

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88036-7 - An Economic and Social History of Later Medieval Europe, 1000-1500

Steven A. Epstein

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

**Y**OU HAVE OPENED THIS BOOK ON THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL history of later medieval Europe, so you are entitled to know its limits and biases. This is a big Europe of open horizons, especially shaped by Mediterranean and Asian influences that draw our story to North Africa and the Middle East (see Figure I.1). The year 1000 is an arbitrary beginning so, in Chapter 1, we must take a step back to examine the social and economic history of early medieval Europe. The year 1500 is not, in some respects, a good ending, but we can worry about that later. By 1000, the Europeans were basically at home, although there would still be some migrations within Europe. These Europeans were far from being the most comfortable or prosperous people on the planet. Two other peoples, the Turks and Mongols, came into Europe during our five-hundred-year period. By 1500, the Europeans, equipped with good weapons, institutions, and reasonable numbers, were on the verge of bringing their distinctive society and economy to the rest of the world. The entire story of this remarkable change is not contained within these five centuries, and the causes of change are not limited to social and economic history. Nevertheless, these vital subjects – economic and social history – warrant opening this book.

*Economic history* is easier to define. Its subject is human choices about consumption and is generally limited to the material circumstances of life. “Human” means women and men, always. Yet, men and women make choices about how to choose, and some reject materialism while others thrive in the world of making, buying, and selling. Here, we must study those who are trying to survive by satisfying their own basic needs – food, clothing, and shelter – while also, in some way, satisfying the needs of others. In other words, we are examining rational maximizers of self-interest, operating under the constraints of the real

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Figure I.1. Big Map of Europe, listing frequently mentioned places (map by Keith A. French and Darin Grauberger, University of Kansas Cartographic Services).

world, its rules, resources, climate, and all of the rest. As Gregory Clark has recently pointed out, wealth alone is the most important factor that enables lifestyles and therefore social history. This is the inevitable bias of economic historians – the privileging of the search for wealth as the activity motivating

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most people most of the time. Such an assumption does not make economic historians crude materialists. What they tend to hate is the absence of wealth – poverty. They see wealth and poverty as two sides of the same coin. Much of economic history is the search for an antidote to poverty and the ways that poverty hurts people.

*Social history*, a vast subject, considers how people live together in society as members of groups. How they survive is the story of the constraints – how climate or clean air, or personal traits, such as health and religious opinions, come together with personal capabilities to affect survival. The emphasis here will be on how people live in families and how they work together, or do not. Because social history takes in almost all of human experience, in practice we must limit our focus here to those aspects of society most connected to choices about work, comfort, and the economy. This social history has little to do with past politics and is no substitute for a textbook on medieval history. Material culture matters here, so, for example, tools are discussed. Cultural history is discussed occasionally when values or luxuries emerge as topics. The approach taken to social history excludes most of cultural history, a regrettable but necessary decision if the book is to be short.

One of the subjects that unifies social history and economic history is the standard of living, that is, the level of comfort a person enjoys. In our time period of study, many people had no choice about these matters, especially those who were born and died as slaves. In practice, comparatively few people had any sort of standard of living that we might envy. Only at the end of our period of study does any sort of consumer society emerge that shared its products with any substantial amount of people – still perhaps the top percent in terms of wealth. It is practically impossible to measure the standard of living in the Middle Ages, but sometimes, at least, we have a sense of what direction it was going. Precise numbers are lacking on topics, such as gross domestic product, wages, literacy, caloric intake, and other factors that shape how people live and die. Whether or not the average person was experiencing any real improvement depends on how we measure or estimate what they valued. The privilege of praying in a great cathedral like Chartres has to be weighed against a grumbling stomach or cold feet. Free lands in Iceland or in the Ukraine experienced a burst of productivity, but it would not last. Clark's perspective on this problem was so wide that he contended that the average person was really no better off in 1800 than he or she was in 100,000 BCE. What he means must be taken seriously, even if he is wrong.

