

# North-American Historiography of the Peasant Land Market

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It is a little hard to justify treating the U.S. and Canada apart from England insofar as the peasant land market is concerned. Not only are most studies of the medieval peasantry undertaken by American historians concerned with England, but it is sometimes hard to decide who is an American historian and who is English. For example Paul Hyams and Mavis Mate are English, have written important articles on the land market, were trained in England and now teach in the United States. Despite the somewhat provincial aspect of limiting myself to this field, it seems to me worth asking why so little has been done in the United States and Canada concerning the peasant land market. Partly because of the influence of the Toronto School of English medieval history but even more because of certain persistent tendencies in the way American medievalists look at medieval society, it is worth exploring how investigation of the land market has been caught up in and obscured by our preoccupation with rather abstract questions of peasant individuality and village community. It is through what I regard as a false, or at any rate misleading, dichotomy between "modern" individualism and medieval community that American medievalists have viewed the land market. Problems of the origin of a capitalist mentality or the solidarity and breakdown of the village serve as a constricting framework even now, limiting research into the full complexity of a practice, the brisk trade in buying and selling peasant land. The peasant land market is not, in fact, easily categorized into decisive evidence for the strength or weakness of individualism, the peasant family or the rural community. I am interested in this historiographic question because of a general sense that American research on the medieval peasantry has suffered from certain conceptual limitations. At François Menant's seminar in February I had the privilege of giving a paper on this problem. François' seminar, devoted to "pression [prélevement?] seigneuriale," allowed me to think about the relative absence of the seigneurial regime in the work of U.S. and Canadian historians. I suggested that while the weakness of American Marxist intellectual tradition was not without significance, a more important factor was the tendency to regard the peasant community as autonomous, its relationship to lords either distant or affected only by impersonal demographic and economic factors. Father Ambrose Raftis and his students at the University of Toronto in their studies of medieval England emphasized the autonomy of the rural manor and village. According to these historians, the pressure of the lord's demands were less important to the lives of villagers than their internal differences between well-off and marginal tenants. Agriculturalists, the "masters in the village," were influenced by such external factors as population growth and decline, prices and the lords' strategies to maximize income (demesne-farming in the thirteenth century or commutation of services after the Black Death). But even beyond the Toronto School's influence, a certain mistrust of identifying such a thing as a "feudal system" (let alone "feudalism") focused the attention of North American historians on a peasantry conceived as individual actors and only intermittently hemmed in by a system of

exploitation.

By system I mean not only the fact of seigneurial pressure exerted by levies but also the integration of family structure and life-cycle into the profits of lordship. In European studies of peasant inheritance, marriage, dowry, indebtedness, provisions for old age and finally the peasant land market have been seen in terms of a seigneurial structure intent on maximizing tenurial stability and profits therefrom. For Catalonia, which I know best, Mercè Aventin and Lluís To have most recently demonstrated these interconnections.

In the U.S and Canada (and here I confess myself guilty of this as well), family and transmission of tenements has been viewed apart from lordship, and the land market in particular has been regarded in terms of the individual and community. For American historians the peasant is either an unconstrained individualist or a member of an organic community whose bonds eventually wane with the onset of modernity. The presence of a land market is thus explicable as proof of individualistic self- or familial aggrandizement, or the fraying of communal ties after the Black death, or both. What has been missing is some feeling for the mechanism of feudal social and economic relations in which the buying and selling of land is linked to such factors as number of children, inheritance customs, and the nature of seigneurial rent. While the Toronto School has tended to give an optimistic picture of the English peasantry by minimizing seigneurial pressure, some recent studies point to a rediscovery of peasant oppression and rebellion against it. At François' seminar I mentioned Thomas Bisson's *Tormented Voices* (which deals with peasant complaints of nobles' violence in twelfth-century Catalonia), Steven Justice's *Writing and Rebellion* (on the insurgents of England in 1381), Richard Wunderli's *Peasant Fires* (a romanticized account of the Niklashausen uprising of 1476), and William TeBrake's *Plague of Insurrection* (on the Flanders revolt of 1321-1328). These books and others demonstrate that not everyone believes peasants felt themselves unconstrained by the conditions of their existence, but they express more interest in the voice of the peasant community and its mentalities than in the actual conditions peasants were attempting to change. I see these studies as evidence for a belated rediscovery of medieval violence and oppression which appears to the authors as all the more surprising given the previous lack of appreciation for the ways in which the seigneurial regime actually functioned as a means of surplus extraction. There was a period in which quantitative studies of demography and peasant families were undertaken by such historians as David Herlihy. On the one hand there is work on the impersonal large forces studied in the 1970s and, on the other hand, anecdotal material about peasants collected to show how diverse and richly textured was medieval rural life (here I am thinking about later products of the Toronto School such as the *Festschrift* for Father Raftis, *The Salt of the Common Life*; or Sherri Olson's *A Chronicle of All that Happens*). There is very little in between these two extremes. There is some attention to dowry and peasant marriages in conjunction with the history of Italian urban women (Diane Owen Hughes) and English peasants (Eleanor Searle). Judith Bennet has looked at gender and the medieval countryside. Lawrence Poos' studies of demography and the economy of post-Plague Essex are mptable for their judicious analysis of evidence and

