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European yeomanries: a non-immiseration model of agrarian social history, 1350–1800*

by William W. Hagen

Abstract

The neo-classical and political economy literatures view the European peasantry's post-medieval history as one of economic dispossession and legal disability. Here I propose a model of early modern European village history concentrating on the maintenance and reproduction of the self-sufficient family farm. Its proprietors figure as householders only marginally dependent on wage labour and capable of developing their holdings into small-scale engines of market production. European villagers were everywhere subject to seigneurial lordship or landlordism. They were universally subject to rents and taxes, and occupied their farms under widely differing tenures, with varying property rights. Some may think the English word 'yeoman' to be non-exportable. Here it signifies not only the politically enfranchised freeman agriculturist but family farmers across Europe (whatever their legal disabilities) living, in good times, in rustic sufficiency, engaged in market production and surplus accumulation in one or another form. The present article offers, in an exploratory spirit, an ideal-typical model.

The neo-classical and political economy literatures view the post-medieval European peasantry's history as one of economic dispossession and legal disability. In this perspective, the beneficiaries of long-term commercialization were landlords and their allies, an emergent rural bourgeoisie. Family farmers and smallholders widely suffered removal from the land or reduction to wage-labourer status. Village communalism dissolved into entrepreneurial atomism, or into class polarization and conflict. East of the Rhine, a semi-feudal neo-serfdom ruled the countryside to the villagers' cost. In Mediterranean and Western Europe, free status was of little avail against rent and tax oppression and Malthusian down-cycles. In England alone did individualized property rights, free labour, and free markets combine to sustain a long-term development only fitfully advanced elsewhere (as in the Netherlands), to

* The present text is, in the historically concrete Weberian sense, a theoretical venture, not an analysis of newly generated empirical research. It engages widely familiar issues in early modern European economic and social history, if also ones concerning Central and Eastern Europe, which the Anglophone literature has, both at the empirical and analytical level, persistently misunderstood. I have refrained from citing from what is, essentially, a limitless scholarship on the subject. For my own approach to the East Elbian German case, see William W. Hagen, *Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and villagers, 1500–1840* (2002), with extensive citation of relevant economic history literature. Useful both interpretively and historiographically is Tom Scott (ed.), *The peasantries of Europe from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century* (1998). On the English case see Keith Wrightson, *Earthly necessities: economic lives in early modern Britain* (2002).

lay the basis for a revolution in agricultural productivity and breakthrough to factory-based industrialization. Yet, the price of Britain's advance was the death of the historic landed peasantry.

Against this vision, which is shared by both the neo-classical and political economy schools despite disagreements over its causal explanation, this article proposes a model of early modern European rural history that concentrates foremost on the maintenance and reproduction of the medium-sized or large, partly self-sufficient (though also market-integrated) family farm. Its proprietors figure here, ideal-typically, as working farmers employing as labourers a mix of family members, farm servants, and wage labourers. Such farms must be conceptualized in an historical setting in which European villagers were everywhere subject to seigneurial lordship or landlordism, whether as serfs, manorial subjects, or freemen; in the words of a widely familiar legal adage: 'no land without a lord' (*nulle terre sans seigneur*).

Landholding family farmers were universally, if variously, subject to rents (whether market or feudal rents), taxes, and often conscription too. They occupied their farms under widely differing tenures, with correspondingly varying property rights, though never altogether without some degree of ownership in fixed capital, farm stock, or other mobile goods. Everywhere, individualism and collectivism co-existed in locally distinctive proportions.

These pages aim to delineate a sphere of comparative history within which such family farms, despite the many ways they differed across Europe, figure as a major stratum of European society which, in the post-medieval half-millennium, did *not* disintegrate under the advancing tread of capitalism. Instead, many family farmers themselves became successful agrarian entrepreneurs, while others managed to survive through market production. In political life, although they inhabited widely differing legal and institutional settings, landed villagers – whether juridically free or feudally hobbled – stubbornly (and communally) pursued their self-interest, preferring judicial to armed solutions, though (like any human group) not foreign to violence's temptations. Such a stratum of family farmers (or, if the traditional terminology is preferred, 'landed peasants') remained, despite early modern rural society's turbulent fortunes, a *major structural feature* of European society into the nineteenth century and beyond. This truism of social history has often disappeared into economic history's shadows.

