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Theory and Society, Volume 6, Issue 2 (Sep., 1978), 255-277.

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THE ORIGINS OF ENGLISH INDIVIDUALISM: SOME SURPRISES

ALAN MACFARLANE

In a work entitled *The Origins of English Individualism*, which will appear at roughly the same time as this article, I have assembled the evidence to support a new thesis concerning the nature of English social and economic structure between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. Since the results of this work have implications for those who would not normally read a book on English social history, it is worth repeating them to a wider audience here. I will first briefly summarize the argument and proof in my book and then turn to the implications. Detailed argument and references on specific points are contained in the book.

I.

The fact that England was the first industrial nation, the first capitalist country, was among the reasons for the attraction it exercised over the founding fathers of modern sociology. Much of the material upon which Marx, Weber, Maine and Tönnies based their ideas came from the history of England. It is held to be the classic case of the documented transition from one type of society, broadly to be termed "feudal-peasant," to another, "industrial-capitalist," a change which occurred principally in the period 1350–1650. Comparative sociologists and anthropologists are agreed that until the seventeenth century, at least, England was a "peasant" nation. This word is notoriously difficult to define, but we will be using it with a specific meaning which has been ascribed to it by Thorner, Wolf, Sahlins, Shanin, and Chayanov. It does not merely mean that most of the population are rural dwellers, using simple technology, living within a state system and only having a "part culture" in relation to the towns. Nor does it mean that the large majority of farming units are small farms, owned and run by small-holders. All these tend to be associated features of peasantry, but the central feature is taken to be the fact that the economic and social worlds have not been split apart. The basic element of society is not the individual, but the family, which acts as a unit of ownership, production and consumption. Parents and children are also co-owners and co-workers. The separation between the household and the

economy which Weber thought to be a pre-requisite for the growth of capitalism has not occurred. For our purposes, the central feature is that ownership is not individualized. It was not the single individual who exclusively owned the productive resources, but rather the household. Thus the heirs have as much right to the resources as the present "owners." The present occupants of the land are managers of an estate; they cannot disinherit their heirs, the father is merely the leader of a production team. This is an ideal-type situation, but something like it has been documented for many parts of the world up to this century, for instance in Eastern Europe, India and China. In this situation, farm labor is family labor. Hired labor is almost totally absent. Production is mainly for use, rather than for exchange in the market. Cash is only occasionally used within the local community. Land is not viewed as a commodity which can be easily bought and sold. There is a strong emotional identification with a particular geographical area. Consequently, there is rather little geographical mobility; any movement to the towns is one-way, with few people returning to the countryside. The villages are thus filled with people linked by real and fictive kin ties and marriages often occur over a short distance. These are a few of the major features of a traditional peasantry. Others include strong patriarchal authority on the part of the father, who is also the work-boss, not only over his children, but also over his wife. Since family labor is valuable, marriage age is characteristically low, particularly for women, and almost all men and women marry. There is often a great gulf between the "peasants" living in the countryside, and the wealthy merchants and landowners living in towns, between the Great and the Little tradition. The society is also divided into many self-contained, though identical, local communities, with their own customs, dialect and beliefs.

This ideal-typical account of both the central features and the correlated characteristics of traditional peasantries could be taken to be a description of what medieval England up to the Black Death was once thought to be like. If we gather together the remarks of nineteenth century observers such as Macaulay, Marx and Weber, or of English medieval historians up to about twenty years ago, they would broadly endorse this view. It would then be suggested that this totally different social and economic system was destroyed, above all in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by a number of factors. Some lay stress on the expropriation of the peasantry, who then became a landless laboring force, others suggest that the growth of world trade and markets, encouraging the use of cash, severed the old face-to-face relationships. Others again stress the rise of a new acquisitive ethic which paralleled the rise of protestantism. *Whatever the explanation of the change, that a change occurred and that the society moved from pre-capitalist peasantry to a capitalist, proto-industrial structure is seldom doubted.* This framework was

erected at a time when little was known about what actually happened at the local level. There had been few detailed studies of particular manors or villages and few manorial documents were published. Since the second world war, however, a growing amount of original material has become available and some very good studies of particular estates have been undertaken. It therefore seems worth reexamining this general framework in order to see how well it survives.

We may start with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period when the peasantry were finally exterminated. If we look at the individual level as represented in the diaries of the period and bear in mind the central features of peasantry outlined above, particularly the absence of individual ownership, we are unable to find any trace of peasantry. From wealthy diary keepers such as Pepys, Mrs. Thorton, Blundell, D'Ewes, through the middling such as Heywood, Stout, Eyre, Jackson, Loder, Josselin, down to the level of the apprentice Roger Lowe, there is abundant evidence of a highly-developed and monetized economy, with complete individualistic ownership. Children could be, and were, disinherited, and they left home before they could work for their parents. There is no hint that the individual, family and farm were blended. England appears from this evidence to be a society with very high geographical and social mobility, high age at marriage, little emphasis on the local community. This impression is strengthened when we turn to recent studies of particular parishes in this period. These again give no hint that on any of the criteria elaborated above, England faintly resembled a peasant society. Land is a marketable commodity, geographical and social mobility is widespread, property was held by the individual rather than the family. This appears to be the case whether one is looking at the south-eastern arable area in Essex, or the supposedly remote pastoral area in the north-west. The picture of mobility and wage-labor, of children leaving their home and village, marrying late or not at all, does not fit the stereotype. But if the peasantry had completely vanished by 1500, we are forced to trace them further back in order to account for their mysterious destruction.

Although some might concede that peasants had disappeared by 1500, it is very generally thought that it was between the Black Death in 1350 and that date that they disappeared. This strongly implies that there was some major change in either the legal system, or in the *de facto* treatment of land and its relationship to individuals during this period. A survey of land law and the records of manorial courts over this period does not support such a claim. It is clear that both in Common Law and in the customary law administered by the courts baron, there was no momentous change during the two centuries after 1350. Land was the property, in practice, of individuals, not of families.

