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F. J. FISHER

TAWNEY'S CENTURY

THE century which separates the Dissolution of the Monasteries from the Great Rebellion may almost be defined... as "Tawney's century".¹ So wrote Professor Trevor-Roper, and many will think his definition a happy one. Yet it is doubtful whether all will accept his reason for offering it—i.e. that Tawney has reinterpreted that century in terms of a rising gentry drawing their strength from new agricultural techniques and a declining aristocracy weakened by economic conservatism and fashionable extravagance—or share his fear that such an interpretation is in danger of becoming a new orthodoxy. Unanimity is scarcely a characteristic of those whose work owes most to Tawney's influence, and Tawney himself has made the appropriate comment upon the fragility of historical orthodoxies—'all flesh is grass and historians wither quicker than most.' His influence has been exercised through more varied channels and at a more profound level. A great teacher has the gift of attracting men of sufficient calibre to be able critically to test his suggestions in the light of the empirical evidence which they unearth, to modify where necessary the views which he originally inspired, and to carry investigations beyond the point at which he himself left them. He shapes the course of scholarship not only through his own, inevitably provisional, conclusions but also—and perhaps mainly—through his capacity to suggest the questions that are most worthwhile exploring. It is by operating through both these channels that Tawney has made the pre-Civil War period his own. Much of what has recently been written about that period is Tawney modified and amplified in the light of further research. And even those who reject his views most vigorously find themselves answering, rather than ignoring, the questions which he has raised. In the last

¹ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The Gentry, 1540-1640*. (1953), p. 1.

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resort, his influence lies in his flair for suggesting to the twentieth century what of interest is to be found in the sixteenth and seventeenth and, as Burkhardt pointed out, what any age finds interesting in its past is the very marrow of history.

The reasons why the twentieth century should be interested in the economic history of the sixteenth and seventeenth are no doubt various, but one is suggested by Sir Theodore Gregory's shrewd description of that part of the world which it is now fashionable to call underdeveloped:¹

'There may be a fringe of plantation-cultivation and some large-scale industrial and mining enterprise, but there is also a mass of peasant cultivators . . . and an indigenous industry organised not on the basis of power-driven machinery but on the basis of the human hand. Finance is provided by the "money-lender" not by a commercial bank; life flows in a traditional pattern. Birth rates are high and so is mortality, production *per capita* is low and the struggle for existence is hard . . . It is a familiar pattern and the danger is of over-simplification. There is the temptation to suppose that because the technical way of life in many parts of the world is traditional, therefore the populations who live that life are simple, unsophisticated souls, unaffected by the economic calculus, unaware of the pull of the more or less, the greater or the smaller gain. Nothing could well be more mistaken. I venture to think . . . that it is not in those parts of the world . . . that self interest and the profit motive are tempered by considerations of the public good.'

Those words might well constitute a description of the England of which Tawney is the great expositor, for the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries constitute perhaps the last period in English history in which economic appetites were remarkably vigorous but in which economic expansion was still slow.

Of the vigour of economic appetites under the later Tudors and early Stuarts there can be little doubt. Both contemporary comment and contemporary behaviour testify to it, and Weber's attempt to

¹ Sir Theodore Gregory, 'The Problems of the Under-developed World', *Lloyds Bank Review*, Oct. 1948 pp. 39-40.

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identify a capitalist ethic distinct from the simple desire for economic gain appears increasingly unconvincing as more about individual capitalists becomes known. The slowness of economic growth must, in the absence of statistics, be more open to question. Clearly, it was not an age of stagnation. The growth of population was undoubtedly accompanied by some expansion of the national income. As a result of the developments in foreign trade and of the growth of London there was a widening of the range as well as an increase in the volume of the goods and services available for consumption. Yet the steep and prolonged rise in agricultural prices may reasonably be interpreted to mean that agricultural production was slow to expand. For what they are worth, the Customs figures suggest that for much of the period exports were sluggish. The persistence of high interest rates may well mean that the rate of capital accumulation was slow. The lag of wages behind prices, the contemporary concern about pauperism, and the mounting fear of over-population all suggest that the growing labour force was absorbed into employment only with difficulty; and it is perhaps significant that the second quarter of the seventeenth century, when the upward swing of agricultural prices began to flatten out and real wage rates began to rise, was also a time when disease and emigration were probably combining to check the rate of population growth. With respect to such an economy, the task of the historian is less that of demonstrating the expansive force of economic ambition than that of examining the impediments which contained it, less that of proclaiming its successes than that of recording the strains and stresses to which it gave rise.