Some may think the English word 'yeomanry' non-exportable. But, if we take the word in a broad sense to refer to a medium- or large-holding family farmer (whatever his legal disabilities) living – in times free of war, epidemic disease, and famine – in socially customary sufficiency, and engaged in market production with opportunities for surplus-accumulation (in one or another form), then we can launch a train of thought which others may find it helpful to follow and develop.

I

At the medieval millennium's pre-plague end-point in the early fourteenth century, the European landscape displayed a virtual universality of family-farm tenure by conditionally hereditary leasehold under noble, ecclesiastical, or princely lordships. These authorities collected from their subject villagers feudal rents in kind and cash, though often, where large

seigneurial demesne farms existed, they demanded labour service (or labour rent) as well. In principle, and often in practice, these three basic forms of feudal rent were *interchangeable*.

Family farmers' personal legal status varied from free to servile, but this did not in itself determine economic well-being. This varied instead with population, where a low land-to-labour ratio worked to villagers' advantage (*even if* – despite venerable hypotheses to the contrary – landlords sought to corral them in serfdom). Important, too, was the larger society's degree of commercialization. For the more prosperous the urban-based cash economy and the array of goods available in its markets, the higher the landlords' standard and cost of living, and the heavier their demands on their village subjects, who were obliged to monetize their surpluses in the market towns so as to pay cash rents (or whose surpluses were skimmed in levies *in natura* which the landlords' agents themselves marketed). But commodity prices were highest in the richest and most heavily urbanized regions, and local family-scale market farmers benefited from this.

The ideal-typical high medieval village based on open-field mixed arable farming and pasturage comprised principally full-holding farmers (with one or more hides or virgates of land, or roughly 25 to 100 acres [10 to 40 ha] or more of fallowed arable, together with access to meadows and woodland). Only farms of such size could maintain the draught teams necessary for ploughing and haulage, both on the farmer's own account and in manorial service for his lord.

Yet, as high medieval seigneurial land was leased to villagers for rents rather than demesne farmed with peasant labour services, the lordship's interest in sustaining the indivisibility of village full holdings waned. The villagers' preference for partible over impartible inheritance practices, so as to favour several or all heirs with portions of land, asserted itself. Still, communally organized open-field agriculture set lower-end limits to the resultant fragmentation of peasant farms, since small farms could not afford the necessary draught teams. Nor could the village farm balloon in its size and labour inputs without limit. Many full holders kept their farms intact by imposing on successive new household heads payments to departing sibling or in-law heirs.

Nevertheless, as seigneurial lordship contented itself with land rents and other exactions from its villagers, rents that derived from their subject status (whether freemen or not), a pattern emerged in the late middle ages which persisted to the French Revolution and beyond. The countryside, though still seigneurialized, became a patchwork of small, medium, and large peasant holdings, which changed hands according to individual families' fate and fortune, some maintaining themselves or rising into full holder status (and beyond), others falling down out of it. Princely or state power might take an interest in village farms' size if it wished to maintain the peasant full holding as a unit of taxation or conscription. But such considerations were peripheral before the emergence of the absolute monarchies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The late medieval social crisis, triggered by catastrophic population collapse resulting from the arrival of bubonic plague in the mid-fourteenth century, enabled the peasantries of the Mediterranean, Western European, English, and western German regions to shed (or, at any rate, greatly loosen) the legal bonds of medieval serfdom. Mostly this was a negotiated process, but in part it entailed peasant revolt (as in the late fifteenth-century Catalan revolt, or the

German Peasant War of 1525 and its regional antecedents). Seigneurialism in these regions of Europe slowly turned into a landlordism that itself underwent commodification, falling frequently through sale or lease into non-noble bourgeois or gentry hands.

Henceforth, across the early modern era, from roughly 1500 to 1800, the central question in the villages in these regions – that is, in Western, Central, and South Western Europe – was how well family farmers could hold their land in the face of agriculture's advancing commercialization. Could they, in the demographic recovery of the long sixteenth century, maintain sufficient market share to enable them to pay rising rents and new state taxes, on terms of trade that – in the silver-inflated economy – were basically favourable to agricultural producers?

