

1 Introduction: The Moral Economy

This book results from the author's attempts to understand a paradox. The smallest social unit throughout the middle ages was the household, those who were fed from a common hearth. Throughout the six hundred years covered by the book, the households of the powerful were fed by the labour of the households of the less powerful, the peasantry. Yet this appropriation of a precious asset, peasant labour, although clear enough, is surprisingly difficult to explain. It did not result from, and was not sustained by, a shortage of the basis of any peasant economy: land. A countryside that had formerly produced enough foodstuffs to support the Roman elite and feed its army, as well as exporting grain and hides, was well able to feed a population that dropped 'after Rome' and probably did not reach the level of the Roman period until the Norman Conquest, if not later. Appropriation was not economically reciprocal: peasants do not need landowners in the same way that wage workers need employers. Nor, until well after the Conquest, did it depend on legal sanction. Peasants in Anglo-Saxon England, as far as the law was concerned, were free people.

Looking for a chronology of appropriation is one way to approach the problem of explaining it. In the early centuries covered by this book, say the sixth to the ninth, it seems that the powerful people who had hegemony in the English countryside had initially gained their position through successful violence. Sheer plunder, as well as tribute if they were powerful enough to demand it from defeated enemies, could well have gone a good way to put food on their tables. By the time that we have written evidence, however, from early in the eighth century, it reveals something much more systematic. As public figures, kings and lords on the move with their retinues could expect to be quite literally fed by the people of the countryside, who provided them with the wherewithal for meals. The countryside in which these people lived and farmed, for most people were farmers of one kind or another, came to be called 'warland', because as well as feeding itinerant courts, its inhabitants were responsible for, *werian*, 'defended', their land, by fulfilling the important public

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obligations of army service and defence work which the land itself ‘owed’. But kings and lords were not on the move all the time. As private individuals in their domestic space or spaces, they were fed food produced by the labour of a distinctive category of people – some slaves, some peasant smallholders – who cultivated what came to be called their ‘inland’: the land whose produce was directed to the lord’s table. This distinction between the land and people supporting an itinerant elite and the land and people supporting a resident elite came to be fundamental to Anglo-Saxon society.¹ Yet by the late twelfth century, the situation had been transformed: large numbers of the warland peasantry now owed regular labour and rent in cash or kind on the estates of manorial lords.

Establishing a chronology of the appropriation of peasant labour can take us only so far: to record a social and economic situation and the ways in which it changed is not to fully understand it. We may come a little closer to that with an approach deployed in two influential works which both use the idea of a ‘moral economy’: James C. Scott’s book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Resistance and Rebellion in Southeast Asia* and Edward Thompson’s article ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’. Although both wrote of rural communities threatened by developments beyond their control, they were describing very different cultures and periods and used the term rather differently. The peasants in the modern South East Asian communities described by James Scott were smallholders whose very survival depended on a ‘subsistence ethic’, the conviction that every individual in the community, irrespective of age and status, had an entitlement to subsistence. This entitlement was a basis of their ‘moral economy’, the structure of values and obligations which governed whether behaviour was judged right or wrong. Ensuring that all its members survived was part of an individual’s obligation to the community as a whole, for as well as being able to support itself ‘a household needs a certain level of resources to discharge its necessary ceremonial and social functions.’² These were essential principles, which had to be preserved.

E. P. Thompson used the idea of the ‘moral economy’ to understand a particular situation in a very different society, the corn riots in eighteenth-century rural England. He found that the rioters based their demand for fair dealing and the right price for bread on the standards that had been laid down by the Tudor corn laws enacted nearly two hundred years earlier. That so much emphasis was put on the principle that a fair price and fair dealing should regulate the market led him adopt the term ‘moral economy’ to contrast with the unregulated market of the ‘political economy’ of the Utilitarians. It is important to the topic to note that Thompson was not arguing that the rioters had a naïve belief in the

‘good old days’, but in a particular body of law. Popular movements are sometimes characterised as having been fortified by unrealistic views of a past which never existed. But English resistance movements, though they have often used the language of liberty and rights, have often been notably legalistic and precise in their demand and programmes, very often founding their case not on unrealistic views of an idealised past but on specific legal precedents and procedures and particular documents. That is the case with the resistance described at the end of this book of English peasants to landlord demands. The moral economy is not confined to a single class. Both authors were describing highly unequal societies dominated by powerful individuals, yet both emphasised that there were values which were shared across class and rank. One of Thompson’s most striking findings was that the Justices of the Peace, before whom the rioters were brought to trial, on occasion are found to have thought in much the same way about the corn laws as they did. The values of the peasants whom Scott studied were those too of the elites who dominated village communities: they were widely accepted as principles that should govern everyone’s dealings with one another.