A parent could disinherit his or her son. The children had no birth-right. The only restraint on alienation was the widow's right to a third of the real estate for life. Parents and children were not co-owners in any sense. The situation may have been different among the nobility and higher gentry, but it is clear that among those who could have possibly constituted a peasantry, the essential link between family and farm was missing. This helps to explain the large number of wills that were made from the fifteenth century onward. It also helps to account for the treatment of land as a marketable commodity. Recent studies of the land market in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries suggest that more land was bought and sold than was passed on to children. There is no hint that the principle of "keeping the name on the land" had any effect. Court rolls suggest that the family's claim on land was less strongly influential in 1400 than in 1700. Thus in one Essex village I have studied, in the period 1401–5, of thirty land transactions in the local court, only seven were within the family, but even of these, only two were from a parent to a child. Even these two consisted of a transfer to a daughter and to a son who sold the piece. By the period 1701–5, however, of eighteen transactions, twelve were within the family. If England was far from a normal peasantry in the seventeenth century, by this criterion it was even more so in 1400. In fact, the most recent generation of later medieval historians have admitted, on the whole, that most traces of peasantry had disappeared. The crucial change, they argue, occurred in the middle of the fourteenth century as a result of the sudden dislocation caused by the Black Death. We need, therefore, to pursue the vanishing English peasant further back.

Here we encounter the work of G. C. Homans on the *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* which, supported by other medievalists, paints a picture of a peasantry analogous to that in nineteenth century Ireland or France. These authors argue that the land was owned by the family, not the individual, and hence could not be permanently alienated. There were birth rights, of eldest sons in areas of primogeniture, of all sons in areas of partible inheritance. Land flowed through the "blood" and could not be alienated from the family line. It is clear that the old belief that "villeins" could not hold land is no longer tenable since villein charters have been discovered. Furthermore, it is clear that the large number of small freeholders in thirteenth century England, who might, with their security of tenure, have been thought to be the backbone of a peasantry, held by a form of tenure which gave the individual complete and exclusive property rights. The position is discussed by F. W. Maitland and his work, in combination with Bracton's *On the Laws of England*, shows that by at least the middle of the thirteenth century there was no indissoluble link between the family and land. As Bracton put it, *nemo est heres viventis*, no-one is the heir of a living man. Children inherit,

ultimately, at the will of their parents. If their parents chose to sell or give away their land during their lifetime, there was nothing that the children could do. Famous law suits in the courts confirmed this principle. To this extent, it is incontestable that a large part of English land was held by a form of tenure which was incompatible with peasantry.

The material which Homans bases his case on, however, comes from that part of the land held by customary tenures, later to be called copyhold land. This was subject to the customs of particular manors. Since such customs frequently specified a custom of inheritance, for instance inheritance by one or all sons, it appears at first sight that land was owned by a family and passed down automatically from father to son. That the situation was not as simple as this can be seen from the sixteenth century when the legal position was exactly similar, namely copyhold land went to certain heirs, but where it is very clear that fathers could sell, give away, or bequeath their land by testament, in violation of their children's wishes. This leads us to examine the evidence of Homans and others on the impossibility of permanent alienation. This is a technical matter and expounded at considerable length in my book.

All we can do here, in brief, is conclude that by taking documents out of context, using false analogies, and putting the wrong stress on certain Latin words, Homans has managed to concoct a picture which bears little relation to reality. Neither Raftis nor Homans, I argue, have managed to show that land could not be alienated. The supposed "blood right" is illusory. The evidence points in the opposite direction. It appears that land was the property of the individual, not the family. This is indirectly indicated by Homans himself when he admits that permanent land sales could, and did, occur. It is these land sales which constitute the strongest evidence that, both in theory and in practice, land was an alienable commodity, owned by the individual and not the group. Recent work on thirteenth century manorial documents has uncovered a very extensive land market from at least the middle of the thirteenth century. There is rapidly accumulating evidence of the buying and selling of pieces of land by non-kin; the idea that land passed down in the family is now increasingly regarded as a fiction. Whether in Suffolk, Huntingdonshire, the Eastern Midlands, Berkshire or elsewhere, the evidence suggests that the supposedly free and the unfree were buying and selling land. Despite attempts to argue this all away as not a "true" land market, there seems overwhelming evidence that this was indeed the purchase and sale of land for economic profit, not for demographic reasons.

If we are correct in arguing that the central feature of peasantry was absent in the thirteenth century, we would expect this to be confirmed or refuted by all the other features of a pattern which we find associated with peasantry.

In most traditional peasantries the property rights of women as individual owners are absent; in thirteenth century England, single women, married women and widows all had very considerable property rights as individual persons. In many peasant societies, the household goes through a phase when there are two or more married couples in the same dwelling and eating from the same table. There is no evidence that this was prevalent in the thirteenth century, and there is a certain amount of evidence that households were predominantly nuclear. Again this challenges the argument of G. C. Homans, but it is a view which is supported by recent work on the poll tax lists for a slightly later period. The idea of the old people's room at the end of the house may well turn out to be a myth. Another feature of peasant societies is the stress on kin links in the local community, which are usually made memorable through what are known as ancestor-focused systems of descent. It seems clear that the method of tracing descent in the thirteenth century was not of this type, but resembled very closely the one which is familiar to us in present-day England or the United States. There were thus no "lineages" or descent groups of the type anthropologists have located. The kinship terminology also reflected the modern ego-centered system and differed radically from that present, for example, in Celtic areas of the country. The kinship system was therefore compatible with a highly mobile, individualistic system, and this is what we find also in rural economics.

