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CHAPTER I

*Introduction: Social structure and
economic change in late
medieval England**S. H. Rigby*

In W. G. Runciman's words, 'all societies can be characterised in terms of the nature and degree of institutionalised differences of privileges among their members'.¹ However, the precise nature of the social privileges characteristic of pre-industrial societies such as medieval England has proved a controversial issue amongst historians and social scientists. For instance, can medieval English society be analysed in terms of the class divisions characteristic of modern societies, or should it be seen, like other pre-industrial societies, as stratified in terms of orders or estates? Was conflict inherent within medieval social relations or can instances of conflict be explained by more immediate, short-term factors? Such debates are linked to broader methodological questions such as whether historians should describe a society in the terms employed by members of that society or whether societies of the past can be analysed using the concepts of modern social theory. Here it will be argued that, rather than being stratified exclusively in terms of classes, orders or any other single form of social inequality, medieval English society was made up of a number of different axes of social inequality. Any one individual thus had a variety of social identities, including those of class, order, status group and gender. The first part of this chapter examines how these forms of social inequality came together to create the particular social hierarchy to be found in late medieval England; the second assesses the forces working to produce economic and social change in the later middle ages.

¹ W. G. Runciman, 'Towards a theory of social stratification', in F. Parkin, ed., *The Social Analysis of Class Structure* (1974), p. 56. I would like to thank Rosalind Brown-Grant, Bruce Campbell, R. C. Nash and the editors of this volume for their extremely valuable comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

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SOCIAL STRUCTURE: CLASSES, ORDERS, STATUS AND GENDER

That modern social theory *can* be fruitfully applied to medieval social inequalities is shown by the ‘dichotomic’ social analysis offered by Marxist and Marxist-influenced historians such as Hilton, Brenner, Dyer and Razi.² The social hierarchy here is understood in terms of one or a number of binary oppositions, such as those between propertied and non-propertied, lord and peasant, employer and employee, exploiter and exploited. Whilst Marxists such as Hilton recognise the existence of a variety of groups within medieval society, their underlying assumption tends to be that ‘feudal’ societies such as medieval England were fundamentally determined by the relations between a landowning class on the one hand and a class of peasant-producers on the other. Similarly, for Hilton, medieval urban society should also be understood in terms of the relations between two main classes: the artisans and the mercantile elite. Marxists see the relationship between these dichotomic classes in town and country as necessarily antagonistic. We are thus presented with a ‘dysfunctional’ model of medieval society: one in which conflict is viewed as the inevitable outcome of the prevailing social relations.

For Marxists, conflict was generated within rural society by the lords’ extraction of a ‘surplus’ from the peasant-producers in the form of rent. This rent could be paid in kind, as grain or livestock; but, far more frequently, it was rendered as labour services on the lords’ demesnes (the land which they had not permanently leased out to tenants) or, most commonly of all, in the form of a money payment. This transfer of wealth was enforced by the legal and political powers enshrined in the landlords’ manorial rights and, in particular, their power over their unfree tenants. Conflict between lords and peasants was inherent in this relationship, as tenants had a vested interest in minimising the level of rents and dues and the extent of manorial controls, while their lords stood to gain by maximising them. Similarly, as employers, the landlords had an interest in enforcing low wages whilst labourers and smallholders naturally sought higher wages. Such clashes of interest could generate intense struggle about levels of rent, wages and manorial restrictions. These struggles could be initiated from below, most dramatically in mass uprisings such as the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Popular struggles could also take more local forms, such as claims to free status, refusals to carry out labour services, ‘go-slows’ when performing services, resistance to the

² For bibliographical details of works cited in general terms here and elsewhere, see Further Reading.

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collection of manorial dues and demands for higher wages. However, social conflict could also be initiated from above. When, in the early fourteenth century, the estate administrators of the bishopric of Winchester systematically reduced the payments in grain to demesne employees, this effective cut in wages was just as much an example of class conflict as were the demands of labourers for higher wages in the era of labour shortage which followed the Black Death of 1348–9.