In primary production, the obstacles to expansion lay mainly in the field of supply and arose largely from the limitations of contemporary techniques. In fishing, it is true, men seem to have found it easier to catch herrings than to sell them; but elsewhere the difficulty lay in raising output rather than in disposing of it. The story of mining was one of a growing struggle with the problems of drainage and ventilation as deposits near the surface became exhausted. That of agriculture was largely one of the increasing difficulties with which men wrested an adequate supply of commodities from the soil. At first sight, that difficulty may seem surprising since the labour force

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was growing and land was, by modern standards, still plentiful. But much of that land was infertile; much was waterlogged; many areas were still thinly peopled; yields were generally low; and the demands upon the soil were many. For in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as in the Middle Ages, men looked to the land not only for their food but also for their drink, for their fuel, and for such basic industrial materials as timber, wool, hides, skins and tallow. It was called upon to provide, not only the horses which maintained the internal system of transport, but also the fodder by which those horses were themselves maintained. And much land was still required to satisfy the appetite of the king and upper classes for the chase. Under such circumstances economic and demographic expansion tended to place upon the land a strain that, in later ages and under different circumstances, they were to place upon the balance of payments. In the course of time, the combined pressure of these competing uses was to be relieved in a variety of ways. For both political and economic reasons the hunting rights of the king and his subjects were to be curtailed. The pressure of the demand for fuel was to be eased by the substitution of coal for wood, by the concentration of the major fuel-using industries in those regions where fuel was most abundant, and by the importation of iron smelted abroad. The pressure of the demand for timber was to be eased by the greater use of brick in building and by the growth of substantial imports from Scandinavia and the Baltic. Improvements in water transport were to bring with them economies in horse power. English pastures were to be supplemented by those of Ireland, Wales and Scotland, which sent increasing quantities of wool and livestock into the English market. And as the pressure of these competing claims was eased, the efficiency of land use was to be raised by the introduction of turnips and the artificial grasses to raise the fertility of the lighter soils and to improve the country's grasslands. But those developments belonged to the seventeenth century rather than to the sixteenth, and to the later years of that century rather than to the earlier. It was not until the later years of Charles II that the flow of produce from the land was to become so great as to inflict upon men the horrors of plenty. Bacon looked back on the reign of Elizabeth as a critical period during which

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England had become dangerously dependent on foreign grain, and both the course of prices and the literary evidence suggest that, despite land reclamation and the increased use of lime, marl and leys, the pressure upon the land continued to mount at least until the reign of Charles I.

Given these competing demands upon land, it was inevitable that the question of land use should become a major issue. Should men be allowed to change the use of their land—and in particular to convert arable to pasture—as considerations of profit prompted them? Should the forest rights of the king and the hunting grounds of his greater subjects, compatible though they were with both rough grazing and the production of wood and timber, be swept away to permit an extension of arable and improved pasture? Above all, should rights of common grazing—a relatively inefficient form of land use—be preserved in the interests of social stability or be suppressed in the interests of productivity? In large measure, no doubt, those questions were resolved by the forces of the market. Men converted their land from arable to pasture, or from pasture to arable, as prices dictated. More than one landowner converted his chase or his park into farms. Enclosure—i.e. the suppression of common grazing rights—by agreement was a feature of the age. But as the pressure upon land mounted, the question of its use became increasingly a political one. Despite growing criticism in the Commons and the ranks of the landlords, the Crown clung to the Tudor policy of forbidding the conversion of arable to pasture save where that conversion ministered to the improvement of arable farming itself. The Crown clung to its forest rights, partly for reasons of prestige and partly, perhaps, because the surrender value of those rights tended to increase with time. Although enclosure by agreement was legal, the difficulties of obtaining agreement were sometimes such as to produce demands that agreement should be dispensed with. As one Jacobean, probably an M.P., argued, ‘the difficultys attending inclosures lye only in the preposterous wills of perverse men who may, and will not, understand reason nor entertain a benefit offered them; and it is therefore not fit that matters of publick good should rest on the consultation and determination as such as afore resolve wilfully to withstand it, not knowing truly

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what they oppose.¹ But the political climate was not yet favourable to enclosure by compulsion.