In the model peasant society, farm labor is family labor and wage labor is largely absent. The presence of a very large number of landless or semi-landless laborers and servants is incompatible with the essence of peasantry. Recent work on the poll taxes and court rolls suggest very large numbers of laborers and servants. It appears probable that in many areas of England in the period before the Black Death up to half of the adult population were primarily hired laborers. It was not parents and children who formed the basic unit of production, but parents with or without hired labor. This was only made possible by the widespread use of money. The work of Kosminsky and Postan has shown that commutation of labor services for cash was widespread by the middle of the twelfth century. Cash penetrated almost every relationship; selling, mortgaging and lending are apparent in many of the documents. Most objects, from labor to rights in all kinds of property, were marketable and had a price. Production was often for exchange rather than for use.

The features of kinship and economics outlined above fit well with our revised picture of social structure. It is now clear that the geographical immobility associated with traditional peasantry, where peasants are glued to the land, was not characteristic of England in the thirteenth century. Recent work by

medievalists suggests that people were very mobile. Few of the surnames in one rental are found in the next. Nor is the pattern of social mobility what we might have expected. The tendency towards cyclical mobility, with little permanent growth of major differences within the peasantry, which has been suggested for the nineteenth century Russian peasantry, does not fit the English situation. There is strong evidence of considerable individual mobility, as well as long-term differentiation between the landed and the landless. Doubt is even being cast on two other supposed features of the medieval peasantry, namely that they married young and that there was more or less universal marriage. The evidence is as yet inconclusive, but it has certainly not been proved that age at marriage bore any resemblance to traditional Asian patterns. The consequence of all these features is that there is a growing impression that the thirteenth century countryside was not broken up into self-contained and self-sufficient local "communities" with strong boundaries and highly differentiated from other communities. The society is beginning to appear much more like the sixteenth century, where people and money flowed through the countryside, where the individual was not born, married and buried amongst his kin.

The evidence for this re-assessment comes primarily from local and legal records. It is based on what happened in particular villages and the nature of the law. It reveals a picture of a social and economic structure so greatly at variance even with what we know of most continental countries in the nineteenth century, let alone Asian or other peasantries, that it is impossible to believe that those who travelled between England and other countries in the period up to the middle of the nineteenth century could have missed the contrasts. If we look at the writings of travellers and social commentators, we find that they did regard the English system as peculiar, particularly stressing the absence of communities, of family ties, of a fixed division between the "peasantry" and the rest. The contrasts are drawn very sharply in the work of De Tocqueville, particularly in his *Ancien Régime*. But he was only able to work back in the historical documents to the late fifteenth century. From that time, it was clear to him, England was inhabited by people with a social structure fundamentally different from that in France. Writing a century before De Tocqueville, Montesquieu observed the same differences, for when he visited England in 1729 he found himself in a country which "hardly resembles the rest of Europe." He seems to have been aware that the differences were very old, dating from a far earlier period than that envisaged by Tocqueville. If we move back another two centuries to German, Dutch, French and Italian visitors who came to England between 1497 and 1600, they again remarked on the strangeness of England. Though they concentrated on physical manifestations of the differences, they also noted curious

English habits such as sending children away from their homes, never to return. The independence, individuality and freedom of the English were also discussed.

The same impression of differences appears from the writings of Englishmen who went abroad or who were consciously comparing their own society to that on the continent. From Fynes Morrison in the early seventeenth century, back through writers such as Sir Thomas Smith and John Aylmer of the sixteenth century, to Sir John Fortescue in the later fifteenth century, observers reiterated the fact that the English social system was different from that abroad. They noted, for example, that while in France it would be difficult to run a jury system in the countryside since those who were wealthy and literate enough to act as jurymen all lived in the towns, in England almost every small village had educated and wealthy landowners living in it. It is even possible to trace elements of these supposed differences back to the writings of English encyclopaedists such as Bartholomaeus Anglicus and Ranulf Higden in the thirteenth century.

To prove or disprove the case that England was basically similar or dissimilar to other continental countries in the thirteenth century would require extensive comparison and research which I have not undertaken. Yet it is interesting to find that when we turn to the work of the great comparative historians of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly F. W. Maitland, Sir Henry Maine and Marc Bloch, we find that they constantly stress the differences between the legal, economic and social structure in medieval England and that present elsewhere. The central difference which all of them stress is that only in England was the concept of indivisible, individually held, private property present by the thirteenth century. A difference which made England "wholly exceptional in Europe" by the eighteenth century was already present, they suggest, by the time of the Black Death.

II.

This brief summary of the thesis presented in *The Origins of English Individualism* cannot be accepted or refuted in itself since the detailed proof has not been cited and complex arguments have necessarily had to be simplified. If the general hypothesis turns out to be correct, however, it would have some very general implications. One of these is that historians have, with some notable exceptions, largely misinterpreted the basic nature of English social structure between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. This is a serious charge and some reasons for a misapprehension which I myself have shared for a number of years needs to be given. For, if the argument is correct,

one of the “most thoroughly investigated of all peasantries in history”¹ turns out to be not a peasantry at all. The classical example of the transition of a “feudal,” peasant-based society into a new, capitalist, system turns out to be a deviant case.

One cause leading to the very considerable error lies in the distorting effect of historical records, particularly those before the mid-sixteenth century. Manor court rolls, accounts, surveys and extents, and taxation records, which constitute over nine-tenths of the evidence for rural inhabitants before the Black Death, are bound to give a distorted picture of the world. This is well known to medievalists, at least in theory. For instance it has recently been shown that laborers and servants are present in large numbers in the later fourteenth century, but not prominent in manorial records. It is easiest to show this fact in a period when such records persist in quantity, but may be tested against other sources, as in the sixteenth century. Suppose we were merely to look at the manorial records and lay subsidies for sixteenth and seventeenth century English villages. We may wonder what impression we would obtain as to stability, the structure of the family, and rights in land, if we did not also use parish registers, wills, listings and other records. These documents were not used by R. H. Tawney in his *Agrarian Problem of the Sixteenth Century* published in 1912. He used the same records as those employed by medievalists and imposed the same models. He consequently paints a picture of large and complex, peasant-style households, and of geographical immobility, and though he admits that the countryside was being penetrated by cash, the market, and “capitalism” generally, sees this as an external force disrupting a traditional “peasantry.” Thus it is only the recent discovery and extensive use of listings of inhabitants, wills and inventories, court records, and parish registers, which have shaken historians of the sixteenth century out of a picture which in many ways resembled that painted by those of the thirteenth. Again, it is not at all difficult to see that if Homans had applied his model to the manorial records of later sixteenth century Essex or later seventeenth century Cumbria, he would have found that the evidence permitted him to make the interpretation he adopts for the thirteenth century. Yet we know that such a model would be totally incorrect for this later period and can prove this to be the case from other sources. The real problem when looking at the situation before the Black Death is how to use the documents to bear witness *against* themselves.² We are supported in our task by occasional references even within these sources, as well as the chance survival of certain manuscripts, a unique list of villein families in the thirteenth century or the discovery of peasant land charters. Such documents do not fit into the predicted mold at all well.