For Marxists, conflict was as inevitable within urban society as it was in the medieval countryside. Urban social conflict was generated by the appropriation of surplus from the producers, in this case the craft masters and journeymen, by the mercantile ruling elite, even if the appropriation of surplus in these circumstances was sometimes carried out by local taxation rather than by direct economic means. Although a variety of mechanisms existed within urban society to prevent social tensions from breaking out into open violence, ‘those who sought unity and peace were often papering over cracks in a divided social structure’.³

With its stress on objective property rights as the basis of social stratification, the Marxist approach lays less emphasis on the subjective perception of social relations by medieval people themselves. If, in terms of the medieval social theory of the three orders,⁴ the lay lords and church prelates were members of two different social orders (that is, those who fought and those who prayed) then, in class terms, these groups seem almost indistinguishable from one another, since together they constituted a single ‘aristocracy’ which derived the bulk of its income from its landed estates.⁵ In this class perspective, the account of social structure offered by medieval preachers, theologians and poets in which the social hierarchy was presented in terms of interdependent orders was far from a faithful portrait of reality. Rather, it was an imaginary representation of society, an ideology that legitimated the wealth, power and status accorded to particular social groups.

One alternative to the Marxist emphasis on polarised social classes and sharp social distinctions is to see social hierarchies in terms of ‘gradation’: that is, as constituting a spectrum of quantitative differences of wealth, status and power. D. W. Robertson, for instance, claimed that medieval

³ R. H. Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (1985), p. 123; C. Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: social change in England, c. 1200–1520* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 25; R. H. Hilton, *English and French Towns in Feudal Society* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 60, 150; C. Dyer, ‘Small-town conflict in the later middle ages: events at Shipston-on-Stour’, *Urban History*, 19 (1992), 184.

⁴ See below, pp. 4–5.

⁵ Dyer, *Standards of Living*, pp. 21–2, 25; C. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: the people of Britain, 850–1520* (New Haven, CT, 2002), p. 8.

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England had no classes in the modern sense, but only a long series of degrees of social rank.⁶ Certainly, as Bailey reminds us, it is misleading to talk of landlords and peasants as though they were ‘homogenous and easily defined classes’ since, in practice, these groups incorporated their own ‘fine gradations of status and wealth’.⁷ It is this internal stratification of the peasantry that has been the focus of the so-called ‘Toronto school’ of medieval historians. Whilst medievalists have traditionally concentrated on the relations between lord and peasant embodied in the *manor*, writers such as Raftis, the DeWindts and Britton have also stressed the need to examine the social life within the medieval English *village*. They have shown how an elite within the peasantry dominated landholding and, albeit to a lesser extent, the profits of ale-brewing, and have demonstrated how this elite enjoyed greater marriage opportunities and a wider geographical range of social contacts than those beneath them in village society. Indeed, this emphasis on differences within the peasantry even led Britton to present the sub-groups within the village as distinct social ‘classes’, each of which possessed its own internal cohesion and ‘class-consciousness’. Whilst co-operation between the villagers in the form of pledging, concords and land exchanges tended to be *intra*-group, cases of social friction (assault, theft, defamation and raising the hue and cry) were more likely to be *inter*-group, although, as Britton himself shows, there is also substantial evidence for *intra*-group hostility, particularly between individuals within the village elite.⁸

In practice, an emphasis on social gradation rather than dichotomic social division is often combined with a third social perspective, that of functional interdependence. Here, the constituent groups of society are not seen as existing in some necessary opposition (as they are in the dichotomic approach), but are rather conceptualised in terms of a mutually beneficial division of labour. This approach is popular with many modern historians, for whom medieval society was not made up of classes but rather of estates or orders which were ranked in terms of the status or honour accorded to their functions by the subjective social evaluation of the day. However, this view also found expression within the medieval period itself in the famous doctrine of the ‘three orders’. According to this theory, society was divided into three estates or orders,

⁶ D. W. Robertson, *Chaucer's London* (New York, 1968), p. 4.

⁷ M. Bailey, ‘Rural society’, in R. Horrox, ed., *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 150. See also J. A. Raftis, *Peasant Economic Development within the English Manorial System* (Montreal, 1996), p. 130.

⁸ E. Britton, *The Community of the Vill* (Toronto, 1977).

