock production; as a result, from the start, farmers had little choice but to specialize output for exchange, for they had to buy grain in the market in order to subsist. From very early on, moreover, tenantry appears to have been widespread, further enforcing the tendency to competitive market production.

Given this non-feudal, non-peasant social-property structure, it is perhaps not surprising that, from the sixteenth century onwards, Dutch agriculture experienced no tendency towards a demographically powered evolution on the basis of ensconced peasant possessors — the familiar Malthusian pattern leading to morcellation, declining productivity, and crisis. Instead, under pressure from the urban markets there took place a process of economic growth based on competition and differentiation: highly specialized market production led to the supercession of smallholders and the build-up of large farms, on the basis of capital investment, technical change and the introduction of wage labour.

The Flemish Case. Finally both Cooper and Le Roy Ladurie point to the precocious improvement of Flemish agriculture in the early

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218 Cooper, "In Search of Agrarian Capitalism", p. 30 n. 47; Le Roy Ladurie, "Reply to Professor Brenner", p. 59.
221 DeVries, Dutch Rural Economy, p. 33.
222 It is notable that DeVries explicitly conceptualizes the specificity of the Dutch agrarian development as following a "specialization" as opposed to a "peasant" model: DeVries, Dutch Rural Economy, passim.
modern period, which was indeed operated by very small agriculturalists.\textsuperscript{224} Does this case prove that peasants could and did provide the basis for a breakthrough to agricultural and, in turn, economic development in the early modern period? It needs to be noted at the outset that the small Flemish agriculturalists generally did not possess their means of subsistence. It appears, in fact, that an important phase in separating the peasants from the “possession” of the land — and thus in conditioning agricultural development — took place during the reconstruction of the countryside in the wake of the late medieval population drop-off, when landlords turned customary tenures to leasehold. In any case, in the early modern period Flemish agriculture was primarily carried out either by commercial tenants or by mini-freeholders whose farms were too small to produce “for subsistence”. Both had to produce for the market and to specialize in order to survive.\textsuperscript{225}

What made it not only necessary for these small producers to specialize and improve for the market, but also possible to do so successfully, was firstly the easy availability of grain brought in from eastern Europe. Massive grain imports from east Germany and Poland gave the Flemish cultivators relative freedom from the usual pressures to orient production to the variety of subsistence needs, in order to avoid dependence on the market for survival. Such security of supply in basic necessities was not, of course, available to most of Europe’s peasantry, which was in general obliged to be self-reliant.\textsuperscript{226} Correlatively, the Flemish peasants’ immediate access to the great Flemish industrial centres — they were located in the shadows of the Flemish towns — gave them ready and consistent markets, and made specialization that much less risky.\textsuperscript{227} Finally, and indispensably, the Flemish farmers’ proximity to the cities gave them access to the big urban supplies of fertilizer (human and animal). Fertilizer from the towns was a linchpin of their entire productive enterprise, which would have been very difficult without it.\textsuperscript{228}

\textsuperscript{224} Cooper, “In Search of Agrarian Capitalism”, pp. 30-1; Le Roy Ladurie, “Reply to Professor Brenner”, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{228} “The model functions in full only near cities . . . which furnish the necessary complements of fertilizer”: Le Roy Ladurie, “De la crise ultime à la vrai croissance”, p. 414.
It must be emphasized that these minifarmers did not, by and large, produce basic food crops. They specialized, rather, in all sorts of industrial crops, in dairy products and in market gardening.\textsuperscript{229} It was not, therefore, the small Flemish agriculturalist who supported the expanding Flemish industrial centres. On the contrary, neither the specialized, Flemish small peasant agriculture, nor the advanced Flemish industry could have flourished had it not been for grain imports from the east.

In view of all its special features, it is hardly surprising that Flemish-type agriculture barely spread at all beyond the regions in which it originally found a home. Are we to suppose that the neighbouring peasants of northern France were somehow too conservative to copy their Flemish brethren? Did the Enlightenment come early to the Catholic peasants of Flanders, while it eluded their less favoured counterparts not too many miles away in Normandy, Cambrésis, Picardy and other places? Le Roy Ladurie himself, writing elsewhere, is careful to describe the Flemish agricultural developments as “aberrant” and to point out that they “seem to develop in isolation” (in a “vase clos”) — precisely because of the peculiar, urbanized, grain-importing conditions of the region.\textsuperscript{230} Is it not clear that this is the exception that proves the rule?

