THE IMPACT OF THE PLAGUES ON THE RURAL ECONOMY OF ENGLAND

THE ENGLISH LANDHOLDING SYSTEM IN COMPARISON WITH THE EGYPTIAN

In contrast to their Egyptian counterparts, English landholders had a much more direct economic interest in the welfare and management of their estates. This was due to several key structural differences. England's landholders retained their estates on a long-term basis, usually hereditarily, and therefore had a much longer financial time horizon, even if that horizon might seem short and inefficient by modern standards. Planning for the future revenue of their lands, even two or three years down the road, was long-term for Egyptians of the time. England's landholders were far more involved in the economic management of their estates. Granted, there was an intermediate body of reeves, bailiffs, and other stewards. Yet the estate managers and cultural filters in England formed a much thinner barrier than that faced by the Mamluk or amir in Egypt.

English landholders were far more likely to live in their manor houses or, failing that, they would at least visit their rural estates. Many of the Mamluk landholders by contrast had never even seen their estates. The notion of a rural manor did not exist in medieval Egypt. Estates in England were more geographically concentrated than those in Egypt. Again, there were exceptions, where several English landlords shared control of a village area. But on a relative scale, these exceptions were not significant.[1] This geographical concentration allowed England's landlords easier access to, and control of, their landed domains. The scattering of estates in Egypt (carried out by Sultan Muhammad al-Nasir in 1315) was specifically intended to prevent local landed power from establishing bases from which to foment rebellion. All of these factors meant that English landholders were far more attuned to the economics of rural labor's supply and demand and to its effect on their individual revenues. This was to play a critical role in the wake of plague depopulation.

Finally a word is needed here on "bargaining" between lord and peasant on a comparative scale. In the manorial economy of England and the Mamluk landholding system of Egypt, economic negotiations were mediated within the intersecting spheres of class relations and demographic-market forces. Negotiations for the terms of rent, tenure of usufruct, and the vast array of *consuetudines non taxatas* (*mudafat* and *diyafa* in Egypt) were carried out within both countries. In certain periods of medieval English history (e.g., the eleventh, early twelfth, late fourteenth, and early fifteenth centuries), class relations and the recourse to violence clearly played the dominant role in relation to market forces and demography. Between two periods of labor scarcity in England (the eleventh century and the fifteenth century) there was a critical shift in the structure of the rural economy: the development of factor markets for land and labor. England's landholding system in 1086 was shaped by the dynamics of an economy dominated by a commodity market. Within this restricted domain, "the lord was able to enforce this one-sided contract on his dependent workforce, despite the fact that labor rather than land was the scarce factor of production, because of his military monopoly and a tacit monopsony arrangement (an exclusive purchasing agreement) with his fellow barons and knights . . . the only alternative to the threat of force, both military and ecclesiastical, by manorial lords was competition between them. The latter, which would have increased the return to labor and reduced the manorial surplus, would not have been a rational undertaking by manorial lords within the economic circumstances of the late eleventh century."[2] The most important change that took place in the intervening period (1086–1300) was the emergence of land and labor markets and the capital markets and credit facilities that provided them with services.

Yet it should be noted that labor markets (and, to a lesser extent, land markets) existed in Egypt long before they had developed in England.[3] As we will see, it was the structure of the landholding system itself that played the crucial role in the wake of plague depopulation. Egyptian landholders were effectively unified and able to bargain collectively with rural labor. England's landholders, by comparison, were eventually driven to individual bargaining arrangements with their tenants. This was to be of momentous consequence for the subsequent history of the two economies.

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF DEPOPULATION

As the Black Death and the following plague outbreaks swept through England, the scarcity of rural labor exacerbated tensions between landlords and peasants.[4] Rural labor had been an abundant resource for so long that many landlords had become accustomed to relying on market forces as much as extra-economic compulsion to secure profits from their estates.[5] After this extensive period of demographic expansion, landlords now faced an environment of labor shortage like the one their Norman forebears had dealt with long ago. Servile tenants and leaseholders were seeking to have their rents reduced, and wageworkers on demesnes were demanding higher pay.