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the *oratores*, *bellatores* and *laboratores*: that is, those who pray, those who fight and those who work. These social groups were defined not by their economic role or their property rights but by their social function. Society was therefore thought of in terms of a body, with the orders as the limbs or organs whose specialist tasks were necessary for the wellbeing of the whole. Each order needed the services of the others if it was to prosper and survive. As Langland's *Piers Plowman* says to the knight, 'For my part, I'll sweat and toil for us both as long as I live, and gladly do my job as long as you want. But you must promise in return to guard over Holy Church and protect me from those thieves and wasters who ruin the world.'⁹

In particular, the tripartite theory stressed the need for the third estate, the producers, to be, in the words of Thomas Wimbledon's famous sermon of c.1388, 'subject and low' and in dread of displeasing their superiors.¹⁰ All should accept their place in the divinely ordained hierarchy. Individually, each man should remain within the estate to which God had called him, accepting the need to work 'according to his degree' rather than aspiring to rise in society. Collectively, since each group needed the services of the others, each should know its place and perform its duties rather than upsetting the 'natural' order of things. Of course, medieval thinkers were well aware that social conflict and mobility existed and that reality did not always match up to their ideal. Nevertheless, this divergence between ideal and reality tended to be regarded as the result of personal sin, as a failure of individual reason, rather than as the necessary product of contemporary social relations.

Medieval thinkers could easily reconcile an account of society as divided into functionally defined orders with a conception of social structure as a gradated hierarchy by their recognition that each order had its own internal stratification. Thus, the secular clergy were ranked from archbishops and bishops at the top of the English ecclesiastical hierarchy down to local priests and chaplains. Within the lay aristocracy there was a growing distinction between the parliamentary peerage (eventually internally ranked as dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts and barons) and the gentry (which was itself divided into knights, esquires and gentlemen). Furthermore, whilst in theory the clergy as an estate was ranked in its entirety above the laity, in practice, contemporaries were quite capable of

⁹ *Piers Plowman*, B-Text, Passus VI, lines 25–8, 159–66.

¹⁰ I. K. Knight, ed., *Wimbledon's Sermon Redde Rationem Villicationis Tue: a Middle English sermon of the fourteenth century* (Pittsburgh, 1967), p. 67.

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equating particular ranks within the clergy with those within the laity. For instance when, in his mid-fifteenth-century *Book of Nurture*, John Russell, marshal to Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, came to deal with the thorny problems posed by the order of precedence in the seating arrangements in a noble household, he divided potential guests into five hierarchically arranged groups. Each group had its own internal gradations according to birth, income and dignity. Within each group there was an equation between members of the clergy and of the laity, from archbishops and dukes through bishops and earls, mitred abbots and barons, unmitred abbots and knights, down to parish priests and esquires.¹¹

The view of society propagated within the medieval period has had a profound influence on modern historians. Rather than dismissing medieval social theory as mere ideology, Keen argues that in order to understand late medieval society we must 'know something about the contemporary hierarchy as men then saw it'. For Keen, late medieval England can be described as 'what we nowadays call a deference society', one characterised by 'an ordered gradation' of the social hierarchy which regulated the respect and the kind of service which people expected to render to or to receive from their fellows. Even though social divisions were more flexible in England than those of continental Europe under the *ancien régime*, 'in the minds of men of that age, the relations of deference and service that persisted between the grades [of society] were the basis of social order, of its essence: they had not yet come to regard social distinctions as divisive, as forces with the potential to tear society apart'.¹²

That society should be seen in terms of its self-perception, and the consequent belief that (as one critic of this approach puts it) pre-industrial societies such as late medieval England were 'neatly ordered ladder(s), the rungs of which were demarcated primarily by status and held together by harmonious social relationships',¹³ is now a common view amongst historians and sociologists. Its defenders include writers such as Mousnier, Fourquin and Crone. With a consensus in place amongst the members of society about the ranking of the different social groups, conflict is seen here as being paralysed from within by the power of some 'common culture' or 'dominant ideology': a view actually anticipated in

¹¹ F. J. Furnivall, ed., *The Babees Book* (EETS, os XXXII, 1868), p. 189–90. For further discussion, see below, p. 72.

¹² M. Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, 1990), p. 1; see also S. L. Waugh, 'Closure theory and medieval England', *New Left Review*, 226 (1997), 126–7.