One qualification to conclude these considerations on the potentials of pre-industrial peasant agriculture: what was “the rule” in medieval and early modern Europe cannot be taken to hold good for all times and all places. For the relationships between certain property systems and certain paths of economic evolution, especially of the development of the productive forces, are not governed by trans-historical laws. In particular, once breakthroughs to ongoing capitalist economic development took place in various regions, these irrevocably transformed the conditions and character of the analogous processes which were to occur subsequently elsewhere. Over time, and especially in the course of the nineteenth century, the significance for economic advance of agriculture based on small owner-operators was altered. The incentives for production for the market grew; the pressures to orient production to subsistence declined; and the technical potential of the small family farm was expanded. As the rise of industry made available an ever wider range of commodities at low costs, there were tremendous inducements for the peasants to give up home production of necessities, and to specialize and buy what they needed on the market. With ever-expanding world supplies in basic food and improved transportation to make these accessible, there was

\textsuperscript{229} Mendels, “Agriculture and Peasant Industry”, passim.
decreasing risk in specialization. Finally, with the development of artificial fertilizers and the growth of biological knowledge towards the end of the nineteenth century, the small family farm obtained positive advantages in certain production lines. Especially in the new forms of animal (combined with fodder crop) production ("polyculture-élevage"), the best techniques were as applicable to small as to large farms and required little capital. Moreover, the small family farmer could apply a quality and care in labour necessary for animal production which was usually unattainable on capitalist farms using wage labour. These developments naturally made much more likely a "smooth" transition from peasant to essentially capitalist farming, without the need for extra-economic processes to separate the direct producer from the means of subsistence -- the continuity of the family farm.

CONCLUSION: INDUSTRY, AGRICULTURE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

It was the growth of agricultural productivity, rooted in the transformation of agrarian class or property relations, which allowed the English economy to embark upon a path of development foreclosed to its Continental neighbours. This path was distinguished by continuing industrialization and overall economic growth through the period when "general crisis" gripped the other European economies, and into the epoch of the Industrial Revolution.

Now, quite possibly, the spectacular rise of English cloth production for export from the later fifteenth century -- powerfully supplemented by population growth a bit later -- was what set off the overall process of English economic development in the early modern period. It may well have provided the initial pressure of demand which set in motion the highly responsive agricultural productive system. Nevertheless, it is critical to emphasize that the English cloth export industry, like its Continental counterparts, was characterized by its continuity with and similarity to the great medieval cloth industries of Flanders and northern Italy: it responded to the same feudal dynamics, was subject to the same feudally based limitations, and could not therefore provide the foundations for continuing growth. It grew up on the basis of its ability to capture a large segment of a growing European demand for essentially luxury products, rooted in growing upper- and middle-class incomes, based finally on the "growth phase" of the European economy extending from the later

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fifteenth century. But like its predecessors of the medieval period, the growth of the English cloth industry for export was strictly limited by the restricted size of the European market, ultimately bounded by the system’s inability to transform agricultural production. Thus the English cloth export industry, like all of its Continental counterparts, inevitably began to falter as population and production on the Continent reached a ceiling and began to descend into crisis in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The intensified competition experienced not only by the English cloth export industry, but by all of the major Continental cloth export industries, was an indication that the market had reached a point of saturation. Beyond that point there might be some redistribution of market shares among the national cloth export industries, but industry as a whole could not grow significantly. Henceforth, every Continental region sank, sooner or later, into the interrelated agricultural and industrial crisis of the seventeenth century.

What, therefore, marks off the English economy from those of all its European neighbours in the seventeenth century was not only its capacity to maintain demographic increase beyond the old Malthusian limits but its ability to sustain continuing industrial and overall economic growth, in the face of the crisis and stagnation of the traditionally predominant cloth export industry. Although perhaps originally dynamized by cloth exports, the continuing English industrial expansion was founded upon a growing domestic market, rooted ultimately in the continuing transformation of agricultural production. It was, by contrast, the restricted and declining home market — undermined by decaying agricultural productivity — which was at the root of the widespread drop-off in manufacturing production throughout France, west Germany and eastern Europe.