In a sense, fourteenth-century landlords tried to revert back to a previous era, an era when seigniorial authority had played the paramount role in surplus-extraction, when the Norman and early Plantagenet landlords had tightened the reins of serfdom during a time of relative labor scarcity.[6] Yet England in the late fourteenth century was a far different environment from the England of William the Conqueror or Henry II. The two periods of labor scarcity were separated by an unbridgeable gap of profound socioeconomic changes. Many of these changes had had a dramatic impact on the mentality and assertiveness of peasant communities.

The economy had become much more commercialized following the development and expansion of markets, regional and long-distance trade, credit mechanisms, and urban centers. The rule of law, in the framework of an increasingly centralized monarchy, had expanded. The legal proceedings of royal courts and, more importantly, manorial courts had become more standardized (as written records replaced oral records); they had also become more familiar to the peasantry. Estate management had improved. Coinage had largely replaced payments in kind. Labor dues had, for the most part, been replaced by cash payments from villeins and hired workers on the demesnes. The calculus of exploitation and customary restraints was now easier for the peasant to understand.[7]

It is worth noting that all these changes had taken place in Egypt long before: Fatimid Egypt in the tenth century was as commercialized as England in the early fourteenth century. Commercialization, centralization, and the development of legal institutions were all-important precursors to the economic outcome of the plagues in England. Yet these elements were equally present in Egypt and were not the central cause of the contrasting economic reactions to the plagues.[8]

Despite its impressive record of economic progress, England in the early fourteenth century was a country facing a number of problems. England was overpopulated, given the existing level of agrarian management and technology. As will be detailed below, this caused a host of problems that troubled the agrarian economy. It should also be noted here that overpopulation limited the scope for further economic specialization and the growth of rural industry. Christopher Dyer has argued that there was a limited demand for manufactured goods and that

> English industry was underdeveloped in relation to that of the continent; in particular English cloth-making seems to have been stagnating or even in retreat until the early fourteenth century . . . as a consequence of the large pool of labor, rates of pay were very low at the end of the thirteenth century, with unskilled workers often earning no more than 1d. per day, and full-time *famuli* commonly received annually 2s. to 5s. in cash and 4.5 to 6.5 quarters of cheap corn, which was barely enough to keep a family alive without income from land or a wife's employment. The rewards of trades such as potting must have been similarly meager. The multiplicity of small-scale food and drink retailers, as in the modern third world, indicates the widespread poverty that drove people into an activity which yielded at least some small profit.[9]

From the broader viewpoint of Western European history, David Levine characterizes this period as one in which "the secular boom ran out of steam. By 1300, the first cycle of early modernization, which had originated with the positive feedback mechanisms that congealed after the year 1000, was over. Rural Europe had become a low-level equilibrium trap in which demographic pressure seemed to forestall economic advance . . . the benefits of commercialization were largely thwarted."[10]

And many historians have raised questions of a much wider scope about the potential for future economic development within the confines of the manorial economy. John Hatcher has argued that demographic and market conditions were harsher than customary restraints in the late thirteenth century, yet also noting that "as in so many areas of medieval life, however, manorial custom and tradition acted as restraints upon innovation and enterprise."[11] Robert Brenner, a dubious source for the overall structure of class relations in thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century England, aptly paraphrases (and concurs with) the viewpoints of M. M. Postan, remarking that "on average something like 50 per cent of the un-free peasant's total product was extracted by the lord. This was entirely unproductive profit, for hardly any of it was ploughed back into production; most of it was squandered in military expenditures and conspicuous consumption."[12] Rodney Hilton put it more directly when he described the economic behavior of thirteenth-century English landlords: "their interest did not seem to go beyond the exaction of the maximum profit. The *idea* of *reinvesting* profit for the purpose of increasing production seems to have been present in the minds of few of the landlords" (emphasis in original).[13]

And as Christopher Dyer has characterized the system:

> The whole purpose of manors and estates was to concentrate wealth in to the hands of a few, who were then expected not to hoard or save, but to redistribute the goods among their followers and supporters in acts of generous giving. We may indeed be exposing one of the great weaknesses of the feudal economy, and one of the sources of its backwardness, because the rest of society was deprived of resources by the constant demand of the lords. It is scarcely surprising to find that such a consumption oriented society lacked investment capital.[14]