In the long seventeenth century, while taxation to support standing armies sometimes ruined villages, it was more often war itself that had this effect, for the absolutist state's self-interest depended on husbanding its villages as sources of revenue and recruits. The greater long-term early modern threat to the family farmer emanated from entrepreneurial rivals in the landlord class. The case of the so-called 'second serfdom' in eastern Germany, and Eastern Europe generally, comes first to mind. Here, private noble lords as well as administrators of princely (or state) demesne land imposed heavy new labour rents on subject villagers so as to construct entirely new large-scale, market-driven manorial farms. The standard literature of western provenance displays rampant confusion over this process's legal and economic dimensions.

Crucial to the present argument is the circumstance that, because of its need for village draught teams, such commercialized manorialism *preserved* (while degrading) the full-holding family farm. It also placed a brake on population growth in the lands it came to dominate, an effect favouring the survival of the larger holdings. The hard-fisted interplay of seigneurial, princely, and village interests enabled peasant farms of full holders and half-holders, both of them continuing to engage on their own account in arable farming with draught teams, to survive in very large numbers until the abolition of neo-manorialism in the 'peasant emancipations' of the nineteenth-century. Despite its inequities, emancipation secured the continued existence of a massive family-farming class until the revolutions of the twentieth century, and even to the present day.

Outside the realm of central and east European commercialized manorialism – that is, in France, England, the Low Countries, western Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Spain, Italy, and the Balkans – the post-medieval family farmer possessed the advantage, idealtypically, of having escaped servile status's worst economic disabilities and vulnerabilities. In many cases he had attained a personal freedom upon which landlordly powers could impinge only through the exploitation of local monopolies, as of lower court jurisdiction, milling, or hunting. To village lands formerly held under longstanding customary, often servile, tenure, a regime of fixed money rents now commonly applied, whose long-term erosion through price and monetary inflation favoured tenants. Sometimes these farmers gained virtual allodial (or undivided) property rights in such holdings, as widely occurred in France and England, though in law they qualified only (though still favourably) as hereditary leaseholds. The danger facing them was to fall into debt or otherwise falter in the early modern market economy, leaving them, despite their advantageous status as post-feudal freeholders or relatively unencumbered hereditary tenants, no choice but to sell out to a rich village neighbour, or to an entrepreneurial, capitalist-minded landlord, whether noble or bourgeois.

The consequence of such misfortune might – as in central Italy and south-west France – be the farmer's reduction to sharecropping, or his eviction and replacement by a sharecropper. It might be his farm's conversion into a short-term tenancy under a landlord imposing 'rack rents', that is, market rents, as happened massively in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It might entail the enclosure of his land into a larger farm, withdrawn from the system of village communalism, and cultivated by a market-oriented tenant farmer (often an upwardly mobile peasant) employing whatever technology contemporary best practice mandated, as happened widely in northern Italy and northern France, and in England and the Low Countries.

Post-medieval western and southern European freeholders suffered these various fates to such an extent that, as in France and England, *ownership* of most village land had, by the eve of the 1789 Revolution, come into the hands of the entrepreneurial nobility and gentry and the urban bourgeoisie.

Yet the family farmer did not disappear from these and neighbouring countries. For the early modern commercialized (though still, in a legal sense, seigneurialized) landlordism that superseded full-blooded feudal lordship *depended vitally* on finding tenant farmers willing to pay market rents and take their own entrepreneurial risks. It remains common to imagine such cultivators as a small rural elite consisting of the legendary English 'capitalist tenant farmer', or as northern France's *grand fermier* or the short-term leaseholding 'bourgeois farmers' of Italy's Po valley and elsewhere. But the full-holding or large-holding family farmer survived in large numbers everywhere in Europe, including, as we have seen, within the realm of east European neo-manorialism.

Moreover, in varying measure he possessed those qualities characteristic of the English family farmer, whether yeoman or tenant. He lived, to a varying but important degree, on proceeds from the market. He worked his land himself, or closely supervised its cultivation by servants and labourers, often his own children. His mentality and tastes were not aristocratic, but demotic, separated by rural culture from the truly bourgeois. He consumed most of his net profit, or distributed it in legacies, but was receptive to profit-enhancing opportunities, whether through adoption of new agricultural practices (limited in open field communities) or entry into specialized market farming (as in vegetable gardening, grazing, dairying, or milling).

Such full-holding family farmers might be *de facto* freeholders, subject to only residual, minor landlordly rents, or perhaps none at all, though liable like anyone else to such direct taxes, conscription, ecclesiastical levies, excises and interest on borrowed money, as fate decreed. They were the dominant rural social group in Switzerland and Scandinavia. Across the countryside of western, central, and southern Germany, post-Reformation state policy sought to maintain such farms as the pillars of their fiscal systems, tolerating a residual and fossilized noble landlordism, but blocking the path to the bourgeois purchase of village farms.

