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Seventeenth-Century Foundations of the Moral Economy of the English Crowd

by Ryan Hund

Abstract

The historian E.P. Thompson famously described English peasant bread riots in the 18th century as based off of a shared ideal of an economy that obeyed moral rules. But where did this idea originate? I argue that conflicts over land enclosure in the seventeenth century led to peasants viewing the old nobility as defending them according to even older moral principles, a view which carried over into the later economic conflicts about which Thompson writes.

When eighteenth-century peasants rioted over the price of bread, they were fighting against what they perceived to be an immoral system of exchange, wherein commodities could be traded on an open market to buyers outside the community. They had reason to be suspicious of this new model, because for them it echoed a similar economic upheaval in the seventeenth century. The enclosure movement took property that had previously been held in common among all the members of a community and instead “enclosed” it for the exclusive use of a single owner. This had dramatic consequences for the average peasant, transforming them from primarily subsistence farmers to wage laborers in a manner that was disruptive and mostly non-consensual. Social historian E. P. Thompson argues that the bread riots of the eighteenth century were not random reactions to impending starvation, but highly organized affairs with a strong moral foundation. Through an analysis of the enclosure movement in the seventeenth century and a comparison to similar peasant movements in Europe, I argue that the perception of a past moral economy to which eighteenth-century peasants wanted to return was only possible because of the prolonged period of suffering inflicted by the emergent English bourgeoisie during the enclosure process. This perception was an unintended consequence of a political struggle between the new landowning classes and the old nobility during the seventeenth century.

According to Thompson, when peasants in England rioted in the early eighteenth century over the prices of food, moral rules governed the economy, and that new bourgeoisie were breaking these rules with their pro-capitalist models of production and exchange. Moreover, Thompson argued that these moral beliefs came out of a strong defense of the earlier, paternalistic model of insular, self-sufficient rural communities. This traditional, paternalistic economy was strictly regulated. Farmers brought their produce to market and sold them directly to members of the community. Poor villagers had the first pick at the market, and only once their needs were fulfilled were other buyers allowed to enter. Villagers viewed trading outside the community with suspicion and hostility, and those holding on to crops in order to sell them for a higher price later in the season faced severe social penalties. Villagers justified this protectionism using the language of morality. Farmers had an ethical responsibility to sell crops within their communities, rather than trading with the outside world in hopes of attracting higher prices.

In the eighteenth century, a free-trade model supplanted the moral economy, championed by, among others, Adam Smith. Smith championed an economy in which the flow of goods was as free as possible. In practical terms, this meant the ability of farmers to hold onto their crops in order to wait for optimal prices and the ability to sell to middlemen outside of the community. In times of plenty, this system worked well; but when crops were not productive, this led to poorer people going hungry at disproportionate rates. Peasants, naturally, were unhappy with this new state of affairs, and believed they had a right to the old system. As a result, Thompson argues that their riots were highly strategic, with clear goals in mind, rather than mindless reactions to hunger.¹ John Bohstedt, writing some years later, argued that the insular, paternalistic moral economies in

1 E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* no. 50 (February 1971): 79-87.

Thompson's argument likely never existed on a large scale.² Yet, for some reason, this myth held enduring power with the peasantry. This myth was not based in fact, but rather came out of the perception of a political struggle between the old nobility and the "new" landowning class, in which the bourgeoisie attempted to enact policies that harmed peasants, and the nobility attempted to help them.

This perception arose from the peasants' similar treatment during the enclosure movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Enclosure was, at its simplest, the process of taking lands held in common and reducing them down to individual ownership. The rights attached to lands held in common included the right to graze on arable land after harvest, at which point the animals would eat the crops left behind and leave manure, which was crucial to ensuring strong harvests for the next season. However, legal enclosure of land often began physically enclosing fields, in which the free grazing of livestock was disallowed. Holdings of individual farmers would often be scattered in small strips across the entire parish, which was time-consuming and resource-inefficient to farm.³ Despite this, peasants still stood to lose the most from enclosure. The earliest forms of enclosure, which involved converting arable land into permanent grazing land, led to massive depopulation in some rural areas, because the amount of labor required to graze sheep is significantly lower than that required for farming. Some peasants managed to find alternative employment, usually in the form of wage labor, which many saw as inferior because it robbed them of their independence. Later forms of enclosure involved enclosing arable land for the agricultural use of a single owner. In many cases, these peasants worked on the same fields as before, but for an inconsistent and

2 John Bohstedt, "The Moral Economy and the Discipline of Historical Context," *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 264-68.