To insist on the importance of the moral economy is not to say that I believe the ‘real’ economy to be irrelevant any more than I think it was determinant. ‘Intertwined’ would be a better term than either. Sometimes the form of appropriation was virtually dictated by the constraints that environmental conditions imposed on peasant production. The different ways in which their produce ended up on the tables of the elite had a great deal to do with the different ways in which peasants farmed their land, where that land was, and how farming changed over time. In spite of considerable advances in the archaeology of crops, techniques, and buildings we are still a long way from understanding the economy of the early medieval farm. One way in which it probably changed less than others was that, while all farms had to provide a living for the farm household, some struggled to do so whereas others were able to produce a surplus. This may have influenced the form in which surplus was appropriated and it certainly influenced the way in which that process was legitimised and the role that played in the moral economy. A few examples may clarify this. That early Anglo-Saxon elites were supported when travelling by supplies collected in the form of produce to be consumed at designated sites was very likely not because peasant farms were producing large surpluses but because they were not. Such a system depended on the capacity of elites to collect small amounts of produce from a large number of small producers over a very wide area. But it could not have been as effective and as long-lived as it was had it not been

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sustained by the value put on ideas of reciprocity, in which such renders were legitimised as ‘hospitality’.

A second example of the connection between economic change and the form in which peasant surplus was appropriated comes from new evidence suggesting that from the mid-Saxon period improved cereal types and cultivation techniques could produce marketable surpluses and support stable groups of consumers. This development is beginning to be referred to as an ‘agricultural revolution’ and one thing we know about agricultural revolutions is that they have implications for the people who do the work. In this case there may have been a change away from appropriation in the form of direct transfers of produce and towards appropriation in the form of transfers of labour. Two sources of labour were particularly important in improving outputs in medieval cereal production. One was concerted manpower, deployed at the optimal time and in optimal conditions, to get the best results from the sowing, weeding, harvesting, and processing of grain. The other was animal traction power, crucially in England of the plough-team, generally consisting of oxen. These were peasants’ own animals in which they had invested time, skill, and resources. Securing a supply of peasants’ labour, and their animals’ labour, could not have been achieved by simple coercion as was the case with slaves, who had no such resources and depended entirely on their owner for subsistence. From an early century law comes evidence that lords were granting tenancies to families who were, in effect, set up as small-scale peasants in that they were supported from the produce of land they farmed themselves, but whose labour, and rent too in some cases, was required in return on the lords’ inlands. In all but one respect, and that an important one, they were serfs. That one respect was that they were personally and legally free.

Not all change, however, can be explained by reference to agrarian development. The moral economy can act as a drag on ‘progress’. The labour which a land-lord could extract from most warland peasants before the Conquest seems to have been restricted to ‘boons’, when at the key points in the farming year, the farmers of an area were accustomed to provide help with the haymaking and harvesting and sometimes the ploughing. Boons were highly specified in terms of the number of days worked and the meals to be provided by the land-lord as *feorm*, a version of the ‘hospitality’ which had supported elites. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, many very large landholdings were broken down into smaller estates, whose owners did not have the same legitimate access to this traditional supply of peasant labour. In the writings of Archbishop Wulfstan at the turn of the eleventh century, we begin to get hints that they were beginning to look for ways to change this situation. The year

1066 brought a new landowning elite, to whom these traditional constraints were unfamiliar, and who consciously set the relationship between lords and peasants on a new footing. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers described the period following the Conquest as one in which there had been a fundamental change in the basis of all rights and obligations connected with land. These were now to be conceived in terms of 'tenure', and 'tenure' deemed to stem from formal contract. Peasants' rights to land were subjected to the same transformation, and the appropriation of peasant produce and labour was now legitimised in the language of this new moral economy.