appreciation of comparative context. Poos, barely touches on the land market, however. If we compare American historiography with England the former appears impoverished: the concern with servitude shown in Rodney Hilton's work, with lordship and serfdom as described in the recent work of Rosmond Faith, the analysis of prices, standards of living, status and the seigneurie in Christopher Dyer, or the comparative breadth in Chris Wickham's work, or the demographic analysis of agrarian income and structure of Richard Smith-- there is nothing really comparable in North America.

The debate over Robert Brenner's theories about the seigneurie and the transition from feudalism to capitalism seem at first glance to disprove my contention that the social historical force of seigneurial extraction has been neglected in America. Brenner's attack on demographic determinism was intended to redirect attention away from impersonal Malthusian forces to the efforts of the land-owning classes to consolidate their holdings and degrade the condition of their tenants. Here clearly there is a seigneurial regime and it functions as an articulated system, but what concerned Brenner more than twenty years ago and what continues to do so in his contribution to the volume on Slavery and Serfdom edited by Michael Bush is the transition from feudalism to capitalism and in particular the question of English exceptionalism. The emergence of Britain as "the first modern society" as the volume in honor of the late Lawrence Stone puts it, is attributed to the inability of the English copyholder in the early modern era to resist the expansion, engrossment and enclosure of land by the powerful. Only apparently paradoxically the relatively free personal status of the English agriculturalist in contrast to his French colleague rendered him less able to transmit a small holding from one generation to another. In England, as in Catalonia, an effective revolt against serfdom has the supposed result of separating tenants not only from their masters but from their particular farms as well. The context for Brenner's observations is still the relative weight of individualism and community. His conclusions and emphasis on seigneurial pressure may differ from those of the Toronto School but there is still the sense of tension between a progressive if isolating mentality of the English peasant and the retrograde communalism of France in the first instance and even more, eastern Europe. Brenner judges the differential evolution of eastern and western Europe in terms of the greater force of peasant enterprise and individualism in the west, where serfdom was thrown off, than in the East where it deepened in the modern period. The land market as such is unremarked in Brenner's work even in the contrast between the entrepreneurial England where peasants were not linked to subsistence holdings and France where self-sufficient holdings survived. Perhaps this is because the presence or absence of a land market is not so conveniently associated with degree of progress towards capitalism, or it may be symptomatic of the tendency to marginalize consideration of the land market entirely in North American studies of the peasantry, even those in which the seigneurial regime and its impact plays a role. The land market has, however, been used in arguments against Brenner's thesis. Patricia Croot and David Parker criticized Brenner for assuming that an investment mentality must be associated only with large farms when in fact the active market in very small pieces of land shows a willingness on the

part of small-holders to engage in rational, efficient assembling of land without particular ties to family parcels. Mavis Mate has used an analysis of the land market in East Sussex to demonstrate how complicated the rural class structure was. Instead of a monolithic contrast between powerful lords and helpless peasants, she finds peasants who are both tenants and landlords, customary tenants who buy and sell other parcels of land, peasants who are entrepreneurs and family farmers at the same time. She answers the question of English progress versus French backwardness by reference to the more fluid land market and more flexible laws in the former realm. Here then, as with Brenner, the real problematic is still the origins of capitalism with the difference that the land market is more explicitly linked than in Brenner to modern open competitiveness.

Is the land market then evidence for the breakdown of community and the rise of individualism? In Ambrose Raftis' work on Ramsey Abbey and its villages the presence of an active land market after the Black Death and its absence before indicates the corrosive impact of the epidemic after which "private and independent interests took precedence over those of groups". Less focused on the aftermath of 1348-1349, Marjorie McIntosh in *Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering* devotes only a brief two pages to the land market, but she too sees its growth in the early fifteenth century in terms of her title, a tension between "autonomy" and "community."