In the absence of direct evidence bearing on many of the crucial issues, writers have been tempted to draw on evidence from elsewhere — particularly from continental Europe in the same period, from nineteenth and early twentieth century “surviving” peasantries in France and Ireland or from modern Third World peasantries. Believing that England in the middle ages was basically similar to other “peasant” societies, it was considered entirely legitimate as a method of proceeding to fill in gaps in the sources by reference to what was known concerning peasants in other parts of medieval Europe or the modern world. Not only could one construct a general picture of England using shreds of evidence from all over Europe, as Coulton did in *The Medieval Village* and most of his other works, but one could use studies of Russia before the revolution, nineteenth century France or Ireland, China and elsewhere since they were all basically similar. For example, Bennett points out that it is impossible to know much about the daily life and routine of ordinary people: “the nearest we can hope to get to such conditions, perhaps, is when we have a few minutes inside the dwelling of a peasant family, not in England, for things have changed radically here, but in some tiny French or Swiss hamlet, where medieval ways and customs are only of yesterday.”³ This use of analogies continues up to the present among medievalists. For instance Krause used census data from sixteenth century Italy and Sweden to fill in gaps concerning England;⁴ Raftis, speaking of peasants being “rooted” in the village, remarks that in this basic respect the “villager was one of the traditional peasant types of Western Europe.”⁵

Perhaps the most sustained use of analogies, which is central to the whole argument of the work, is in Homans’ *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*. At first he appears to leave the question of the similarity between the “peasants” of the thirteenth century and the rest of the world an open one. We are told that “If what happened in England in the thirteenth century was like what happens in the parts of Europe where the old peasant culture is still established,” then a certain type of behavior can be expected in the thirteenth century.⁶ But elsewhere the “if” is forgotten, and Homans confidently draws on analogies with other parts of Europe in more modern times, for example France and Russia, in order to confirm some otherwise unprovable points.⁷ The most explicit justification of this method occurs when he admits that “In reconstructing any ancient society, our knowledge of what happens today must give flesh and blood to the dry bones of records,”⁸ and puts this forward as a justification for drawing on a picture of nineteenth century Ireland in order to support his ideas concerning the treatment of the old. In Homans’ work, as in that of the others referred to above, there appears to be a strong, self-confirming, and circular hypothesis. It is thought to be self-evident that the rural inhabitants of England between the Norman invasion and the six-

teenth century were basically like “peasants” elsewhere in time and space. It is therefore held to be justifiable to fill in the vast gaps in our records and our knowledge by drawing information from studies of peasants elsewhere. The picture of medieval society which emerges then seems to show that there really were peasants, who acted and felt like Russians, Chinese, Indians and Poles, or at least like medieval Frenchmen, Italians and Germans. Since this is taken as proved, we may look to studies of these other societies in order to fill in further gaps — and so on in an apparently endless spiral of self-fulfilling confirmation. The same fault could also easily be detected in historians writing on later periods.

The attraction of the “from peasant to industrial” theory lies very deep in our hearts since it also appeals to the still strong nineteenth century evolutionary mode of thought, with its idea of gradual growth from small, closed, immobile, technologically simple, subsistence economies where life was “nasty, brutish and short” towards the humane, mobile, affluent society of modern western Europe and North America. It is furthermore attractive to think of this “progress” from “lower” to “higher” as a more-or-less continuous line. Such an evolutionary interpretation of history has frequently been unmasked.⁹ F. W. Maitland for instance, wrote concerning the legal status of women in the medieval period:

We ought not to enter upon our investigation until we have protested against the common assumption that in this region a great generalization must needs be possible, and that from the age of savagery until the present age every change in marital law has been favourable to the wife.¹⁰

His warning could be extended to most areas of social history. To find that the spirit which moved Macaulay to see himself on a pinnacle of achievement towards which the past had slowly climbed is still very strong, we need only turn to recent publications in the field of family history, for instance the works of Stone, Shorter and that edited by De Mause.¹¹ While drawing analogies with other “peasant” societies as described above these all agree on the model of evolution from a loveless, harsh, “peasant-type” situation towards the modern, loving, nuclear-family which we now see around us, a framework which again has been superbly exposed by Maitland:

To suppose that the family law of every nation must needs traverse the same route, this is an unwarrantable hypothesis. To construct some fated scheme of successive stages which shall comprise every arrangement that may yet be discovered among backward peoples, that is a hopeless task. A not unnatural inference from their backwardness would be that somehow

or another they have wandered away from the road along which the more successful races have made their journey.¹²

There are other explanations for the considerable distortions, one of them being a kind of economic determinism which assumes that because land is the basic factor in production, and England was basically a “plough” culture, it *must* have a social structure and ideology similar to other “plough” cultures such as Russia or China. In fact England is an excellent illustration of the basic fact which both Marx and Weber realized, namely that it is not simply the case that the means of production – the technology and the ecology – determine the social relations and ideology, but that there is a mutual interaction. It is far too simple to assume that because the means of producing wealth in thirteenth century England seems to resemble those in nineteenth century Ireland, France or Russia, *therefore* the society was in any basic way similar. It may indeed have been: but this needs to be proved, not assumed.