David Herlihy has gone as far as to propose that thirteenth-century England (and the rest of Western Europe) was trapped by the manorial system in a Malthusian deadlock that threatened to hold it "in its traditional ways for the indefinite future."[15]

None of these historians mean to suggest that the manorial system did not have capacity for growth. Yet what is striking here for a comparative historian is the notion of a landholding structure that was highly successful and yet had a limit beyond which it could not go. For the Middle East, the precedent is certainly well established. Scholars of medieval Egypt and other areas of the Islamic world can attest to the case of societies that exhibited remarkable growth in agricultural, civil, and proto-industrial technology, only to lapse into stagnation or decline.

So although England had outgrown the economic structure and sociological framework of early Anglo-Norman Britain, there remained a crucial question that was to play a central role in the post-plague outcome. Did landlords still have the ability to deal with labor scarcity, overcome peasant resistance, and once again intensify the mechanism of coercive surplus-extraction?

Some landlords tried to act alone in their dealings with the peasantry. For example, the abbot of Eynsham raised the price of entry fines in the 1350s and attempted to reinstitute labor dues. Money rent increases and the reimposition of labor dues were to be found on many other estates as well. Other examples include attempts at raising merchet payments and forcing tenants either to take up vacant holdings or to pay for not doing so.[16]

Yet the crucial step taken by the landlords was collective. Landlords articulated their economic demands, using Parliament to enforce them. Armed with the seal of Edward III's authority, Parliament approved first the Ordinance of Labourers (1349) and then the Statute of Labourers (1351).[17] Both of these measures were aimed at unifying landlords and imposing restrictions on wage increases and peasant mobility.[18] Violators—both lord and peasant—were to be punished. At first, these restrictions met with some success: the statutes were applied and at least some of the violators were punished.

However, these laws, combined with other factors (such as the experimental 1381 poll tax), galvanized peasant opposition, contributing to the Wat Tyler uprising. The rebels, appealing to the royal authority of Richard II, sought among other things the complete abolition of serfdom as a legal entity. Richard II made public concessions to the angry mob, concessions that were later rescinded as the rebels were hunted down and defeated.[19]

This rebellion was, in a sense, an unprecedented social insurrection in scale and scope, the like of which was not to be seen again until the seventeenth century.[20] Perhaps it sparked fear in the hearts of landlords and made them more reluctant to provoke the peasantry again. However, from the lens of comparative history, this rebellion should be viewed in a very different light, for this was exactly the type of struggle that would have ensured landlord victory. Armed conflict between unified bodies of heavily armed knights and peasant mobs, even if some of the peasants were armed with the deadly longbow of Crécy and Poitiers, was a highly uneven match.[21] As a unified force (or even cohesive forces of rival baronies), landlords were more than a match for peasant mobs with poorly articulated leadership, often vague goals, and few allies among other elements of society.[22] If this had been the battlefield of landlord-peasant strife, and legal measures had kept the English landlords united, they might well have been able to turn back the clock and change the economic outcome of the plagues' impact.[23]

But the struggle between landlord and peasant was not fought on the battlefield in a series of violent confrontations. It was rather to be a slow, steady, and inexorable war of economic attrition.[24] Rather than fight as armed insurrectionists, peasants simply pursued the increasingly available incentives of labor-market supply and demand and voted en masse with their feet. Peasants were willing and able to abandon estates if rent or wage conditions were not to their advantage.[25] As Rodney Hilton succinctly put it, "The English peasants were able to take advantage of economic and demographic circumstances which were themselves beyond their control, as they were beyond the control of the manorial lords and government."[26]

