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3. The Decline of the Manor

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3. The Decline of the Manor

Abstract

The development of towns into commercial centers was soon accompanied by the decline of the old manorial system of agriculture and serfdom. Changes were taking place in methods of agricultural production, systems of land holding, and the quantity of land under cultivation. These changes came about as it became increasingly apparent that population growth was creating demands for the products of the soil which the old agricultural methods no longer could meet. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, community, town, society, government, commerce, industry

Disciplines

Cultural History | History

Comments

This is a part of [Section V: The Rise of Capitalism and the National State to 1500](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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3. The Decline of the Manor

L.M.A.

The development of towns into commercial centers was soon accompanied by the decline of the old manorial system of agriculture and serfdom. Changes were taking place in methods of agricultural production, systems of land holding, and the quantity of land under cultivation. These changes came about as it became increasingly apparent that population growth was creating demands for the products of the soil which the old agricultural methods no longer could meet.

One of the first dents in serfdom came with the opening of new lands to cultivation. The inability of medieval farmers to increase the yield per acre at a time when the towns provided growing markets for their produce compelled landholders to seek additional acres. As a result they began to clear forests, drain marshes, and adopt new methods of tilling the soil. One of these new methods was shifting from the early two-field system to the three-field system so as to permit one-third of the land to lie fallow each year. On the newly cleared lands, where, as we have noted in a previous chapter, ville neuves and neuburghs had been established, landlords had to grant more personal freedom to the migrants who settled there. The status of these colonists ranged from a mild form of serfdom to a high degree of freedom.

The lords themselves accelerated the break-up of the manorial system in the belief that it was to their advantage to permit the substitution of manorial services and payments in kind with money payments. Manorial lords thus tended to become landlords. These money payments were fixed and later when prices rose throughout Europe many of the lords regretted what they had done. On the manor itself a degree of agricultural specialization appeared, prompted by the commercial revival and urban growth. Landlords, anxious to acquire an immediate share of the new wealth springing from trade, sold off plots of diverse size and the approximately equal dimensions of the early feudal manor largely disappeared. Although serfdom and seigneurial authority did not completely disappear and the peasant was not yet to attain an elevated place in the social hierarchy, the manorial system was greatly modified. It must be remembered also that these changes did not occur in all countries at the same time or in the same degree, and when they did come they confronted the active and passive opposition of custom.

In the fourteenth century economic changes occurred that produced social unrest and turmoil at all levels of society. In contrast to the relative stability of the 1200's, the next two centuries were crisis-ridden. Lords tried to revive the manorial services and payments in kind which they had commuted earlier, and the resultant dissatisfaction of the peasants contributed greatly to the social unrest of that century. A series

Happens unevenly (in different countries)

Caused by opening up of new lands.

Lords want money, decides serfs aren't efficient, Lords started to use money instead of labor & kind.

of calamitous events further undermined the rural and agrarian nature of medieval society. Between 1315 and 1317 a disastrous famine swept over the Continent and in 1348 came the Black Death, a catastrophic plague which, it is estimated, carried away between one-third and one-half of the population. The epidemic struck with fatal force at the poorer classes crowded together in the sunless and unsanitary streets of the towns or in rude huts on the manors. As the available supply of labor declined without a corresponding decrease in demand, the costs of agricultural production mounted alarmingly and many landlords stared ruin in the face. In England they appealed to the king for relief, and in 1349 Edward III issued the "Ordinance Concerning Laborers and Servants" which sought to fix wages and conditions of labor. Two years later Parliament, in an effort to strengthen the force of this royal decree, enacted its major provisions into law. These were abortive and reactionary attempts to stabilize labor costs at a time when agriculture was competing with commerce and industry for workers. Neither employers nor employees could be induced to obey them. The selection which follows is the text of the royal ordinance of 1349:

Edward by the grace of God etc. to the reverend father in Christ William, by the same grace archbishop of Canterbury, Primate of all England, greeting. Because a great part of the people and especially of the workmen and servants has now died in that pestilence, some, seeing the straits of the masters and the scarcity of servants, are not willing to serve unless they receive excessive wages, and others, rather than through labour to gain their living, prefer to beg in idleness: We, considering the grave inconveniences which might come from the lack especially of ploughmen and such labourers, have held deliberation and treaty concerning this with the prelates and nobles and other learned men sitting by us; by whose consentient counsel we have seen fit to ordain: that every man and woman of our kingdom of England, of whatever condition, whether bond or free, who is able bodied and below the age of sixty years, not living from trade nor carrying on a fixed craft, nor having of his own the means of living, or land of his own with regard to the cultivation of which he might occupy himself, and not serving another, -- if he, considering his station, be sought after to serve in a suitable service, he shall be bound to serve him who has seen fit so to seek after him; and he shall take only the wages, liveries, meed or salary which, in the places where he sought to serve, were accustomed to be paid in the twentieth year of our reign of England, or the five or six common years next preceding. Provided, that in thus retaining their service, the lords are preferred before others of their bondsmen or their land tenants: so, nevertheless that such lords thus retain as many as shall be necessary and not more; and if any man or woman, being thus sought after in service, will not do this, the fact being proven by two faithful

Price rise caused lords to have difficulties. (Fixed income + rising price)

men before the sheriffs or the bailiffs of our lord the king, or the constables of the town where this happens to be done, -- straightway through them, or some one of them, he shall be taken and sent to the next jail, and there he shall remain in strict custody until he shall find surety for serving in the aforesaid form.