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We must resist the temptation in social and economic history to focus on elites, lords, and great merchants. The great mass of people, poor with very little or nothing, subsisted in a standard of living that their distant hunter-gatherer ancestors may very well not have envied. Our later Middle Ages were in the middle of the Malthusian world in which economic success equaled reproductive failure. In this environment, the stern message was that, for most people, the only ways to raise the standard of living were to decrease the birth rate and/or to increase the death rate. A pie of a stable size gave bigger slices to fewer people. The rich had more children because they could afford to, but if they had too many they would end up poorer. Yet, those factors we might assume improved the lives of people – peace, hygiene, freedom from epidemic disease – reduced the standard of living because they lowered the death rate! This way of looking at the world made economics, at first, seem to be truly the dismal science of death. Most medieval people viewed this world as a brief stop on the way to either a pleasant or hellish eternity. But they thought that what they did here mattered, not only to their salvation, but also to their choices about how to live. Their institutions, the sets of rules or norms by which they regulated social and economic life, are perhaps their most durable legacy to the modern world.

This textbook is a summary of vast scholarly literatures which are growing exponentially every year in a variety of languages. Even at this moment, it becomes slowly out-of-date. This is the normal fate of textbooks. This introduction and each chapter mention the most important works for the topics discussed. Some major studies influenced every chapter and are not listed again. The bibliographies of these works, in turn, become a guide for the huge literature that you may wish to consult on any special subject that seems neglected or omitted. Wherever possible, I have emphasized readings in English, but I have tried to keep a proper perspective on the social and economic history of later medieval England. This vast and intensively studied subject cannot be allowed to overwhelm a text that must illuminate Europe as a whole. This textbook is a filter standing between you and the known facts and opinions about medieval social and economic history. I have selected some themes and not others, and I have chosen one example over another. My biases and ignorance will become apparent as you read. For now, I want to make it clear that this is not the first textbook on this subject. I will briefly set out the major influences on the ways I have shaped this book, so that you can think about these limits in advance.

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Let us consider a few old and great books for what they have contributed to the current wisdom on medieval social and economic history. Not all of this will make immediate sense to you, but down the road it will ring bells, and even now it explains the biases of this textbook.

Henri Pirenne's *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe* (1937) rightly commanded the field for most of the twentieth century. This book stood the test of time because of its big ideas. Pirenne claimed to be guided by the facts rather than theories. In practice, this means that he was in the grip of theories that he did not understand or had suppressed. Yet, his judgment was excellent and where the book fails is in the lack of up-to-date information. In the last seventy years, more research has rendered obsolete most of what Pirenne wrote about credit, customs duties, employers, and entrepreneurial landlords, among other topics. He knew well northern Europe, commercial fairs, banking, manors as social institutions, trade, in general, and many other things. Pirenne saw Europe from the perspective of what he knew best – his native Flanders, its leading medieval city, Bruges, and another city he seemed to admire above all others, Venice.

Pirenne's book is filled with *bons mots*, really striking points revealing his biases, partly inherited by me. He thought that the merchant improvised at the will of his circumstances. This means he focused on entrepreneurs, opportunities, and accidents. The rise of a merchant class struck him as a fundamental issue in this period. Jewish merchants seemed to be accessories, and when they were largely excluded from commerce Pirenne thought society had lost nothing essential. He was the first, but by no means the last, historian to ponder the exact role Jews played in economic development, as their social fate became dominated by discrimination and even expulsion from parts of Europe. Feudal society hovered over the world Pirenne studied, and he thought that the few common people who preserved their liberties were of no consequence. Piracy struck him as the first stage or indeed the root of commerce (he had the Vikings in mind), validating Balzac's view that behind every fortune there is a crime. Commerce was contagious according to Pirenne, so being neighbors to more prosperous trading civilizations was a stroke of good luck. His characteristic open-mindedness inclined Pirenne to value the contributions of Islamic practices to medieval economic life. Yet, he saw the one important result of the Crusades (not a subject that much interested him) as the ways Italians, Provençals, and Catalans came to dominate the Mediterranean at the expense

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of the world of Islam. Usury laws on the interest rate on loans struck Pirenne as a hindrance rather than a barrier to economic development.