In secondary production, by contrast, the obstacles to expansion seem to have lain in the field of demand rather than in that of supply. Technical difficulties, it is true, existed. As in mining and agriculture, men's impotence in the face of wind and weather tended to make employment irregular. Changes in their relative scarcities raised the problems of substituting coal for wood as an industrial fuel and long wool for short in the manufacture of textiles. In some industries English methods were poor by comparison with those of the Continent, and skilled immigrants were required to repair the deficiency. But these problems were either solved or remained comparatively unimportant in the century before the Civil War. Both the course of prices and the literary evidence suggest that, although secondary producers may have found it difficult actually to reduce their costs, they did not find it difficult to increase their output at current prices. In most industries, the main factor of production was labour and labour was both plentiful and cheap. It was easy enough to set more men and women on work; the problem, as many a poor law officer found, was to dispose of their output. The situation was, in short, one that is often found in countries in which the agricultural sector is large but agricultural productivity is low. High food prices meant that the industrial worker had little to spare for the purchase of manufactured goods, but the low output which made those prices high also limited the purchasing power of many agriculturalists. The labourer and cottager, irregularly employed and miserably paid, were poor customers. The small husbandmen, most of whose petty surpluses might be swallowed up in rent, were little better. Prosperity was largely confined to the landlords and more substantial farmers, and although their purchases of manufactured goods were no doubt considerable they were hardly enough to ensure a high level of industrial output. Much of their wealth went on personal services; much on building; much on luxuries and imports. Industrial activity was, moreover, further discouraged by the fact that the bulk of the population lived scattered in small communities with the result that

¹ J. St. John *Observations on the Land Revenue of the Crown*, (1787), Appendix III.

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much production was for local markets too small to encourage any high degree of specialisation. One of the most striking features that emerges from the probate inventories of the time is the extent to which the more prosperous artisans tended to diversify their interests instead of ploughing back their profits into their basic activity.

The effects of that situation on thought and policy are obvious enough. On the one hand, there was a series of attempts to check the production of industrial goods—or at least to restrict the number of industrial workers. The commercial crisis of 1551 was followed by a series of measures designed to prevent any repetition of the mushrooming of textile production that had characterised the preceding boom. Although it is possible that the Statute of Artificers was primarily designed to ensure an adequate supply of cheap agricultural labour—in a letter to Sir Thomas Smith, Cecil described it as ‘a very good law agreed upon for indifferent allowance of servants’ wages in husbandry’¹—in its final form it placed serious restrictions on the flow of labour into industry. And although there is no evidence that the government, either central or local, took positive steps to enforce those restrictions, Mrs. Gay Davies has shown that common informers were sufficiently active to make them of some significance. Moreover, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, many of the corporate towns reconstructed their guild systems and tightened up their bye-laws in an effort to ensure full employment for their citizens by suppressing the enterprise of those who did not share their freedom. On the other hand, men increasingly looked to the manipulation of foreign trade to solve the problems of industry. The curtailment of manufactured imports would create and stimulate the production of native substitutes for them; new markets overseas could make good the deficiencies of the market at home. Unfortunately, the circumstances of the time tended to favour the growth of imports rather than that of exports.

From the later middle ages until the eighteenth century, England’s major export consisted of woollen textiles; no other English product—and certainly no other English manufacture—was in great demand abroad. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries Eng-

¹ Conyers Read, *Mr. Secretary Cecil and Queen Elizabeth*, (1959), p. 274.

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land had enjoyed important competitive advantages in the production of the heavier fabrics suitable for the climate of north, central and eastern Europe and exports of those fabrics had risen substantially, with the consequence that more labour had found employment in the textile industry and that more land had been put down to grass. By the middle of the sixteenth century, however, that rise was virtually over. During the next hundred years such exports, for a complex variety of reasons admirably discussed by Dr. Supple, were to fluctuate around a trend that rose scarcely at all and by the reign of Charles I was undoubtedly falling.¹ By that reign, it is true, the trade in heavy woollens was being significantly and increasingly supplemented by a trade in the lighter and cheaper fabrics known as the new draperies. But under the early Stuarts those draperies were still very new, and for most of the century before the Civil War English industry can have received but little direct stimulus from expanding exports. Admittedly, that century was a time of great mercantile activity and saw the creation of great mercantile fortunes. But the aim and effect of much of that activity was less to increase the volume of English trade than to transfer that trade to English hands. Under the later Tudors, tariff changes and the cancellation of the privileges of the Hansards gave native merchants a predominant position in the shipment of goods from England. Under the early Stuarts, and to some extent even before, those goods were increasingly being shipped, not to some cross-channel entrepot, but to more distant regions whither they had previously been taken by Continental middlemen, and imports were more frequently being obtained in or near their countries of origin. By the reign of Charles I, moreover, a re-export trade in Asiatic and colonial produce was beginning to appear and Englishmen were carrying goods between foreign ports without ever bringing them to England itself. Thus commercial expansion took the form, not only of a slowly increasing export of native commodities, but also of a rapidly increasing export of commercial and shipping services. This export of services enriched the merchants, added to the national income, and led to a growth of imports. But