As the fourteenth century drew to a close, the attempts of landlords to act collectively, to "bargain" collectively—represented by labor legislation—slowly broke down. The fundamental dynamic behind this was the nature of landlord ownership. Despite aspects of absenteeism and the use of an intermediary body of reeves and bailiffs, English landlords remained, as owners, attuned to the revenue problems of their individual estates. Thus each landlord, as an individual economic actor, was faced with the stark reality of the direct effect of labor supply and demand on his revenues.[27] The bonds of ownership between landlord and manor led to individual bargaining on the part of the landlords. Yet landlords bargained as individual agents, whereas peasants relentlessly pressed their demands as a random yet economically collective force driven by the market dynamics of labor scarcity. As a result, economic competition between individual landlords in the labor market became increasingly fierce.[28] The brief attempt at collective landlord action broke down, and the peasants' demands were slowly but surely met: rents dropped, rural wages rose, customary fees and fines were reduced or abolished, and the manorial system, already on the wane, slowly fell apart.[29] The outcome of this battle had the most profound consequences for England's economic response to the plagues.

By the early 1400s, a multitude of economic changes began to take place in rural areas. One of these was the transformation of the geographical usage of land and labor along more economically efficient lines. Just as the previous century had witnessed the expansion of grain agriculture onto soils of marginal fertility, the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century witnessed a reversal of this process on a more dramatic scale. As wave after wave of epidemics depopulated the countryside, the nature of rural labor mobility changed.[30] Peasants slowly drifted away from soils less suited to arable farming. Marginal lands were either abandoned or devoted to pasture.[31] As Norman Cantor describes the situation: "Millions of acres [of forests had been] settled with peasant villages. The space preserved for grazing cattle and sheep in each village [had been] cut back. Less attractive land, on hillsides or on more chalky soil up to [the thirteenth century had fallen] to efforts at cultivation."[32] Aerial photographs show the extent to which villages on marginal land were abandoned after the Black Death.[33]

The increasing number of peasant smallholdings that had sprung up over the last century had been exhausted by the pressure of monoculture cropping without sufficient crop rotation, fallow time, manure, or other means of nitrogen replenishment.[34] These were gradually replaced by larger plots of land (usually under leasehold) where, given more fallow time and more animals per capita, fertility rose and convertible husbandry could be practiced more intensively.[35] The relocation of rural labor and the structural changes in the size of peasant holdings had profound consequences for the agrarian economy as a whole.[36] Although total agricultural output declined, the decline was substantially less than the proportional decline of the population because both the marginal and average products of labor rose as marginal lands were abandoned or transformed. This redistribution thus led to a rise in per capita output for rural labor and a rise in per capita income for England as a whole.

The economic "defeat" of landlords was thus no zero-sum game. In and of itself, the prominent rise in the average and marginal products of agrarian labor meant that falling rents and rising wages were not a simple redistribution of income down the socioeconomic pyramid. Landlord incomes did drop, but they were more than offset by the gains of the rest of the population.[37] The agricultural production function shifted outward on a per capita basis. Furthermore, equally important shifts in demand and in factor endowments of supply were to follow.

As Hatcher remarks of the general rise in living standards, "To use the language of the economist, the real wage was a measure of the marginal productivity of labor, and this in turn must have been closely related to the welfare of the population at large."[38] It must be emphasized that from the landlords' point of view this was nothing less than a catastrophic agrarian depression (a drop in income ranging from twenty-five to fifty percent from 1348 to the mid-fifteenth century). They were the relative losers in terms of land and labor, the two major factor endowments for this period. And as Christopher Dyer points out, they were "caught (metaphorically) between the blade of the [price] scissors."[39] They lost income from falling grain prices; they paid out more cash to hired labor; they received less cash from customary and leasehold rents; and they had to pay more for manufactures (a serious problem given that two-thirds of their expenditures went to goods other than food). Their real income expressed in its power to purchase goods thus dropped even further. Some of this loss was eased by the closing of the price scissors in the fifteenth century, when the price of manufactures fell; but the prices of lower-quality, higher-quantity goods fell more than those of luxury manufactures. The consequent trend was for the aristocracy to consume lower quantities of more refined luxury goods, partly because of the cultural pressure from those below their class enjoying relatively higher incomes.[40] Yet the loss in revenue suffered by landlords was far less than the drop in total agricultural output (total kilograms of grain per year), since most of the loss stemmed from the same factors—lower rents, higher wages, and falling grain prices.[41] Nicholas Mayhew's estimates for 1470 show a very marked rise in living standards for most of the population (i.e., those below the top of the social pyramid).[42]