The combination of this discovery of new sources, particularly for the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, plus a new interest in local and social history, plus more sophisticated knowledge of what happens in contemporary non-European societies, has made it possible to re-think the whole basic stereotype. Confining ourselves for the moment to the crucial medieval period, and looking with the perspective of an anthropologist and seventeenth century historian, we see that the evidence to contradict almost every one of the supposed characteristics of peasantry has been accumulating rapidly in a number of detailed studies. But lacking any other appropriate model, medievalists have tried to stretch the earlier characterization of medieval society to fit it to the new data without abandoning it entirely. There are a few who rebel openly against a position where “to all intents and purposes historians have long since disposed of the medieval peasant. He was after all, as we have been told repeatedly, isolated, backward, exploited, and generally unfree.”¹³ In general, however, the situation appears to be one which approximates to the final stage before a paradigmatic change.¹⁴ The data does not fit the predictions of the model, yet many historians cling to an outworn stereotype.

Since this may seem an arrogant interpretation, examples should be cited. Some instances are contained in recent work by two of those who have made among the most distinguished contributions to the study of medieval rural England. M. M. Postan’s own research, and that stimulated by this work, have been largely responsible for undermining the old consensus. He seems to be aware of this, and yet, protesting too much, attempts to continue to stuff new wine into old bottles. In a short paragraph written in 1968 he proceeds to show that the landlessness, production for the market rather than for use,

the employment of hired labor, and other features of medieval society appear to make the medieval English villager very different from other peasantries of which we know. But he argues that nevertheless "historians will not fail to recognize in the physiognomy of the medieval villager most of the traits of a true peasantry."¹⁵ Similarly Hilton, faced with the fact that Kosminsky had shown for the thirteenth, and Faith for the later fourteenth century, that many of the features of peasantry seemed to be absent, can only argue that "both the market conditions and the extreme population pressure of the second half of the thirteenth century, and the sudden relaxation of population pressure after 1350, covered a relatively short period of time, and took place under peculiar circumstances."¹⁶ Given the fact that documentary evidence is only available from the second half of the thirteenth century onwards and that we know that the fifteenth century was in many ways similar to the later fourteenth, it would appear that a leading medievalist is close to being forced to argue that the whole of the recorded medieval period in England was "exceptional." In such circumstances we may well wonder whether the underlying model is still appropriate.

III.

It is well known that people do not like altering their basic views. We would therefore expect that those who wish to avoid the consequences of the foregoing argument will attempt to show that only a minor terminological re-shuffling is involved. They will ask whether so much fuss should be made over the word "peasant," what word can be used instead of it, whether it matters what we call people, and so on. It is necessary to repeat, therefore, that it is not the *word* which is in debate. It would probably be as well if English historians could abandon it entirely, for it is misleading. Yet it is probably a word that is too deeply ingrained to eradicate. In any case, the avoidance of the word would be of no value if the general model of a "peasant-like" society, as described above, was not modified. It is the associated set of features which is at issue. That more than mere terminology is involved will be apparent if we consider very briefly a few of the effects which the acceptance of my thesis would entail, not only for historical research, but also in the related fields of sociology, anthropology and economics. It is the scale of the alterations which would be necessary in neighboring disciplines which leads one to believe that paradigmatic shifts are involved.

It is not necessary to spell out the consequences of the argument for the general theories of Marx and Weber. In almost every detail, their views in relation to England in the medieval period appear to be incorrect. They believed that up to the end of the fifteenth century England was basically a "peasant"

social structure in the fullest sense, similar in kind to other European countries. Thus to challenge medievalists is also to encounter the two most formidable theorists of the development of western society. It is to maintain that when they both chose England as their prime example of the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist, they had the misfortune to select a singular and peculiar example, which has few analogies elsewhere. Indeed one of the major reasons for their choice, the unusually good records produced by a centralized bureaucracy, was one of the products and indices of this peculiarity. In one sense, at least, this does not matter for Marx. If it is finally proved that he was historically totally incorrect about the specific instance, this does not necessarily invalidate his general argument. Yet to continue to take Marx and Weber as a guide to what we should be asking about the origins of modern capitalist and industrial society in the west will lead us to pose the wrong questions. If we concentrate on the sixteenth century as the watershed and assume that all the European nations were in essence similar before, a range of enquiries is immediately closed off from us. Furthermore, we are driven to seeing law, social structure and politics as largely a reflection of something else. To abandon the Marx-Weber chronology is painful, but not too shocking. It is not surprising that writing a century or more ago, when hardly any detailed work had been undertaken on medieval England, these two authors should have assumed that the country was essentially the same as other agrarian nations in Europe and that the differences within Europe only really emerged at the end of the middle ages. Nor is it difficult to see why they should have believed that the basic agrarian structure was very similar to that in other parts of the world. As Ernest Gellner remarks, the Marxian description of the transition from "feudalism" to "capitalism" "may not be true, but it is by no means manifestly or wholly false: "no mean achievement for a sociological theory over a century old, concerning issues which are a burning concern to many, and where material is rich and has accumulated at an amazing rate."¹⁷ The continuing vitality of the hypothesis will no doubt be shown by the reactions to the argument outlined above.

It has been argued that if we use the criteria suggested by Marx, Weber and most economic historians, England was as "capitalist" in 1250 as it was in 1550 or 1750. That is to say, there was already a developed market, mobility of labor, land was treated as a commodity and full private ownership was established, there was very considerable geographical and social mobility, a complete distinction between farm and family existed, and rational accounting and the profit motive were widespread. This has generally been obscured by an over-emphasis on technology or *per capita* income. But Weber's distinction between the "spirit" of capitalism and its manifestation in the physical world helps us to see behind the superficial forms. Just as a Furnivall could describe

Burma as a “factory without chimneys,”¹⁸ so we could describe thirteenth-century England as a capitalist-market economy without factories.