¹ B. E. Supple, *Commercial Crisis and Change in England, 1600-1642*, (1959), pp. 136-49.

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its effects on industry were essentially indirect and ambivalent. Greater imports of raw materials such as wool, silk and cotton no doubt gave some stimulus to English manufactures: but greater imports of consumer goods must have had a contrary effect.

Modern experience suggests that economies in which the competition between alternative uses for land is keen and in which industry is sluggish are likely to see the development of two phenomena. There is likely to be a vigorous struggle for the occupancy and ownership of land; and ambitious young men are likely to seek in the professions the wealth that is not abundantly available in the business world. Tudor and Stuart England was characterised by both. 'Do not', wrote Winstanley, 'all strive to enjoy the Land? The Gentry strive for Land, the Clergy strive for Land, the Common people strive for Land; and Buying and selling is an Art whereby people endeavour to cheat one another of the Land.'¹ At the bottom of the social ladder there was a growing competition for agricultural holdings, a competition that was reflected in a steep rise of rents and entry fines. In the middle of the sixteenth century it had been usual to attribute that rise to the avarice of landlords, but by that century's end the more perceptive observers saw that it had its roots in the struggle of tenant against tenant. Even from remote Pembrokeshire it was reported that whereas 'in tymes past . . . fewe sought leases for most commonly the Landlord rather made suite for a good tenante to take his lande then the tenant to the Landlord. . . and as for fynes yt was not a thinge knowne among them a hundred yeares past . . . nowe the poore tenants that lyved well in that golden world ys taughte to singe unto his Lord a newe songe. . . the worlde ys so altered with ye poore tenants that he standeth so in bodylie feare of his greedy neighbour, that ii or iii yeares eare his lease end he must bowe to his Lord for a newe Lease and must pinche yt out many yeares before to heape money together.'² Nor was that struggle surprising. It was the result, partly of the growth in population, but partly of the state of agricultural technique. A man's ability to profit from the rise in agricultural

¹ Quoted in Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, (1958), p. 153.

² G. Owen, *The Description of Pembrokeshire*, Cymmrodorian Society Record Series, (1892-7), Part I, p. 190.

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prices obviously depended on his having a worthwhile surplus for sale; and since the limited range of knowledge at his disposal made it difficult to obtain that surplus by more intensive cultivation there was an obvious temptation to seek it by enlarging his farm. In practice, no doubt, the tendency thus to create larger farms was kept in check. But it was often kept in check by competing offers from desperate smallholders driven to offer rents greater than their agricultural output really justified.

Further up the social scale, there was a parallel competition for estates. 'For what purpose', wrote Sir Richard Weston, 'do soldiers, scholars, lawyers, merchants and men of all occupations and trades toil and labour with great affection but to get money, and with that money when they have gotten it but to purchase land?' Such men competed to purchase, not only manors, but also freeholds, copyholds and even long leaseholds. For, as an investment, land offered the attraction of relative safety combined with the prospect of a rising income. And, as a consumer-good, an estate, with the amenities and status that accompanied it, was among the most seductive that the age could offer.

The history of the professions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has yet to be written, but at least its main outlines are becoming clear. As C. S. Lewis has pointed out, those centuries saw education move up the social scale. Grammar schools multiplied and the more successful among them significantly changed their social complexion. The universities not only expanded but were gradually converted into congeries of boarding schools for the sons of gentlemen. Increasingly, the Inns of Court served as finishing schools for men who had no intention of devoting themselves to the law. That growing demand for education may, in part, have reflected a growing demand for culture. But contemporary comment leaves no room for doubt but that education was looked upon mainly as an avenue leading, through the professions, to influence and affluence. For that reason, some were to argue that it should be denied to the sons of the lower orders and Bacon was to warn of the dangers of educating more persons than the market could absorb.

Both the vigorous demand for land and the enthusiasm for a