3 G. E. Mingay, *Parliamentary Enclosure in England: an Introduction to its Causes, Incidence, and Impact, 1750-1850* (London; New York: Longman, 1997), 7-12.

unreliable wage rather than a share of the harvest. From the peasants' points of view, enclosure also robbed them of community, not only because of depopulation but also because village-dwellers, who would in pre-enclosure times have had access to their own small allotment in the common to maintain a minor garden or small amounts of livestock, were left with nothing. Small farmers disappeared almost entirely. Local officials were deprived of their (meager) incomes and perquisites of office. Those without land no longer had the ability to obtain land, which made any form of social mobility impossible. From a social perspective, rural communities regarded enclosure as catastrophic.⁴

In England, the enclosure of land proceeded through the Long Seventeenth Century, mostly over the objections of the peasantry. W. E. Tate explains that enclosure in the Tudor period occurred mostly in the case of villages that had been abandoned or otherwise depopulated. In the seventeenth century, however, arguments for enclosure on purely economic rather than demographic grounds began to appear with greater frequency. Its proponents numbered primarily among the landowning classes who stood to benefit financially from enclosure policies.⁵

Almost every source among the bourgeoisie was in favor of enclosure. Andrew Yarranton, an engineer, argued that enclosure would make England so rich that they would be able to subdue the Dutch without fighting.⁶ In fact, according to Tate, almost every author of the late seventeenth century presupposes the desirability of enclosure, suggesting that the bourgeoisie of the day believed in its inevitability. One author argued that enclosure would bring more wealth to England than would the mines at Potosí to the King of Spain.⁷ The fact that from 1550-1700 almost 49 villages were entirely

4 W. E. Tate, *The Enclosure Movement* (New York: Walker and Co., 1967), 167-175.

5 *Ibid.*, 63-65.

6 Andrew Yarranton, *The Great Improvement of Lands by Clover*, Worcester, 1663.

7 Tate, 82.

deserted in Northamptonshire alone, compared to only 14 in the 150 years prior, is testament to the enduring power of the enclosure movement. Peasants had no reason to trust landowners because the landowners would rarely take their welfare into account when making decisions about enclosure.

Enclosure was not only justified on geopolitical grounds. From 1660, the study of agriculture as science became increasingly common, and scientific investigations primarily supported enclosure. For example, roots, which farmers used as a valuable crop to replenish soil nutrients mid-rotation, could not be grown in fields in which sheep grazed. The common pre-enclosure practice of allowing sheep to graze on unused common land therefore impeded the replenishment of that land's soil.⁸ Furthermore, drainage could be much improved if subsurface drains were built, but it was impossible to build subsurface drainage if all of one's land was held in narrow strips scattered all around the village. However, large, concentrated fields were much more easily drained. This and other new drainage techniques allowed for marshy lands to become productive, and for the yields of all arable land to increase. Despite these facts, peasants were still understandably opposed to enclosure; even if it meant greater productivity on a macro level, it led by definition to lost livelihood for them. The scientific justifications for enclosure therefore gave the peasant class another legitimate reason to be suspicious of modern ideas.

It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that any significant voices would show up in print arguing against the enclosure movement. Peasants, however, had opposed enclosure from the beginning. In 1604, a knight of Northamptonshire communicated to Parliament that a group of enclosure victims were close to revolt, and that every time they gathered to air their grievances, they grew closer and closer to open revolt. In their manifesto, the Levellers, who became a prominent faction in the English Civil Wars,

8 *Ibid.*, 80-81. Neither Tate nor his primary sources specify exactly which roots were used in this process.

cited enclosure as the primary reason for their violence.⁹ Furthermore, peasants were upset that what they saw as their comfortable, independent existence had been reduced to the uncertain life of wage labor. Peasants had a surprising ally in the old nobility, who believed, either on appeals to tradition or on moral grounds, in the value of common land. The government made a few token efforts to curb enclosure, but landowners mostly ignored them. Laws passed by a royal commission of 1517 prohibiting enclosure were frequently disobeyed, and the conversion of arable land into pasture continued almost unabated through the sixteenth century.¹⁰ This conflict between official policy and fact continued during the reign of Elizabeth I, who largely promoted the same agricultural policy as her predecessors, with significantly less success. While on some occasions the courts did intervene to stop especially cruel acts of enclosure, this represented the vast minority of cases, and the local landowners usually got their way.¹¹ William Harrison, a clergyman, wrote in his 1577 *Description of England* of parishes owned almost entirely by a few men, with the others reduced to begging for table scraps. While his attempted historical account doubtless takes no small amount of poetic liberty, it may be seen as representative of the overall attitudes of the peasantry towards the landowning class.¹² This introduced a split into the minds of peasants between the clergy and nobility, who were seen as looking out for their welfare, and the emergent bourgeoisie, who were viewed as attempting to gather as much land as possible with little regard for its inhabitants. Thus, by the dawn of the eighteenth century, newly-landless peasants could draw on centuries of suspicion of science and of the new landowning class.