Is the presence of a land market evidence for a mentality of individualism as opposed to an earlier communal orientation? Here the Toronto School is not completely monolithic in its response. While Raftis himself has tended to regard the land market as a product of decaying common ties, his students have been more inclined to see transfers between living peasants as part of family strategies and dependent on family size and expectations. For Raftis' student Anne DeWindt, for example, buying or selling land by peasant tenants in King's Ripton (belonging to Ramsey Abbey) depended on changes in family size (in more or less Chayanovian fashion). Evidence for an active land market is used to bolster the standard Toronto argument that the community of the village was more important in governing the every day life of the manor than the distant lord. This is a community versus seigneurie paradigm rather than community versus individual: "The manorial lord made an effort to record these transactions for the peasant in order to ensure his share of the profits. . . but the motivation and rationale for this activity on the land market must be sought from within the peasant community itself." The problem, as Peter Gatrell observed, is that DeWindt didn't offer much evidence for the link between family size or age of children and the buying or selling of land. The problem of records insufficient to make sure of family connections is well-known in connection with debates over the use of manor court rolls. Where such records are complete, as at Halesowen in Worcestershire studied by Zvi Razi, there is an erosion of the tie between families and specific pieces of land, but there doesn't seem to be a connection between acquisition and disposal of land on the one hand and family expansion or contraction on the other. But Christopher Dyer and Edwin DeWindt have found links between the land market and the desire to provide something for children otherwise cut out of inheritance, so that the presence of non-inheriting children would be a

stimulus for acquiring small assorted parcels. In looking at American studies of English rural society as a whole, I would summarize their preoccupations in three categories: 1) the origins of capitalism and the end of feudalism. This is of clear interest to Brenner and to Marxist scholarship but without being quite so explicitly labeled is present in the Toronto School insofar as the Black Death is seen as breaking apart a traditional form of organization and equilibrium without giving it the name "feudalism." More congenial to the Toronto School and to most North American historians of the Middle Ages is 2) the forces of individualism and community. These can be opposed, as in the theory that the land market represents the triumph of individual ambition over communal egalitarianism or in attributing social tension within villages to the differentiation between a peasant elite and everyone else. But especially in the work of the Toronto School community, family and individual are set up against seigneurial power. The peasant community is depicted as stronger than the seigneurial administration (in the DeWindts work, for example), or the peasant family is presented as close and harmonious (Barbara Hanawalt's *The Ties that Bound*), or the individual peasant has greater scope for ambition than we have usually thought (Sherri Olson's *A Chronicle of All that Happens* or Judith Bennett's recent study of female brewers [ale-wives]). The risks of teleological imposition of contemporary concerns onto the Middle Ages are sufficient to render suspect these formulations of medieval peasant mentality and its changes. To see peasants either as self-effacing within a local solidarity or as newly energized entrepreneurs is to avoid serious consideration of what motivated peasants and what their choices were.

The third aspect is a tension between the neo-populism of Chayanov and the destabilization brought about by market forces in general, including the land market in particular. In Chayanov's view of the peasant family economy, peasants do buy and sell land but only to preserve the family and assure the transmission of its patrimony to a new generation. The effect of market forces is to undermine the older solidarities of the peasantry. For Lenin, Dobbs, Kosminsky and the early Rodney Hilton the emergence of a class of wealthy peasants undermined the class structure and solidarity of the peasantry and functioned pretty much on the order of the individualism mentioned above: dissolving communal ties by a petty capitalist accumulation of economic power. This is readily acknowledged on the right wing of the political spectrum in the most famous example of the celebration of individuality and enterprise, Alan McFarlane's *Origins of English Individualism*.

Chayanov does not have an exclusive resonance in North America, but while Chayanov's emphasis on family life-cycle has is no longer so influential in Britain (as Philip Scofield pointed out last year at Noirmoutier), it remains popular in the United States and Canada. What is really at issue is the absence of anything to replace the ideas built around individuality versus community or neo-populism versus the market. As long as this is the case rather basic questions about the land market are not easy to deal with and so are not asked. There is, as I've already noted, a remarkable absence of attention to the land market even in such excellent and detailed accounts of peasant life as Richard Hoffmann's exhaustive study of the Duchy of Wroclaw in Silesia. Hoffmann notes the



disparities of wealth among peasants and explores the workings of credit and debt, but has nothing on the land market. Where there does seem to be a real contribution to the matter is in studies of the social meaning of land transactions as in Barbara Rosenwein's work on Cluny and its lay donors and in her recent book on the cultural meaning of immunities. The "American School" of anthropological history does offer perspectives on property that go beyond questions of private aggrandizement versus community to explore the non-economic context and implications of sales and donations of land.