What proportion of Europe's landed peasantry belonged to such a yeomanry or large-holding family farmer stratum on the eve of 1789? In East Elbian Europe, including Russia, probably half the villagers holding arable farms possessed full holdings yielding them and their dependents, in peaceful times, a socially acceptable standard of living and liquid assets or otherwise transferable surpluses (as of livestock and other farm capital) adequate to launch

the next generation into marriage and house-holding. There were many village patriarchs who died with coin-filled strongboxes and long lists of debtors.

In Balkan Europe, heavy post-sixteenth century Ottoman taxation and local power struggles among elites, both Muslim and Christian, converted increasingly numerous village farmers into hard-pressed and vulnerable tenants of *chiftlik* (market-supplying) landlords. Yet surplus-harvesting full holders and independent, market-oriented pastoralists, alongside a politically protected frontier peasantry, were nonetheless numerous.

In France, the fissiparous effect of partible inheritance worked against the yeomanry, yet virtually every village displayed its well-to-do *laboueurs*, while entrepreneurial tenant farmers of mainly rural, often peasant origins were a dominant presence in the Paris basin and the north. In England, most of the famous 'capitalist tenant farmers' were, by continental standards, big peasants, farming, with servants and wage labourers, rented landholdings of some 40–120 acres. Alongside them were the yeomanry proper, also with mostly rented farms of similar or smaller extent. If, as in France, the mass of post-medieval family holdings had disappeared, or shrunk to wage-labouring cottager status, this had occurred *simultaneously* with the *regrouping of a large-holding tenant class* of rural origins whose presence across the European landscape this article highlights.

II

It may be objected that, in the end, what matters most are the agricultural preconditions of industrialization, which – as is commonly claimed – were achieved uniquely in England. But it is as mistaken to overestimate productivity gains in English agriculture before the late seventeenth century as it is to overlook them in the agriculture of Italy, the Low Countries, and western Germany both before and after that date. In East Elbian Germany too – especially in proximity to riverine and Baltic trade lanes – the eighteenth century witnessed major output and productivity gains through widespread conversion of large estate and state demesne open field cultivation to fallow-free convertible agriculture.

Taking the broad, world-historical view, European industrialization, if first launched by steam and coal in Britain, spread very rapidly across the European continent. Nor is industrialization, strictly speaking, the vital prerequisite for the higher living standards the concept of economic modernity evokes. Capitalist development in nineteenth-century agriculture and related light industry and trade, accompanied by public schooling and public health improvements, achieved the same living standards in such continental regions as west Germany, Denmark, parts of France, and the Netherlands, often with less proletarian misery than in Britain.

Moreover, people's lives and fates in the pre-industrial past are not uniquely measurable by a teleology of industrialization, any more than ours should be by a future that genetic engineering may revolutionize. The question here has been whether, in the post-medieval half-millennium, a market-integrated yet also more or less self-sufficient large-holding peasantry or village farmer class survived in large numbers throughout Europe. The argument, which lends itself to massive documentation, is that such a broadly conceived European yeomanry did – despite much internal social turmoil – evolve and survive. Doubtless its existence was a *structural necessity*, deriving from its social and economic functions in a transport system dependent on

draught animals, and in supplying the needs of the very large non-landed rural population and the countryside's myriad small market towns.

It is a question that neither the neo-classical literature, with its emphasis on market forces and property rights, nor the political economy scholarship, with its stress on late-feudal extra-economic coercion, has thought necessary to raise. But to affirm the yeomanry's European character and perseverance is more than a debt owed to empiricism. It is essential to an understanding of modern politics and culture. Nor does acknowledging its presence on the social landscape throw into eclipse the often hard fate of the proletarianized smallholding peasantry of early modern and modern times.

But in asking how European agriculture so widely succeeded in sustaining the continent's cumulatively great post-1648 population growth, and in tracing beyond England's borders the crucial role of rural consumer demand in capitalist development (for the family farmer purchased many manufactured goods, if in small lots), as also in analysing post-1789 rural political mobilizations, the importance of Europe's village yeomanry must burst the bonds of a social science that mistook it as little more than the victim of early capitalism (or late feudalism).