Words

Any historian who uses the term 'peasants' will rightly be asked what she means by it. I use it to mean the people of the countryside who largely supported themselves by their own work on the land.³ The term has become a derogatory one in modern England, where peasants are generally seen as a failed class, confined to the 'developing' world. The situation is quite different in the rest of Europe where the kind of people discussed in this book would be described as, and would describe themselves as, *contadini*, *paysans*, *bauer*, *campesinos*, the 'people of the countryside'. Clearly for a long time England has not been regarded as a 'peasant society' in the sense that most people earn their living working their land. One reason for this cultural difference may be that the English peasantry are often thought to have been eradicated as a class by the economic changes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Principal among these were enclosure, which deprived them of essential common rights and drove many off the land, the onset of capitalist farming, which eradicated small-scale farms and required a workforce of paid labourers, and industrialisation, which fatally undermined small artisanal production and drove hitherto independent cultivators into the new urban proletariat. I would not dissent from any of this as a 'grand narrative', essentially one whose later stages were proposed by Marx and earlier stages by R. H. Tawney. But like all grand narratives, it can sweep away some important exceptions. A small-scale economy of people who were peasants in all but name survived these changes into the twentieth century. That Scottish crofts do not provide a full livelihood today for anyone who expects a twenty-first-century standard of living is not to say that they are inherently unviable.⁴

An English historian using the term also commonly encounters the assumption that a peasant class necessarily implies the existence of a landlord class. As nearly all our evidence comes from the records made

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for such a class, this is understandable. No one would deny that early medieval Europe was a world in which ‘lords’, powerful men, women, and institutions with control over vast areas of land, exercised their power over a population of much less powerful men and women, most of whom were peasant farmers. By far the richest and most detailed accounts of rural Francia in the early middle ages, for instance, belong to a deep-rooted scholarly tradition based on the evidence of the great monastic polyptyques which recorded the fixed and onerous obligations of the serfs and slaves who were tenants of the greatest of medieval landlords: the church. These texts have often been taken as evidence of peasant conditions in general: Eileen Power’s Bodo, a serf on the lands of the abbey of St Denis, has retained his iconic place in many depictions of early medieval peasants. More recently, Julia Smith has taken the evidence of similar monastic sources from a corner of north-eastern Europe, an area which she shows to have been one of exceptional commercial vitality, to ‘stand as a microcosm of early medieval society as a whole’. Other lines of enquiry have established that a model of society based on the records of great monastic estates is helpful in understanding only particular parts of Europe, at particular periods, in particular political situations, geographically summed up by the pioneer of this approach, H. Verhulst, as being ‘between the Loire and the Rhine’.⁵ Elsewhere there was a vast variety, magisterially deployed in Chris Wickham’s *Framing the Early Middle Ages*: areas where there were peasants without lords, or lords without peasants, or where estates on the model of the polyptyques were ‘islands’ in a world of largely free peasants. Moreover, envisaging all early medieval English peasants as tenants, working land which belonged to a lord, will stand in the way of understanding them as farmers, heads of families and members of communities and hence of the ‘body politic’. To envisage all early medieval English lords as ‘landlords’, owning land which they leased to their peasant tenants in return for service and rent, will stand in the way of investigating how such power came to be gained. To understand that process is what this book struggles to do. ‘Peasants’ entails some further pitfalls to be negotiated. One is historiographical. The rich documentation of late medieval English estates has made possible nearly a century and a half of historical studies which have investigated peasants by way of the records of those who exploited them. These have yielded the evidence which are the meat and drink of peasant studies: the land market, social and family relationships, petty commodity production, and legal status, and there is a strong tradition of ‘peasant studies’ in England, and the debates which this has engendered.⁶ Although virtually none of this kind of evidence is available for the period studied here, to

approach peasant lives from Anglo-Saxon evidence can be a thankless task, but I hope it is not a worthless one.