The fact that the industrial development of Continental Europe continued to be fettered by its feudal agrarian base throughout the early modern period is finally confirmed by the constricted developmental path of even its most advanced region, the United Provinces. By the early seventeenth century, Dutch shipping dominated the European carrying trade and may have constituted the economy’s most dynamic sector. There was also an impressive cloth industry for export, located especially at Leiden. Furthermore, important paper, brewing, bleaching, baking, and brick and tile making industries, at

least partly for export, grew up in this period. Meanwhile, a vital agricultural sector developed rapidly by carrying specialization by region, and especially in relationship to the European economy, to an extremely high pitch.

The problem was, however, that all of these developments were spurred by and dependent upon the general growth of the European economy over the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century. The industrial and agricultural sectors were heavily dependent upon grain imports from eastern Europe for their existence. Even more significantly, both shipping and cloth, as well as a number of other leading Dutch industries, were dependent upon overseas export markets, and thus overseas production. This was eventually true also of Dutch agriculture. In sum, Dutch production hardly constituted an economy in its own right; it grew up as an integral part of the overall European economy and naturally shared its fate.

It was predictable, then, that as the European economy as a whole moved into stagnation and crisis at various points in the seventeenth century, the Dutch economy would be profoundly affected. The carrying trade was perhaps most sensitive to the general European crisis, stagnating after 1650. Cloth, too, could not help but be hurt, the output of Leiden falling by one-third between 1650 and 1700. Because it was so deeply rooted in the European economy, the Dutch economy could not turn back in upon itself when the crisis came. The Dutch had simply built too great an edifice on shaky foundations. The region’s advanced economic organization had allowed it to dominate the growing markets of Europe’s economy in “phase A”. But when these markets inevitably reached their limit, the Dutch economy was bound to fall back. Enmeshed in what remained an essentially feudal circuit of production, the Dutch economy was slowly strangled, as that circuit gradually constricted with the onset of “phase B”.233

By contrast, the English economy of the early modern period witnessed the gradual construction of mutually interdependent, mutually self-developing agricultural and industrial sectors at home. That English production had already begun to orient towards a developing home market by the second quarter of the seventeenth century appears to be evidenced in the relatively small degree to which the dramatic crisis of the traditional cloth export trade in this period disrupted the economy as a whole. The economic “crisis” was largely

233 For the foregoing paragraphs, see especially Van der Woude, “A.A.G. Bijdragen and the Study of Dutch Rural History”, pp. 227-41. Schöffer comments: “To a certain degree, we can call the economic prosperity of the Dutch Republic parasitical . . . [It] was bound to Europe in all its fibres . . . Holland’s prosperity waned after 1660, the Republic was also enmeshed in the B-phase of European economic development”: I. Schöffer, “Did Holland’s Golden Age Coincide with a Period of Crisis?”, Acta historiae Neerlandica, i (1966), pp. 100-1.
confined to the areas directly involved in cloth production for export, and was manifested in high levels of unemployment in these locales. But at the very same time (1615-40) there was a significant growth of all sorts of import trades: not only luxury goods for the upper classes but a wide range of consumer goods, such as fruits from Spain, currants from the Levant, spices from the Indies, tobacco from America. This seems to indicate the existence of a substantial middle-class, even lower-class, market at home. The appearance of an actual glut in grain production in these years, with accompanying lower prices, seems to have eased the effects of the cloth crisis and provided the basis for continuing growth.

The continuing dynamism of the English economy in the second half of the seventeenth century evidenced the transformation which had occurred. During this time, as Thirsk explains, there was a rapid growth of a whole range of industries which had their beginnings in the Tudor period (including stocking knitting, lace making, linen weaving and so forth), as well as a host of other “consumer industries” (knives, edge tools, hats, pots and the like). It is difficult to assign quantitative weight to these developments. Nevertheless, the “macro-economic” trends seem to confirm the impression that there was a significantly growing home market for industrial goods. Demographic growth continued through the end of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, and population continued to shift from agriculture into industry and from the rural towards the urban areas, as there was a big growth not only of London, but also of Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham. Even so, grain prices ceased to rise. This allowed real wages to increase, a new golden age for working people. With agriculture providing growing discretionary incomes and increasing purchasing power not only to the middle but to the lower classes, the home market continued to grow. Industry fed on agriculture and stimulated in turn further agricultural improvement — an upward spiral that extended into the Industrial Revolution.

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234 Supple, Commercial Crisis and Change in England, passim.
237 Thirsk, Economic Policy and Projects, ch. 5, and Conclusion.