By shifting the origins of capitalism back to well before the Black Death, we alter the nature of a number of other problems. One of these is the origin of modern individualism. Those who have written on the subject have always accepted the Marx-Weber chronology. For example, David Riesman assumes that modern individualism emerged out of an older collectivist, “tradition-directed” society, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹⁹ Its growth was directly related to the Reformation, Renaissance and the break-up of the old feudal world. The “inner-directed” stage of intense individualism occurred in the period between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though a recent general survey of historical and philosophical writing on individualism concedes that some of the roots lie deep in classical and biblical times and also in medieval mysticism, still, in general, it stresses the Renaissance, Reformation and the Enlightenment as the period of great transition. Many of the strands of political, religious, ethical, economic and other types of individualism are traced back to Hobbes, Luther, Calvin and other post-1500 writers.²⁰ Yet, if the present thesis is correct, individualism in economic and social life is much older than this in England. In fact, within the recorded period covered by our documents, it is not possible to find a time when an Englishman did not stand alone. Symbolized and shaped by his ego-centered kinship system, he stood in the center of his world. This means that it is no longer possible to “explain” the origins of English individualism in terms of either Protestantism, population change, the development of a market economy at the end of the middle ages, or the other factors suggested by the writers cited. Individualism, however defined, predates sixteenth-century changes and can be said to shape them all. The explanation must lie elsewhere, but will remain obscure until we trace the origins back even further than has been attempted in this work.

Closely related to the question of individualism is that of equality and liberty. One of the major works which considers the supposed origins of the concept of equality is Louis Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus*.²¹ Dumont bases his view of western society on Marx, Weber, Montesquieu and De Tocqueville. He consequently comes to the same conclusion as they did, particularly the last named, arguing that individualistic, egalitarian society with easy social mobility and the strong rights of the person against the group is a relatively recent phenomenon, limited to certain parts of western Europe from the sixteenth century onwards. His aim is to show that Indian caste society, rather than being aberrant in its emphasis on hierarchy and the power of the group, is in fact normal: it is egalitarian individualism which is exceptional, a recent and specialized growth. The argument is less convincing if we come across a large

agrarian country with very good records stretching back six hundred years which has always appeared to have had a highly flexible social structure. If since at least the thirteenth century, England has been a country where the individual has been more important than the group and the hierarchy of ranks has not been closed, it becomes clear that there is no necessary evolutionary set of stages from hierarchy to equality. They are alternative systems which may co-exist in time. Furthermore, it becomes easier to see that the clash between the Indian and the English systems was between a peasant social structure and a fundamentally non-peasant, individualistic one.

The same theme can be viewed from the standpoint of the individual and his wider kin links. We saw that Weber, especially, described a major transition from a kinship-based society, to one based on impersonal market relations. There is also a strong tendency to see kinship as gradually playing a smaller and smaller part, to chronicle the "break-down" of wider groupings as a consequence of changing technology and economy. One example of this can be seen in the work of social anthropologists who have assumed that the present English family system is the consequence of changes which have occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The modern "individualistic" system, with its stress on the nuclear family, is spread throughout England and North America, but is generally held to be both peculiar and of recent origin, a reflex reaction to the dislocation caused by the growth of capitalism, industrialization and urbanization. Let us take just three examples. Radcliffe-Brown argued that romantic love as a basis for marriage grew in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, out of a previous arranged-marriage society: "the modern English idea of marriage is recent and decidedly unusual."²² More recently, Edmund Leach has written that the nuclear family system "is a most unusual kind of organization, and I would predict that it is only a transient phase in our society."²³ A popular sociological survey of English kinship and marriage has also drawn a picture of the eighteenth and nineteenth century transition from a traditional, extended household, arranged-marriage, kinship-based, "peasant type" society, to our modern nuclear-family system.²⁴ But if we are correct in arguing that the English now have roughly the same family system as they had in about 1250, the arguments concerning kinship and marriage as a reflection of economic change become weaker. To have survived the Black Death, the Reformation, the Civil War, the move to the factories and the cities, the system must have been fairly durable and flexible. Indeed, it could be argued that it was its extreme individualism, the simplest form of molecular structure, which enabled it to survive and allowed society to change. Furthermore, if the family system pre-existed, rather than followed on industrialization, the causal link may

have to be reversed, with industrialization as a consequence, rather than a cause, of the basic nature of the family.²⁵

We have now begun to bridge the gap between individualism and economic change and may turn to another problem which appears altered, namely the explanation of the origins of capitalism itself. If it was present in 1250, it is clear that neither the spread of world trade and colonization, nor Protestantism, can have much to do with its origins. Nor is it plausible to argue, as does McLelland,²⁶ that it was the result of unspecified childrearing changes connected to the religious developments of the sixteenth century. Socialization and the family, especially the apparent absence of "patriarchal" power and the sending away of children from home at an early age are clearly very important. But they were part of an English pattern that was probably established by at least the thirteenth century. Nor can the development of towns have much to do with the explanation. Like Calvinism and expanding trade, they could be seen as a consequence, rather than as a cause, of the patterns described above. Again we need to take the story further back. Only when it has been established *when* England really did become capitalist and individualist, or, put in other terms, when it ceased to be or whether indeed it was ever, a "peasant" nation, will it be useful to speculate about causes. What is absolutely clear is that one of the major theories in economic anthropology is incorrect, namely the idea that we witness in England between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries the "Great Transformation" from a non-market, peasant society where economics is "embedded" in social relations, to a modern market, capitalist system where economy and society have been split apart. This view is most clearly expressed in the work of Karl Polanyi. He depended on Marx, Weber and economic historians for his material and this led him to conclude that the great change occurred mainly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus he wrote in relation to England and France that "not before the last decade of the eighteenth century . . . was the establishment of a free labour market even discussed."²⁷ Before the sixteenth century, land was not a commodity and markets played no important part in the economic system.²⁸ One implication of this argument, parallel to Dumont's concerning the untypical nature of equality, is that market economies are recent and unusual, so that when Adam Smith founded classical economics on the premise of the rational "economic" man, believing that he was describing a universal and long-evident type, he was deluded.²⁹ According to Polanyi, such a man had only just emerged, stripped of his ritual, political and social needs. The implication of the present argument, however, is that it was Smith who was right and Polanyi who was wrong, at least in relation to England. "Homo economicus" and the market society had been present in England for centuries before Smith wrote. Yet Polanyi's insight, that Smith was writing within a

peculiar social environment is correct when we realize that in many respects England has probably long been different from almost every other major agrarian civilization about which we know.