As peasant incomes grew, elastic demand for noncereal products rose in tandem. Demand for meat and dairy products—the output of land redirected to pasture—increased significantly.[43] Demand for more diversified noncereal crops rose, as did demand for proto-industrial goods, including cloth from the expanded output of wool from pasture.[44] On the supply side of the economy, both landlords and peasants responded by increasing the output of noncereal goods. Landlords, facing a new economic terrain, were forced to adapt. Many of them did, and took advantage of differential factor endowments.[45] Not only did this mean the spread of pasture and increased supplies of meat and dairy products, but it also entailed crop diversification, the expansion of proto-industrial crops such as flax, dye plants, and hemp, and cheaper inputs of raw wool for the growing cloth industry.[46] More than ever before, these items found their way to market. For example, a higher percentage of meat was sold at local markets and in urban areas.[47] Peasants, of their own accord or under the direction and financial encouragement of urban merchants, expanded the realm of proto-industry, shifting, to some extent, the center of gravity from urban guilds to rural industry.[48]

The most prominent example of this shift was in the cloth industry, which grew by a factor of five from the fourteenth to the fifteenth century. Although the export of raw wool to Italy and Flanders plummeted, the production of finished cloth for both the domestic and export markets increased dramatically.[49] Some areas specialized in high-grade cloth for export, previously the domain of Flemish and Italian weavers. The customs revenue of England now came primarily from the export of cloth.[50] As Christopher Dyer succinctly put it, "England, once an exporter of raw materials, now supplied the European markets with manufactured goods."[51]

Yet an even more important factor here was the rural production of goods for the domestic market. In the cloth industry, peasant weavers, both independent producers and weavers working for urban merchants, took advantage of the redistribution of income and produced lower-grade cloth on a mass scale for the domestic market.[52] This type of manufacture—cheaper, lower quality, more homogenous, larger in scale, and produced for a wider income range—was the type of production that set important precursors for later developments in early modern proto-industry.[53] No other rural industry demonstrated as much progress as the cloth industry, and much of its success was confined to the southeast of England.[54] But new developments in other areas of rural industry appeared, widening the potential growth of factor markets in land, labor, and capital.[55] These were to have a significant impact in later Tudor and Stuart England.

Economic opportunities for those below the top of the social pyramid thus expanded, and this created a cycle of positive feedback. This positive feedback loop was in many ways the reverse of what was taking place in Egypt at the same time. The lower and middle strata of England's rural population were slowly pulled toward the marketplace, just as the same group was being pushed away in Egypt. The poorest members of agrarian society figured prominently in this process. Holders of tiny subsistence plots were now able to find more productive outlets for their labor.[56] The same applied to the outsiders of England's economic landscape, those who had retreated into complete autarchy.[57] Whether they took up short-term leaseholds from landlords, entered the agrarian milieu as wageworkers for landlords, or worked for other leaseholders, they were generally able to improve their lot and add to productivity on both the demand and supply side of the economy.[58]

For the middle and upper ranks of the peasantry, the change in the balance of agrarian power also created new opportunities. As customary tenure gradually withered away or changed into various forms of leasehold, the basket of fines and payments (i.e., heriot, legerwite, mortuary, merchet, multure, tallage, etc.) generally became simplified into a single rental payment.[59] This contributed significantly to the effective power of the peasantry in the fifteenth century, as it entailed a far simpler and more comprehensible system of rental choices. And it added further impetus to labor mobility and made the land market more open and volatile. Opportunities to buy and sell land expanded.[60] Some of the more enterprising upper peasantry were able to amalgamate plots of land into substantial holdings, establishing themselves as prominent members of the growing class of yeoman farmers.[61] Further up the social pyramid, the fifteenth century witnessed a significant expansion of the nascent class of gentry farmers.[62] The growing ranks of the gentry played a role in the dynamics of the class struggle by acting as a further check on the power of the greater landlords.[63] Meanwhile, both yeoman and gentry farmers were distinguished by their openness to new opportunities for profit and their greater flexibility toward new methods of production.[64]