9 *Ibid.*, 74-75.

10 Harriet Bradley, *The Enclosures in England: An Economic Reconstruction* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 30-31.

11 Tate, 70-73.

12 Harrison's *Description of England* is notable among its contemporaries for being written as an early history - Harrison attempted to portray England as it was, relying on firsthand observations, experience, conversations, and documentary evidence. William Harrison, *Description of England*, Holinshed's Chronicles (1577), <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1577harrison-england.asp>.

In order to prove that the moral economy of eighteenth-century England developed in the centuries preceding it, it is necessary to look at the protest movements of other countries as counter-examples. In the French province of Languedoc, the holding of land underwent the opposite process from that of England. Under traditional theories of early capitalism, landholding should have consolidated into fewer and fewer parcels, in theory allowing for production to increase through economies of scale. But, as Le Roy Ladurie argues in his *Peasants of Languedoc*, this rarely occurred. The population explosion of the early sixteenth century led to individual landholders owning less land on average, with total agricultural production per farmer dropping to 39 hectoliters in 1607 from 60 hectoliters in 1492. Even this average is inflated, because there were very few “average landholders,” with the vast majority clustered around the two extremes, primarily the lower.¹³

The population increase combined with decades of poor harvests made the sixteenth century a difficult time for the peasants of Languedoc. The local governments sprang into action, with some reluctance. *The Parlement* of Toulouse typified the reactions of the authorities, ordering the petty nobility under its control to sell off the excess grain they had been holding in reserve at lower-than-market prices.¹⁴ While the lives of peasants were still difficult, and multi-year famines were not uncommon, the conjuncture of sixteenth-century Languedoc was toward price-fixing and protectionism, rather than toward proto-free-market policies as in England.

Why did this take place? The increased centralization of the French monarchy as compared to the relatively decentralized English system certainly deserves at least partial credit, for providing the legal framework for active policymaking. However, Brink argues that the Estates General of Languedoc was effective in maintaining local autonomy over matters of prices and tax-

13 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The Peasants of Languedoc*, trans. John Day (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 85-87.

14 Le Roy Ladurie, 104-107.

ation.¹⁵ In addition, bureaucracy itself does not explain fully why peasants saw their needs met, or why bureaucrats even considered their needs in the first place. Le Roy Ladurie makes it very clear: they forced their voices to be heard. Throughout the Long Seventeenth Century, the peasants of Languedoc participated in mass protests over the excessively high costs of tithes, salt taxes, manorial taxes, and feudal taxes. Le Roy Ladurie describes their highly combative nature as being unique to this particular region.¹⁶ It was most likely due to their initial successes that they realized the potential of mass action and chose to act on it many more times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their struggles were, of course, never against the King directly, but always an appeal to the King to deal with the local bureaucracy.

Unlike in England, where protests occurred mainly against the non-noble or petty-noble landowning classes, peasants in Languedoc directed their protests squarely at the governing bureaucracy. The failures of enclosure were a direct cause of this, as without the increased profitability of enclosed land, Languedoc had very little of a landowning class to speak of. According to Bohstedt, the commonly-held view of the moral economy in England resembled that of an imaginary past wherein the nobility and peasantry enjoyed a paternalistic relationship, a view that came about only during the period of enclosure, when the ties between nobility and peasantry eroded rapidly in favor of a landlord-tenant relationship. Because there were very few non-noble landowners in Languedoc, the peasants had no imaginary past for which to advocate. Essentially, the English peasants' desired past was the Languedocian peasants' lived present, and they experienced it in a much more negative manner than did the English. As a result, they protested directly against the government, and were occupied with much more material concerns; namely, the excessive burden of taxation.

15 James Eastgate Brink, "The Estates General of Languedoc: Struggles for Provincial Autonomy in Early 16th Century France," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (August 1980), accessed March 4, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/439555>.

16 Le Roy Ladurie, 191-194.

The peasants of England and the peasants of Languedoc all had difficult lives, but the peasants of England believed, with no small measure of accuracy, that the nobility was on their side. Because of this, when the bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century instituted new economic reforms, their outrage had a moral character, in which they insisted that the traditional relationships of production should govern the economy. This line of thought was only possible because they remembered the lessons of the seventeenth century, in which the nobility had stood with the peasant class against the non-noble landowners who tried to enclose land. In being removed from a traditional manorial system, that system of production took on a near-mythological character, allowing English peasants to refer to it fondly as the moral basis for their protest. The peasants of Languedoc provide a worthy counterexample: they were more than happy to protest the government, and their protests had no moral dimension, since they never experienced a conflict between landowners and nobility, and had not supported them in the past. This moral economy is a testament to the enduring power of traditional manorial relations and is necessarily based on the large-scale social upheavals of the seventeenth century.

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