And if a reaper or mower, or other workman or servant, of whatever standing or condition he be, who is retained in the service of any one, do depart from the said service before the end of the term agreed, without permission or reasonable cause, he shall undergo the penalty of imprisonment, and let no one, under the same penalty, presume to receive or retain such a one in his service. Let no one, moreover, pay or permit to be paid to any one more wages, livery, meed or salary than was customary as has been said; nor let any one in any other manner exact or receive them, under penalty of paying to him who feels himself aggrieved from this, double the sum that has thus been paid or promised, exacted or received; and if such person be not willing to prosecute, then it (the sum) is to be given to any one of the people who shall prosecute in this matter; and such prosecution shall take place in the court of the lord of the place where such case shall happen. And if the lords of the towns or manors presume of themselves or through their servants in any way to act contrary to this our present ordinance, then in the Counties, Wapentakes and Trithings suit shall be brought against them in the aforesaid form for the triple penalty (of the sum) thus promised or paid by them or their servants; and if perchance, prior to the present ordinance any one shall have covenanted with any one thus to serve for more wages, he shall not be bound by reason of the said covenant to pay more than at another time was wont to be paid to such person; nay, under the aforesaid penalty he shall not presume to pay more.

Likewise saddlers, skimmers, white-tawers, cordwainers, tailors, smiths, carpenters, masons, tilers, shipwrights, carters and all other artisans and labourers shall not take for their labour and handiwork more than what, in the places where they happen to labour, was customarily paid to such persons in the said twentieth year and in the other common years preceding, as has been said; and if any man take more, he shall be committed to the nearest jail in the manner aforesaid.

Likewise let butchers, fishmongers, hostlers, brewers, bakers, pulvers and all other vendors of any victuals, be bound to sell such victuals for a reasonable price, having regard for the price at which such victuals are sold in the adjoining places: so that such vendors may have moderate gains, not excessive, according as the distance of the places from which such victuals are carried may seem reasonably to require; and if any one sell such victuals in another manner, and be convicted of it in the aforesaid way, he shall pay the double of that which he received to the party injured, or in default of him, to another who

fixed hours, no money to beggars, person offered a job has to take it, stabilize food prices. Wanted to turn clockback + freeze it there. Couldn't enforce this. Lords wanted labor. Used power of state, + themselves Serfdom just dying out. Serfs started using money were like free peasants.

shall be willing to prosecute in this behalf; and the mayor and bailiffs of the cities and burroughs, merchant towns and others, and of the maritime ports and places shall have power to enquire concerning each and every one who shall in any way err against this, and to levy the aforesaid penalty for the benefit of those at whose suit such delinquents shall have been convicted; and in case that the same mayor and bailiffs shall neglect to carry out the aforesaid, and shall be convicted of this before justices to be assigned by us, then the same mayor and bailiffs shall be compelled through the same justices, to pay to such wronged person or to another prosecuting in his place, the treble of the thing thus sold, and nevertheless, on our part too, they shall be grievously punished.

And because many sound beggars do refuse to labour so long as they can live from begging alms, giving themselves up to idleness and sins, and, at times, to robbery and other crimes -- let no one, under the aforesaid pain of imprisonment presume, under colour of piety or alms to give anything to such as can very well labour, or to cherish them in their sloth, -- so that thus they may be compelled to labour for the necessities of life. *

Before the fourteenth century had passed, England and France were locked in the disastrous Hundred Years' War. The ravages of this struggle bore heavily upon the lower classes and led to insurrections in both countries. In France the peasant distress and hatred of the nobility, whom they held responsible for their misery, erupted in 1357 in the Jacquerie revolts in Normandy, Picardy, and Champagne. Across the English Channel a combination of townspeople and countryfolk rebelled in 1381 against the efforts of English landlords to revive serfdom in England. Although in each case the insurrections were ruthlessly suppressed by both the feudal lords and the kings, apparently neither lords nor peasants were aware that social changes were taking place which in time would alter the position of both and lead to the rise to power of the commercial class.

An important economic development in the fifteenth century administered a coup de grace to English manorialism. The developing woolen textile industry on the Continent and in England made the production of raw wool exceedingly profitable. Consequently, many landlords turned to grazing sheep, which necessitated abandoning the open-field system of small plots in favor of larger and more compact holdings. These holdings were fenced and from this the term "enclosure movement" derives. Since sheep-raising required fewer people than agriculture,

* Ernest F. Henderson, Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892), pp. 165-168. Henderson incorrectly labeled this document "The Statute of Laborers."

Manors had been set up for a closed static commerce. Just wasn't like this anymore. So the lords started joining them.

many of the former manorial tenants were forced from the land. They flocked into the towns to provide an abundant supply of cheap labor.

By 1500 the medieval manor, and therefore serfdom, had all but disappeared in England and northern Italy and was on the rapid decline in France and western Germany. Although the spirit and techniques of capitalism only slowly invaded agriculture in these areas, production was carried on increasingly for profit rather than for use, as was earlier the case. In some places the free peasant farmer and in other places the tenant farmer or the sharecropper gradually replaced the serf. Such complex changes as these took centuries to effect and did not proceed at the same pace everywhere. France did not eliminate the last vestiges of the manorial system and serfdom until 1789. This step was not taken in central and eastern Europe until the nineteenth century. In Russia, where serfdom was established only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its abolition did not come until 1861.