I would like to deal briefly with two exceptions that although not centered on the land market suggest some connections between this and other questions concerning the place of peasants and their room to maneuver within the seigneurial regime. The first, Eleanor Searle's Battle Abbey and its Banlieu is well-known to many of you, far better and with considerable more expertise than anything I can command. In her study of the burgesses living within the vill, Searle considers the land market at some length. These burgesses, originally servants and craftsmen dependent on the monastery, held houses with lands appertaining to them as well as agricultural lands outside the village. Their status was somewhat ambiguous: they were free men as regards personal condition but were not entirely free holders of property. They did not possess a formal borough charter and so the term "burgesses" stops short of encompassing a clear franchise. The distinctive aspect of their participation in a land market was that the abbey was the most energetic buyer during the maximum period of activity, the 13th and early 14th centuries. Attempting to reconstruct a demesne out of what had been alienated as leased property, the monastery and not individual burgesses emerges from analysis of the documentation as the most aggressive player in the land market. The status of those who can more properly be regarded as peasants was also ambiguous, according to Searle. Battle's "customary tenants" were copyholders whom the abbey attempted to degrade to villeinage in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the same period in which it was also restoring its demesne by purchase. The customary tenants held in "ancient demesne," that rather tricky form of privileged status that they defended against the abbey's attempt to levy death duties (heriot) as a sign of a lower status. Battle Abbey was only partially successful in its attempt to impose this and other indices of servitude but what it did succeed in doing was to choke off what had been a free peasant land market. In effect a compromise was worked out that allowed the monastery to control and profit from inter vivos sales among tenants while relaxing its insistence on levies more clearly implying servitude. The land market is thus linked to status as an indication of the relative freedom of these tenants to transact with minimal seigneurial interference, whatever their formal status or legal designation. At the same time, when faced with a choice between defending the free sale and purchase of land or holding off the levy of heriot, the tenants were willing to forgo the land market in order to compromise, forestalling a degradation that might have rendered moot their practice of untrammelled exchange of land in any event. Here, contrary to what one would expect from the researches of the Toronto School, seigneurial jurisdiction and pressure did limit the economic autonomy of the community while stopping short of the actual

imposition of servitude. Teófilo Ruiz in his book on city and country in Old Castile shows us a land market with some similarities to what Searle found for England. Examining over 1,000 transactions from 1240 to 1360 Ruiz found the church was an important buyer, joined by townsmen and individual clerics. Peasants were net sellers of land. Here, however, there was little in the way of servile status. Most important, the dichotomy between community and the individual or rather change in the relationship between the two did not exist in Old Castile. Long before the Black Death or any other putative solvent of social bonds, peasants bought and sold land at a furious pace. There was never a time when this was not the case and such activity does not seem to contradict the communal ties of these settlements. Moreover, unlike Zvi Razi's Halesowen, transactions were not among neighbors but often between townsmen or institutions on the one hand and villagers on the other.

Old Castile was a territory without servile tenure and so the active land market may be associated with personal freedom. Most important, however, is the depopulation of the region before the Black Death by reason of the attractive conditions offered on the expanding frontier of the thirteenth century Reconquista. Thirteenth-century Castile was a non-Malthusian society in which there was no population pressure in relation to the supply of arable land. This is not to say that its peasantry was prosperous. Willingness to move as well as the evident impoverishment and debt of many sellers attests to quite the contrary. But beyond the obvious freedom from seigneurial constraint in buying and selling, the land market existed in medieval Castile independently of a crisis of feudalism, a transition to capitalism or radical changes in tenure, family structure or seigneurial pressure.

What one sees now in European research on the peasant land market is a tendency to look at the phenomenon in itself without too much interference from more abstract questions of community versus individual or transition from one mode of production to another. This has its frustrations: as we have tended to emphasize, our work has demonstrated the omnipresence and importance of the peasant land market while making less progress in explaining it. Clearly it is related to family strategies, inheritance and the perceived opportunities and economic necessities of buyers and sellers. Why this has not had much resonance in North America in recent years I don't know. The studies of Searle and Ruiz are not very new and I can't point to anything more recent that is not closely associated with the advanced work being done in England. There is no logical reason why Americans have to make a significant contribution to this as the study of a history not one's own is always carried out at a distance both logistical as well as to some extent psychological. The reasons for this backwardness, however, are more related to historiographical shifts than to the difficulty of carrying out local studies (otherwise the Toronto School would never have gotten started). These historiographical factors I would summarize as a movement toward mentalities and away from material culture. As I indicated, peasant mentality, perception of opportunities, complaints and rebellions are more popular topics than ever, while even the Toronto School's attention to local

case studies has tended to dissipate into anecdotal material. Again as already mentioned, there seems to have been relatively little work done in the methodological space between quantitative tabulating of information from manor court rolls (the Toronto School at its zenith) and sympathetic but unfocused accounts of peasant oppression. The disillusionment with 1970s social history has threatened the study of social history altogether. If it is a cliché, in closing remarks, to express one's gratitude for learning at such a conference more than one can contribute, it will be obvious that in my case this is quite true. I can only hope to help stimulate some revival of interest in the working of rural society and economy in the US and Canada through the example of the scholars assembled here.