Above all, Pirenne was convinced that the later Middle Ages witnessed the rise of commercial capitalism and that anyone who failed to see this was blinded by theory or bias. He surely had in mind Max Weber, Karl Marx, and others who, for one theoretical reason or another, denied the existence of a medieval capitalism. Europeans did not have to wait for Protestantism or the end of the feudal mode of production to invent capitalism. Pirenne claimed that capitalism required an entrepreneurial class of rational maximizers who owned private property, who produced for a market, and who employed people to work for them. These basic hallmarks of a market economy, commercial capitalism, appeared together in Western Europe precociously in twelfth-century Flanders and northern Italy. Elements of a market economy had been long present in the Muslim and Greek East, legacies of the ancient world. Nevertheless, some people, be they peasants or nuns, continued to exploit some lands in common ways. One economic system does not automatically drive out others. The search for food, clothing, and shelter can be an individual, familial, or collective endeavor.

Most economic historians have joined with Pirenne in locating the rise of free markets in the Middle Ages. Disagreements still exist about the degree to which the market's rise, which was admittedly impressive, had become the dominant engine of the European economy by 1500. This textbook tries to avoid abstractions like "the market" or "capitalism." I put forward here a view of economic development entirely consistent with a clear market economy in some regions by the end of this book. This does not mean that markets prevailed everywhere or overcame more traditional means of organizing production – for example, durable forms of peasant servitude. Pirenne also understood this inevitable mixing of styles of production and degrees of personal and material freedom. Pirenne was not infallible. For some reason, he was convinced that no one had economic policies in the Middle Ages, but as we will see, there were many policies.

Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* (1961) was conceived in the 1930s and reflects the French *Annales* school approach to medieval social history. This school aimed to fuse economic, social, and cultural history into a total synthesis, enriching the previous emphasis on past politics and the Church. Bloch rooted his understanding of society deep in the soil worked by generations of peasants or serfs – both farmers under duress. A lordly class of professional warriors and landlords

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subjected this peasantry and lived off of their labors. Whatever surpluses the feudal regime generated sustained early markets and noble consumption. Bloch understood that feudal society did not prevail everywhere and was not even present all parts of medieval Europe. Nevertheless, we owe to him an abiding interest in medieval agriculture – its farming and pastoral regions that sustained cities. The role of the warrior in medieval society, and the social value placed on contracts among people, became distinctive medieval social legacies to the subsequent development of Europe. Some later historians have turned a skeptical eye toward “feudalism” as an anachronistic and useless legalistic construct imposed on the rich variety of local medieval experiments in self-help and farming. Bloch's social insights suffuse this text and its assumptions.

John Hicks, *A Theory of Economic History* (1969) synthesized the lessons of nearly a century concerning how to write economic history, a subject hard to disentangle from all the other types of histories. Hicks wondered about how exactly history benefits from quantitative analysis, but he concluded that it did. Economic theory was relevant to general phenomena, but not the stories that remain the staple of the historical narrative. Hicks was interested mainly in markets, which he saw as rising from custom and command in a society. The rise of the market is not a good or dramatic story; it is a general phenomenon. Yet, most people eventually work for a market. Like Pirenne, Hicks loved city-states, such as Venice and Florence, because they revealed how merchants ruled and specialized. It is natural for economic historians to have a fondness for merchants. So the things that engage merchants tend to absorb economic historians, because these things leave behind records and numbers to ponder. Hicks drew attention to risk – the merchant was above all in the business of reducing risk and enduring uncertainty. Yet, we must be careful to ask exactly what risk entailed in specific contexts. Law and money were the great Roman legacies to the medieval economy. Medieval merchants had to reinvent credit. For Hicks, the real point to disputes about usury was the morality of interest on unsecured loans. He saw feudal society as primarily a military system, and economic historians cannot forget about the costs of war. Finally, according to Hicks, everyone understood that the theoretical benefits of free trade did not always work out, in practice, to enrich everyone. Economic historians tend to take free trade as an obvious good thing, as almost a religion. Social historians tend to worry about how the powerful rig trade to their private gain at public cost.