All of these factors taken together—increased per capita income, shifts in income distribution, changes in demand- and supply-factor utilization, and growing opportunities for almost all social segments below the top of the socioeconomic pyramid—made for an economy that was more efficient on a per capita basis and more open to economic change.[65] Each of these elements played an important role in the overall economic recovery that was firmly in place by the end of the fifteenth century.[66]

Peasants in the fifteenth century benefited the most from these changes as the movement away from grain monoculture and the rise in incomes improved their standards of nutrition and housing.[67] This was the so-called "golden age of the peasantry." Some historians have rightly asked how golden an age this could have been with plague epidemics episodically sweeping through villages.[68] Certainly, there was a grisly tarnish to this period. Yet even if we include plague deaths, peasant life spans still increased significantly.[69] But all things considered, it seems rather obvious that starving peasants of the early fourteenth century would gladly have chosen to live in the age of their fifteenth-century descendants. For the peasant, the grim side of the fifteenth-century changes appeared later, in the sixteenth century.[70] An inseparable part of this dynamic shift in economic power was the longer-term consequence of the decline of the manorial system. It is well beyond the scope of this study to discuss these long-term changes. Suffice it to make two comments here: as population grew, leaseholding ultimately turned market forces against a peasantry no longer protected by the customary restraints of the manorial courts. Rack-renting, tenant eviction, etc. became the norm.[71] The golden age was relatively short-lived. Yet, from the colder logic of economic efficiency, many economic historians believe that this was essential to the emergence of agrarian capitalism.[72]

Returning to the economic dynamics of the 1350–1500 period, it is worth posing a final question. Some historians contend that this was one of the worst depressions in English history.[73] Yet, we should ask how one could characterize the 1350–1500 period as a true economic depression. Economic depression, properly defined, entails far more than a drop in total agrarian (or commercial) output because of a drop in population. A real economic depression includes across-the-board, not merely sectoral (i.e., grain price), deflation.[74] Depression further includes a significant rise in unemployment, a considerable drop in per capita income, a notable drop in wages, and a substantial drop in investment devoted to invention and innovation. None of these classic symptoms made more than a brief appearance in the 1350–1500 period. In fact, almost all of these indicators pointed in exactly the opposite direction.[75] Wages rose, unemployment dropped, per capita income rose, and investment in the production of finished (rather than raw) goods increased (at least on a per capita, if not an absolute, basis).[76] If one were to sum up this period for rural development, it would be far more accurate to refer to it as one of beneficial long-term economic restructuring induced by the exogenous impact of depopulation.

FIVE

THE DINAR JAYSHI AND AGRARIAN OUTPUT IN ENGLAND AND EGYPT

Historians of Egypt have made several attempts to evaluate the overall output of Egypt's agrarian economy before and after the Black Death. Yet there remain many unanswered questions, and some rather dramatic errors that need correction. This chapter will provide new answers to some of the mysteries. The analysis here will also pose new questions and attempt to restructure some of the methodological approaches to the economic history of Egypt.

The 1315 cadastral survey (*rawk*) conducted by Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad provides us with an excellent starting point for the quantitative section of this study. Despite Heinz Halm's outstanding work on the information provided by Ibn al-Ji'an and Ibn Duqmaq, the survey remains a valuable, though relatively neglected source for the macroeconomic history of Egypt at this time.[1] It is no exaggeration to say that without this source the arguments presented here would remain purely speculative. The 1315 survey offers the best opportunity to get an accurate figure for the agrarian output of Egypt before the plagues. Not only does it give a record of the land area and the relative value of each village in Egypt, but we also know from fourteenth-century sources that this particular survey was conducted with special attention given to accuracy and precision. Tsugitaka Sato has studied the planning and execution of this survey in detail and has concluded that it was carried out under the close supervision of amirs and administered by experts in the lower echelons of the landholding bureaucracy.[2] Ibn Mammati's work of the late Ayyubid period provides a glimpse of procedures used for surveying lands and illustrates the sophistication of the techniques that were employed by the specialists in land management.[3]