Closely related to the old question of the origins of capitalism is the equally important one concerning the origins of industrialization. Again the terms of the questions we would ask would be altered if the present thesis is correct. It is now very obvious that historians are quite unable to explain in purely economic terms why industrialization occurred. However we define the phenomenon and whenever we date its main period, it is extremely difficult to explain why it should have occurred and, particularly, why it emerged first in England. The most succinct summary of the major explanations that have been put forward in the past and the overwhelming objections to each of them is by R. M. Hartwell.³⁰ The factors listed are: capital accumulation; innovations in technology and organization; "fortunate factor endowments" (coal, iron, resources); *laissez-faire* in philosophy, religion, science and law culminating in the eighteenth-century; market expansion (both foreign trade and the domestic market); a number of miscellaneous factors, including war, autonomous growth of knowledge and "the English genius." After examining all these economic explanations, Hartwell concludes that the theories have "added little to our understanding of the industrial revolution."³¹ He suggests that the explanation must lie in long-term factors over several centuries: "industrialization generally was the product of a European civilization long in the making."³² He further believes that the solution may lie in the social environment, about which we know "precious little."³³ Pursuing these two hints a little way, he argues that there was something special about England before the eighteenth century. It was not industrialized, but nor was it an "underdeveloped" economy. It fitted into some intermediary category. Asking when it became "modern," the author accepts Charles Wilson's conclusion that it was in 1660.³⁴ Though we agree with Hartwell's summary of the objections to an economic explanation, we have argued that, however we define "modern," this is much too late a date. Furthermore, England had apparently taken a different course from much of the rest of Europe.³⁵

A realization that English property relations were at the heart of much that is special about England, particularly in relation to industrialization, is shown by a number of social historians. Marc Bloch believed that the growth of individualistic ownership was peculiar to England and was related in some way to the "two most immediately obvious facts of English Economic History — I mean colonial expansion and the industrial revolution, for both of which it probably prepared the way."³⁶ More recently Harold Perkin has argued that the major cause of British industrial revolution was "the unique

nature and structure of English society as it had evolved by the eighteenth century.”³⁷ The central feature of this social structure was the “openness of the hierarchy, the freedom of movement up and down the scale, and above all the absence of legal or customary barriers between the landed aristocracy and the rest.” This stemmed, as did everything else, from the individualistic pattern of ownership.³⁸ But just as Hartwell took the major change to have occurred in the seventeenth century, these authors assume it took place after the Black Death and principally in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We would incorporate their insights into the central contribution of ownership and social mobility, but argue that the change, if change there had been, had already occurred in England by the thirteenth century at least.

In the light of this argument it begins to become clear why England should have been precocious in its economic and social development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for it had been somewhat different for a very long period. When Kosminsky asked how we were to explain why England, which was “not the first country to start out on the road of capitalist development” nevertheless “quickly overtook the countries which had taken that road before her,” he was unable to provide an answer.³⁹ Trapped within a Marxist chronology with its great break at the end of the fifteenth century, he could not account for “this all-conquering growth of capitalism in a country which apparently occupied a very modest place in the economic life of medieval Europe.” From the information which he cites in the work quoted, it is clear that he realized that England in the thirteenth century was a far more sophisticated market economy than did Marx. Yet he was still forced to pose the question in terms which would make it impossible to answer.

England did not set out on the road to capitalism later, nor is it relevant that it played only a modest part in medieval economic life. As Weber has stressed, it is not the splendor of Florence, Agra or Peking that is to be noted, but the social and economic structure and mentality in small market towns and villages. The ethics and organization of England may already have set it apart from the many, more splendid, peasant civilizations which overshadowed it. This should not be taken to imply that other factors such as the absence of marauding armies or high taxation were unimportant. But all the geographical, technological or other advantages would have been of no account if they had not been associated with a very unusual social, demographic and economic structure.

Where this structure came from and hence its causes are problems for further investigation. Yet if England’s transition was not typical, even within western

Europe, it is obvious that to draw parallels between England and currently developing Third World peasantries without realizing the enormous differences which flow not merely from a disparity in wealth, but in the social, political and psychological sphere, is a recipe for disaster. If most contemporary countries are trying to move from "peasantry" to "urban-industrial" within a generation, whereas England moved from non-industrial but largely "capitalist" to "urban-industrial" over a period of at least six hundred years, it will be obvious that the trauma and difficulties will not only be very different but probably far more intense.⁴⁰ Furthermore, if such countries absorb any form of western industrial technology, they are not merely incorporating a physical or economic product, but a vast set of individualistic attitudes and rights, family structure, patterns of geographical and social mobility which are very old, very durable, and highly idiosyncratic. They therefore need to consider whether the costs in terms of the loneliness, insecurity and family tensions which are associated with the English structure outweigh the economic benefits.

A final test of the theory advanced here is that of the width and economy of explanation. Does the hypothesis give a more reasonable explanation of other features of the past and present and does it do so with the minimum of re-arranging of the evidence? As an example of width of explanation we may mention the fact that the argument helps to explain the curious effects of English colonization. Englishmen who went abroad took with them a system very different from that present in much of the world. When Daniel Thorner surveyed world peasantries, he noted that the one area which had never had a peasantry at all was that colonized by England, namely Australia, New Zealand, Canada and North America.⁴¹ It is my argument that this was no accident. Englishmen did not merely shed their traditional social structure as they walked down the gang-plank into the promised land, as one writer had disingenuously suggested.⁴⁷ When Jefferson wrote, "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable," he was putting into words a view of the individual and society which had its roots in thirteenth century England or earlier. It is not, as we know, a view that is either universal or undeniable, but neither is it a view that emerged by chance in Tudor and Stuart England.