Readers who are uncomfortable with ‘peasants’ may be more comfortable with ‘farmers’. Farming is what peasants have always done. The family farm, the basis of the early medieval economy, has survived in many parts of England, and in many more of (mainland) Britain. As in early medieval England the family is still the workforce that keeps these farms going. Great store is still set on keeping the farm in the family. Reciprocal arrangements among neighbours are just as vital now and ‘ceremonial and social functions’, in James Scott’s phrase, still articulate the points at which farm and community meet. And for modern and Anglo-Saxon farmers alike the farm is not simply an economic unit; it has a kind of political identity as well. It is enmeshed in political and economic systems far beyond its borders. For modern farmers some are very remote, like the subsidy systems of the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy, some nearer to hand, like the raft of regulation from the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. There are the demands of the Inland Revenue. The demands of the ‘state’ impinged, increasingly so, on Anglo-Saxon farmers as they too had public obligations and tax liabilities which stemmed from the fact that they cultivated their own land. The networks of local government which form a web over the countryside today have their early counterparts, and sometimes their origins, in the townships, hundreds, and shires of early England. Neighbours still help neighbours with livestock, getting the sheep off the hills in winter, and at peak periods such as harvesting. Off-farm resources are still vital, as are entitlements vis-à-vis other farmers such as the right to put livestock on commons, much diminished nowadays in lowland England but still of great importance in uplands like the Lakeland fells. Powerful landowners still figure in country lives: many of today’s farmers are their tenants. I have found that the notion of ‘moral economy’ proposed by Thompson and Scott has proved to be just as useful in thinking about modern farmers and farm workers as it has for thinking about those of the period the book considers. So, while this book certainly does not make a case for continuity over the centuries between early medieval England and our own times, these similarities have never been far from the author’s thoughts.

Freedom and Agency

Perhaps because it is one of the most important, one of the most contentious words in this book is ‘free’. It seems to give modern historians more problems than it gave people in the early middle ages, when the existence

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of slavery made a legal distinction essential. The distinction between slave and free, common across continental Europe ‘after Rome’, appears too in the early English vernacular law codes. David Pelteret has pointed out that the terminology of slavery in Old English is proof of how central this institution was in Anglo-Saxon society: ‘the concepts of servitude and freedom had passed into the thought patterns of the Anglo-Saxons.’⁷ Extreme poverty drove many into dependence: some ‘traded their bellies for food’ to become slaves ‘by need’, *niddæowetling*. Children of slave parents were *deowboren*, slaves ‘by birth’. Another cause of poverty, debt, could enslave to slavery too, as could commission of a crime. Captured in war, the better-off could expect to be ransomed, but poor captives were war booty as slaves, *hæft*. There was also an equally precise lexicon of freedom and freeing, which could mark the status of a former slave who had become a free person. These legal distinctions mattered. Throughout the period covered in this part of the book, while economically many peasants were far from free agents, legally they were free people. The concept of ‘all free men’, however compromised it undoubtedly was by social and economic inequality, retained its identity as a political idea: the institutions of local peace-keeping required the participation of all free adult males. Legal freedom remained an important part of how people regarded themselves, and each other. Had it not been, there would have been no need for lawyers to construct, as we begin to see them doing towards the end of our period, the condition of legal unfreedom that came to be called villeinage. I hope that the use I have made of the vernacular laws, where there is no sign of people who were not slaves having been anything other than free, will have passed scholarly scrutiny. But before I looked at texts I spent a long time looking at farms and farming, the reality for most of the people whose values are discussed here. Working together on *Anglo-Saxon Farms and Farming*, Debby Banham and I followed entirely different lines of approach, and used entirely different evidence, but we came to identify the same characteristic of the rural economy: peasants had agency. It is evident in her contributions to the book on the choices they made about crops, tools, and stock, and in their knowledge of the natural and supernatural worlds. I hope peasant agency is evident in my contributions about their organisation of the landscape to support both pastoralism and agriculture. Both of us think that peasants were capable of co-operation when necessary but neither believes that they lived lives free of conflict: much of the evidence for the values of the moral economy comes from evidence of dispute settlement. Neither of us would think of a peasant farmer except as someone working in a countryside in which most people were like them while there were others, more powerful, very unlike them. But

neither would think that lords in the period we were concerned with dominated the rural economy in the way they were to do in the later middle ages. Although farming is not the focus of this book, the extent to which peasant farmers were able to exercise agency most certainly is.

Was England Different?