¹³ S. McSheffrey, 'Conceptualising difference: English society in the late middle ages', *Journal of British Studies*, 36 (1997), 139.

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early fifteenth-century England in Robert Rypon's claim that 'the unity of the state exists in the agreement of its minds'.¹⁴ Certainly, in relation to medieval English towns, a number of historians – Thrupp, Reynolds, Palliser, Phythian-Adams and Rosser – have argued that urban political life was based on shared ideological norms such as the deferential belief that the rich should lead and dominate, so that to disobey one's social superior was to commit a sin. Similarly, for rural society, members of the Toronto school such as Britton and A. R. DeWindt have claimed that, in the thirteenth century, conciliation was 'much more common than conflict' in lord–peasant relations. Rather than the inevitability of conflict stressed by the Marxist model, it is the shared interests of lord and tenants which are emphasised here, feudal lords being seen as benefiting from the economic progress of their wealthier customary tenants and as bound by the responsibility to maintain local justice and to protect the orphans and widows within their power.

How are we to choose between these conflicting views of medieval English society? Although the dichotomic, class-based approach to medieval English social structure may seem to be in contradiction to the gradated and functional stress on orders, there is no reason why these models should necessarily be seen as mutually exclusive. Instead, the decision to emphasise classes or to put a stress on orders will tend to reflect our own immediate analytical concerns. If, for instance, we are interested in the manorial policies of the landlords, such as their abandonment of direct management of their demesnes in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we will tend to emphasise the class similarities between clerical landowners and their lay counterparts. If, on the other hand, we are interested in how individuals obtained their access to such property and how it was transmitted, we will be likely to stress the differences between the clergy and the laity as orders. Certainly, we do not have to swallow the doctrine of the three orders in its entirety in order to recognise that social status in medieval England was not solely the consequence of one's class position. Thus for the clergy access to the corporate wealth of the Church (both its temporal wealth as a landowner and the income from spiritual services drawn from particular ecclesiastical offices) was itself the consequence of their membership of, and ranking within, a particular status group, a group which was defined by functions

¹⁴ A. J. Fletcher, "'The unity of the state exists in the agreement of its minds': a fifteenth-century sermon on the three estates", *Leeds Studies in English*, ns 22 (1991), 109.

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that were not based on the production of goods or any other economic activity.

While it may be the case, as Doyle argues, that ‘power differentials unrelated to wealth are quite inconceivable’,¹⁵ this does not mean that inequalities in the social distribution of power and status in medieval England were therefore simply the *result* of economic inequalities. On the contrary, the acquisition of wealth, the mode of its possession and the ability to transmit wealth to successors fundamentally differed between the lay and ecclesiastical magnates. While the lay landowners enjoyed a personal ownership of property which meant that they could pass it on to their heirs, the access to the institutional wealth of the Church enjoyed by the higher ecclesiastics was the result of success in specifically clerical career paths. Lay and ecclesiastical landlords in medieval England were themselves certainly aware of their shared *class* interests: for example, in using the law to keep down wages in the aftermath of the Black Death. But they were also aware of their conflicting interests as members of separate *orders*, as in the competition over land and wealth. By the thirteenth century the ecclesiastical landlords possessed almost half of all agricultural land in England, and the laity expressed its desire to set a limit on such acquisitions by persuading the state to issue ‘mortmain’ legislation regulating the conditions under which the Church might receive new grants. It is, therefore, perfectly possible to reconcile an analysis of medieval society based on classes with one based on orders, provided that we realise that these are matters of analytical convenience, and that both offer useful insights into the social reality of medieval England.

Once we see individuals as the members of multiple social groups, there is no need to limit the social groups of medieval England either to the classes of Marxist historiography or to the three orders set out in medieval social theory itself. As in other societies, individuals could also be ranked socially as the members of status groups defined by language, race, culture or religion. A classic example of this in medieval England is provided by the Jews, who, despite the individual wealth of a number of prominent Jewish moneylenders, never as a group enjoyed substantial political power or high social status. As a result, in the thirteenth century the Jews suffered increasingly from punitive royal taxation and restrictive legislation until, eventually, they were expelled from England in 1290 – a precedent that other European states were later to follow.

¹⁵ W. Doyle, ‘Myths of order and ordering myths’, in M. L. Bush, ed., *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500* (1992), p. 221.