One example of the criterion of economy of explanation will end this work. The received opinion, that England was like the rest of Europe until the sixteenth century and then became different, and that it followed roughly the same set of developmental stages, has to re-arrange most of the evidence we have from the period under examination. It has to argue that almost all

those who wrote about England up to the nineteenth century, both those who lived there and those who visited the country, were deluded. It is forced to take the view that those who studied their own past and their own present were under a massive misapprehension.⁴³

The argument I make here takes the sources seriously. Of course contemporaries made mistakes and we have to weigh their words, especially when they were using history for political purposes. Yet it seems more reasonable to assume that when they argued that England was somehow different, when they used “peasant” only of foreign countries, and when they minimized the effects of Norman feudalism, they knew, in general, what they were doing.

Acknowledgement

This paper is based on material from Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, forthcoming). The author and publisher are thanked for their kindness in making it available for publication here.

NOTES

1. R. H. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (London, 1973), p. 10.
2. Marc Bloch was making the same point when he wrote that “even when most anxious to bear witness, that which the text tells us expressly has ceased to be the primary object of our attention today. Ordinarily, we prick up our ears far more eagerly when we are permitted to overhear what was never intended to be said.” He also wrote of forcing documents “to speak, even against their will . . .” *The Historian’s Craft* (Manchester, 1954), pp. 63, 64.
3. H. S. Bennett, *Life on the English Manor* (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 237–38.
4. J. T. Krause, “The Medieval Household: Large or Small?” *Economic History Review* 9 (1957), pp. 423–25.
5. J. A. Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility: Studies in the Social History of the Medieval English Village* (Toronto, 1964), p. 33. The assumption that the “basic” social structure of England in the middle ages was the same as that of Europe as a whole is present in writers from Marx and Engels to Hilton. Cf. Karl Marx, *Capital* (London, 1954), vol. 3, pp. 885 n., 897; Hilton, *Bond Men*, pp. 26, 33.
6. G. C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), p. 140.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 112–13, 207.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 157; see also p. 5 for a similar argument.
9. For example, in Herbert Butterfield’s *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931).
10. Sir F. Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1968), vol. 2, p. 403.
11. For example, Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York, 1975); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York, 1977). These works will remind anthropologists of much writing in later

- nineteenth-century England, with medieval and early-modern men and women replacing the unenlightened "savage," as will Chapter One of Lloyd de Mause, ed., *The History of Childhood* (London, 1974).
12. Pollock and Maitland, *English Law*, vol. 2, p. 225.
 13. E. Britton, "The Peasant Family in Fourteenth-Century England," *Peasant Studies* 5 (April 1976), p. 2.
 14. In the sense defined by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962).
 15. M. M. Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 280.
 16. Hilton, *Bond Men*, p. 39.
 17. Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London, 1964), p. 128. As F. J. West has recently pointed out, Marx and Engels had little access to medieval records and they did not even use the major part of the material that was available to them: *Feudalism, Capitalism and Beyond*, ed. E. Kamenka and R. S. Neale (London, 1975), p. 60.
 18. In Margaret Mead, ed., *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change* (New York, 1955), p. 53.
 19. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven, 1961), pp. xxv, 6–7, 12–13; *idem*, *Individualism Reconsidered* (New York, 1954), p. 13.
 20. Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 14, 40–41, 47, 53, 62, 67, 74, 80, 89, 95, 99.
 21. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (London, 1972), esp. pp. 35–55.
 22. In the introduction to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde, eds., *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (London, 1950), p. 43; see also pp. 45, 63, on the "recentness" of change.
 23. E. R. Leach in *Environmental Solutions*, ed. Nicholas Pole (Cambridge, 1972), p. 105.
 24. Ronald Fletcher, *The Family and Marriage in Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1962), pp. 45, 47.
 25. Among those who have begun to speculate along these lines are John Hajnal in *Population in History*, ed. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (London, 1965), pp. 131–33; W. J. Goode, *The Family* (Englewood-Cliffs, 1964), pp. 108 ff.; *idem*, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York, 1963), pp. 10 ff.
 26. David C. McLelland, *The Achieving Society* (New York, 1967), pp. 365 ff.
 27. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston, 1957), p. 70; see also pp. 77, 83.
 28. *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 68–71.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 43. Adam Smith was, of course, a Scotsman, working in Edinburgh, but his work nevertheless fitted into an anglicized tradition.
 30. R. M. Hartwell, ed., *Causes of the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1967), pp. 10, 58 ff. For another recent survey of the causes which comes to a similar conclusion, see M. W. Flinn, *Origins of the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1966), esp. p. 90.
 31. Hartwell, *Causes of the Industrial Revolution*, p. 77.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 21; see also pp. 63–64, 78.
 33. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
 34. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.
 35. The exact extent to which England differed from continental countries will, of course, only be established by future research.
 36. M. Bloch, *Land and Work in Medieval Europe*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London, 1967), p. 49.
 37. H. J. Perkin, "The Social Causes of the British Industrial Revolution," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series 18 (1968), p. 127.
 38. *Ibid.*, pp. 136, 135.
 39. E. A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. R. H. Hilton (Oxford, 1956), p. 319.

40. This is another reason for seeing W. W. Rostow's work as a gross oversimplification of the issues; see, for example, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 31–35.
41. Daniel Thorner, "Peasantry," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), vol. 11, p. 504.
42. "The colonial settlers seem to have seized privacy and intimacy for themselves as soon as they stepped off the boat." Shorter, *Making of the Modern Family*, p. 242.
43. For example, as argued in J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (London, 1957). Thus Perry Anderson dismisses "local legends" of the continuity of English history in *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974), p. 113, and *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, 1974), pp. 159–60 n.