Carlo M. Cipolla published the first edition of his fundamental *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy 1000–1700* in 1973, and its third edition

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appeared in 1994. The title and dates reveal his most important premise – the later medieval world was a prequel to what really mattered – the Industrial Revolution. Cipolla's interests and statistics thickened as he came to the end of this story. Yet, he accepted the basic connectivity of economic and social history. One of the common themes was scarcity – the basic constraint operating to shape and to distinguish needs from wants. Choice was always necessary, because there were always more wants, let alone needs, than resources. Basic choices concerned food, clothing, and shelter. Cipolla always had an eye out for those whose choices were most constrained: the many beggars in medieval society and the foundlings left on church porches. Charity was a prime example of a voluntary transfer of wealth. Cipolla saw the important distinction about savings: before 1000 – hoarding and dishoarding, and after 1000, the rise of investment. An important question to ask about any society is: who can save and invest? He too rightly observed that the public debt was unknown in the ancient world and was thus a great medieval invention. The very high percentage of the medieval work force in agriculture was proof of its low productivity. Some medieval work, such as weaving, saw considerable increases in productivity while others, such as domestic service or building, saw virtually none. Fixed capital was mainly in livestock, tools, and weapons. Cipolla had no doubts that warfare was negative economic production and a social waste. He also wondered if free trade was always a good thing and if protectionism was sometimes wise policy. Finally, Cipolla was a close student of the rise of the professional in later medieval Europe, and he gave pride of place not to the banker but to the physician. Cities were death traps but frequently hired doctors to serve the public. This was an amazingly astute and caring public health policy.

These thoughts on the current status of medieval economic and social history prepare us to enter this complex world. Medieval people had no reason to believe that what we know as their social and economic history affected their own values, or history in general. We are imposing these categories of analysis on the medieval world. Important themes take us to the calamity of the Big Death in the fourteenth century. This world did not end. Europe contained enough grounds for optimism so that its people chose to continue making choices to live. Without their endurance, many of us would not be here. From the perspective of the rest of the world, with its own stresses, the arrival of the prosperous and well-armed Europeans, with their new institutions and diseases, was far from a blessing.



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Nevertheless, we may see these five hundred years as an interval between the great migrations of Europeans during the early Middle Ages, and their subsequent adventures after 1500 across the planet. During our period of study, some Europeans (and not others) began to triumph over poverty and backwardness. Of course, any competitive society produces losers as well as winners. The grim side to the expansion of Europe remains a persecuting culture rightly credited with the origins of modern racism and slavery. Yet, on the other side of the argument, a judicious mix of property rights, reliable ways to resolve disputes, and useful mediating institutions, such as guilds, and policies such as protectionism, among other causes, helped Europeans to astonish their near and distant neighbors.

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## 1

## EUROPE AT THE MILLENNIUM

**T**O START OUR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF EUROPE with the Tenth-Century Crisis, we must take a step or two back in order to make a good beginning. First, the ancient economy ended in the early medieval West but continued on in some fashion in the Byzantine Empire in the East. Great movements of peoples occurred across early medieval Europe. Vast migrations brought Germanic- and Slavic-speaking people into new lands that they claimed as their own. Second, the rise of Islam affected the entire Mediterranean economy and society. Third, the Carolingian state experienced an economic revival whose strengths and problems define the Tenth-Century Crisis. Let us start with the legacies of the ancient economy as they are currently understood in light of the latest research.

In the Barbarian kingdoms of the early medieval West, the imperial economy, with its sophisticated tax structures, collapsed by 700. Nearly everywhere in Europe, kings were increasingly unable to draw on local resources for military purposes in the ways that the most effective late-Roman emperors were able to do. This fact suggests that the survival of the Byzantine state depended on some continuity in fiscal structures and public income in the eastern Mediterranean. Later, Muslim caliphates would be able to draw on these legacies. In the period from 400 to 800, aristocracies became weaker everywhere except in Francia and in the Greek East. In most places, the ruling elites were poorer and less comfortable in their material circumstances than they had been in the fourth century. Peasants, who were farmers working under some form of duress, became more autonomous, and those who had originated as rural slaves in many places found servile status to be less well defined and more onerous. Weaker aristocracies changed their cultures and identities as Christianity set