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In recent years, historians have increasingly devoted their attention to another of the social axes of medieval society, that of gender, a form of inequality which was central in determining access to wealth, status and power in late medieval England. Traditionally, if society has been seen as a pyramid, sociologists and historians have tended to see the family, not the individual, as its basic building block. It is membership of a family that is regarded as determining access to economic resources, power and status, and as the main mechanism for the transmission of such privileges. Certainly it has been argued that the family was the most basic social unit known to medieval society itself.¹⁶ Yet writers within the medieval period were also aware of the social differences *within* families. As the legal treatise known as *Bracton* put it in the thirteenth century, 'Women differ from men in many respects for their position is inferior to that of men'.¹⁷

It is this inequality between the genders, the ways in which the biological differences between male and female were culturally and socially interpreted in historically specific ways, which has been emphasised by feminist social theorists and historians. For these writers, medieval society was profoundly patriarchal: that is, characterised by a systematic subordination of women to men and the consequent relative exclusion of women from wealth, status and power. While women may have enjoyed agency and initiative as individuals, their social position was also characterised by a structured inferiority to men of their own class in terms of inheritance and property ownership, economic opportunities, access to education, legal rights and enjoyment of formal political power. Such historians tend to stress the social disabilities common to all women. As Bennett put it, peasant women can be seen as facing 'limitations fundamentally similar to those restricting women of the more privileged sectors of medieval society'.¹⁸ Similarly, Mate argues that shared disabilities and experiences were, at least in the sense that these combined to prevent any transformation of women's status, 'more fundamental' than those of class.¹⁹ All women were confronted by the reality of their systematic social inferiority, even though women of different classes

¹⁶ M. Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, CT, 1984), p. 160. The 'family', in medieval terms, could also be taken to imply the *familia*: the whole household, including servants. This is discussed further by Coss, below, pp. 46–50.

¹⁷ G. E. Woodbine and Samuel E. Thorne, eds., *Bracton de legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae: Bracton on the laws and customs of England* (4 vols., Oxford, 1968–77), ii, pp. 29, 31.

¹⁸ J. M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside* (Oxford, 1987), quotation at p. 6, also pp. 178, 185–9.

¹⁹ M. E. Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows after the Black Death* (Woodbridge, 1998), quotation at p. 8, see also pp. 182, 192, 197.

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experienced this subordination in different ways. In other words, not only peasants and landlords, or clergy and laity, but also men and women can be seen as distinct social groups whose members possessed a common position within the social distribution of power and privilege.

Once we see individuals as occupying a number of intersecting social positions, including those of class, order, gender and status group, the notion of late medieval England as a society of gradated orders can, in certain respects, be reconciled with the view that this was a society divided along class lines. However, where the two approaches remain fundamentally opposed is in their assessment of the extent and significance of contemporary social conflict. This *was* an age of deference, as is shown by John Russell's concern with having each man literally in his proper place at the dinner table. But this could also be an age of ambition and of conflict, as Chaucer's Wife of Bath symbolised by her determination to enjoy first place when making offerings in church. Indeed, such 'quarrels for precedence seem at times less the occupational hazard of churchgoers in late medieval England than their principal occupation'.²⁰ One reason for emphasising the importance of conflict in medieval English society is that such conflict has been seen as a major determinant of long-term social change. It is to the forces that brought about social and economic change in medieval England that we now turn.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE: TRADE, POPULATION, CLASS AND MONEY

If medieval English society can be understood in terms of a variety of overlapping forms of social inequality, how can we explain the long-term changes that this structure underwent? In particular, is it possible to identify a 'prime mover' of social and economic change in late medieval England? For the earliest historians of the medieval English economy and society, writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the main determinant of social and economic change was the long-term growth of the market and an increasing division of labour within society, which allowed an increase in economic efficiency and productivity. This approach was based on the work of Adam Smith, for whom the market was the dynamic agent of economic growth in overcoming the stagnant 'natural economy' of the countryside, a growth embodied in the rise of

²⁰ S. H. Rigby, 'The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan and the medieval case for women', *Chaucer Review*, 35 (2000), 139–40; E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: traditional religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, CT, 1992), pp. 125–7 (quotation at p. 126).