It has always been difficult to make a case for historical developments in England having taken a different path from those on the Continent without being accused of arguing for 'English exceptionalism'. Such a tension is in the background of the entire book, particularly so in Part I, as the similarities and connections between Anglo-Saxon England and the Carolingian world have played an important part in the historiography of the period. There is no question about the importance of many of these similarities and connections in the culture of a cosmopolitan, literate, Christian elite on both sides of the Channel. Others seem to me to have much deeper social roots, going back to the post-Roman past, or rather, how people perceived that past. Exploring the view of their past on which the Anglo-Saxon elite based their claims to high status helps to explain the resilience of their continuing grip on power. But it also makes a case for this having been part of a more widely shared culture. The values of the barbarian world generally appear in modern scholarship as those of a 'warrior elite', but they were part of the moral economy of the wider society too. 'Germanic' settlement brought England into a post-Roman Europe whose poetry and narratives reflected the 'heroic' values of the barbarian world which fed into the Anglo-Saxon ideas about 'lordship', explored in Chapter 2. An important part of this post-Roman European culture was its narratives of the past: Chapter 3, 'Our Island Story', argues for the importance of Gildas' account of the downfall of the British in forming such a narrative in England. For three major writers, Bede, Alcuin, and Wulfstan, Gildas provided an irresistible argument for England having a military system which was based on the public obligations of those who had land. Common too to post-Roman Europe was the tripartite division of society into nobles, freemen, and slaves: the same division is fundamental to the Old English vernacular laws. Chapter 4 looks at the roots of the importance of notions of rank, honour, and respect in peasant society. English peasant farmers considered themselves the owners of the land they farmed, and the land they farmed was the land which traditionally supported public burdens. It was precisely because they were obliged to take part in local dispute settlements, attend public courts or assemblies, supply the itinerant king and his entourage from their own produce, and contribute to warfare and

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national defence, that they considered themselves to be free people. That participation in public life was open to, indeed enjoined on, every adult male who had land is a key to understanding the moral economy of pre-Conquest England.

Rank and reciprocity (the focus of Part II) might seem to be incompatible values, but their coexistence is an intriguing aspect of Anglo-Saxon England. Catherine Clarke's work on literary sources of the period portrays them as showing 'strict systems of hierarchical order and the vertical operation of power' while individuals were 'enmeshed in economies of mutual obligation, interdependence and reciprocity.'⁸ The value put on reciprocity was not due to any egalitarian notion but to a belief that every action requires its appropriate response. The elaborate compensation tariffs of the *wergeld*, 'man-price', system expressed this principle. Long after violent reprisals had been mediated into financial compensation, injury still demanded its appropriate response. Chapter 5, 'Hospitality', argues that while reciprocity was not an egalitarian idea, and reciprocal relationships in fact legitimised many very one-way transfers of goods from the real economy, the fact that hospitality could be seen as a reciprocal relationship ensured that it retained its place in the moral economy as the legitimisation for providing the meals that fed chiefs and kings and lords. Chapter 6, 'Hearth, Household, and Farm', argues that the family farm, the basic economic unit of the rural economy, was in itself a reciprocal system: its viability depended on the labour of all the members of the farm household, who were thus entitled to be supported from the farm's produce. A person's reputation in modern society is constructed in part by people who do not know them personally. In early medieval society it was just the opposite: it was the accumulated personal knowledge by members of the community that gave a person 'worth'.

Part III takes up the notion of 'worth', essential in dispute settlement, described in Chapter 7, 'Neighbours and Strangers', and could earn the essential testimony of a more powerful person who would stand surety for the individual in court. In Chapter 8, 'Markets and Marketing', considering a rural world which was becoming increasingly commercialised, in the sense that many transactions involved money, but was short of currency, worth is interpreted as a form of credit.

Part IV, 'The Wolf Sniffs the Wind', turns to a contemporary witness to the changes that were beginning to undermine the traditional moral economy of Anglo-Saxon England. Archbishop Wulfstan, who died in 1023, wrote at a time when a long period of relative peace had been followed by war: the battle of Maldon in 991 signalling the beginning of Danish raids. Chapters 9 and 10, '*Hwylum Wæs*: Archbishop Wulfstan's