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Economic Freedom and the Peasant Uprising of 1831

by Scott McPherson

There's no bread, let them eat cake

There's no end to what they'll take

Flaunt the fruits of noble birth

Wash the salt into the earth.

— “Bastille Day,” by Rush

Beginning roughly from the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, feudalism took hold of England and replaced the Saxon institutions that had defined that land for six centuries. Under this new regime, kings held title to all the land in the realm and parceled out bits and pieces, or “fiefs,” to their vassals, who were lords and noblemen who held their property in exchange for allegiance to the Crown.

While all of England was held thus in vassalage to the king, the nobles became mini-kings in their own right as they subdivided their vast estates through a process called “subinfeudation,” granting parcels of land to lesser nobles who in turn swore allegiance to this higher lord. (Fearing divided loyalties, this process would later be checked by a statute of Edward III called *Quia Emptores*.)

These noblemen held the power of life and death over those living on their estates. They performed functions that today are reserved exclusively to government, such as coining their own money and sitting as judges in their own courts.

Further, under this system the vast majority of people were peasant workers bound by law to the lands held by the nobles. These serfs, or “villeins,” owed labor to the lord and spent two or three days per week working his “demesne,” the land retained by the lord. Jackson J. Spielvogel, in *Western Civilization: A Brief History*, writes,

The serfs paid rents by giving the lord a share of every product they raised. Moreover, serfs paid the lord for the use of the manor's common pasturelands, streams, ponds, and surrounding woodlands. For example, if a serf fished in the pond or stream on a manor, he turned over part of the catch to his lord. Peasants were also obliged to pay a tithe . . . to their local village church.

Over the centuries this relationship would evolve, providing greater freedom to peasants. By the 13th century the population of urban centers was on the rise and so too was the demand for food. Higher demand raised prices, which “encouraged lords to try to grow more food for profit.”

“One way to do this,” writes Spielvogel,

was to lease their demesne land to their serfs. Labor services were then transformed into money payments or fixed rents, thereby converting many unfree serfs into free peasants. Although many peasants still remained economically dependent on their lords, they were no longer legally tied to the land. Lords, in turn, became collectors of rent rather than operators of manors.

This was the beginning of a process that would radically change the nature of the lord-peasant relationship, called “commutation.” Serfs began to “commute” the service they owed to their lord by changing it into a money payment, essentially buying (or more accurately, renting) their freedom. This arrangement worked out well for everyone: the peasant now had more time to work his own land and the lord could use the money to pay the wages of more-motivated workers (hired help generally being more productive than coerced servants).

Labor supply and the plague

According to George Townsend Warner, in *The Groundwork of British History*, “This plan of ‘commuting’ services for money was spreading gradually over the country, but it was not complete, when it was interrupted by disaster.” The disaster was the Black Death, a devastating plague that swept across Europe in the mid 14th century.

The impact of the Black Death fell heaviest on the lower classes, but by no means were the wealthy spared. It was not uncommon for entire families to perish and, by 1351, when the first wave of the plague finally passed, sometimes entire villages had been wiped out. Anywhere from a third to half the population of England were killed. As Warner writes, “It is literally true that often the living could scarce bury the dead.”

There is some disagreement between these two historians about the economic consequences of the plague. Spielvogel maintains that a rapidly declining population drastically lowered the demand for food, causing prices for corn and other agricultural products to plummet.

Warner, in contrast, writes that “since at the height of the plague men were so terrified that they left the harvest to rot ungathered in the fields, corn became scarce. This caused a rise in prices.”

But whatever their divergent opinions on the price of corn, both agree that during and in the years following the plague *labor* was truly scarce. With up to half the population dead there were far fewer people to do the work, and the daily wages that free peasants could demand soared, perhaps by as much as four to six times the pre-plague rate.

This development distressed the landowners in two ways: many of those whose services had earlier been commuted were now dead, which meant that the noblemen had lost that income. And worse, those who remained had contracted their “commutation” at wage rates that were drastically less than the current price of labor.

Many noblemen now found themselves in the rather untenable position of seeing their standard of living decline (Spielvogel reports that “aristocratic incomes dropped more than 20 percent between 1347 and 1353”) and their fields lying fallow because they could no longer afford to hire workers. The result was social upheaval, political backstabbing, and, eventually, revolt.

Forcing down wage rates

The first move the nobles made to alleviate their distress was to try to force wage rates down. In 1351, a very young Parliament (which, though it had included “commoners” and “burghers” since 1265, was still a tool of the landowning nobles) passed the first of the Statutes of Labourers. This law, which was reenacted with greater penalties in 1357 and 1360, compelled workers to accept wages at the 1347 rate.

Here the nobles provide modern students of economics with a case study in the futility of wage-and-price controls and the weakness of so-called cartels. The nobles were forced into a corner. They didn’t want to pay higher wages and the government willingly stepped in to insulate them from the market, but, as Warner puts it, “Better to give higher wages than have no labourers.” If they wanted their fields cultivated, they would have to pay.

And many did. They broke the very laws that had been made to protect them. In response, Parliament threatened harsher and harsher penalties for those breaking the law, including imprisonment, branding, slavery, and death. “But even ferocious penalties will not make men obey impossible laws,” writes Warner. “If it was a choice between the certainty of starvation and the chance of punishment, none could doubt what the choice would be.” Prices in general continued to rise, squeezing nobleman and peasant alike between the decrees of Parliament and market reality.

Adding more fuel to this volatile social situation was a resurgence of the plague in 1361/62 and again in 1369. More people were dying and wage rates continued to defy the pretensions of the ruling elite. In desperation, some landowners began to try to revoke the process of commutation and compel serfs to return to providing labor services. The Statute of Labourers

attempted to rebind these serfs by law to the land of their lord, preventing them from seeking better terms elsewhere.

An incendiary situation was developing. Warner writes correctly of this time that “men who have nearly gained freedom will not tamely consent to lose what they have won.” There was increasing restlessness in the peasant class. John Ball, a priest from Kent, preached that “things will never go right in England so long as there be villeins and gentlemen.” A rhyme said to have been echoing around England at the time asked, “When Adam delved and Eve span/Who was then the gentleman?”

Taxes ignite the spark

To all of this kindling only a spark was needed to ignite the countryside. In 1377 a graduated poll tax was levied, and in 1380 the tax was repeated, only this time “less distinction was . . . drawn between rich and poor.” The rate levied against the poor was a shilling, which at that time represented a full week’s wages. “It caused the smouldering discontent to burst into flames,” writes Warner.

In 1381 the entire southeastern part of the country rebelled. A man named Wat Tyler emerged as a leader of the uprising and under his guidance the discontented peasants marched towards London, burning manor houses, torching court records of their servitude, and hanging lawyers along the way. Once inside the gates of the city, the rioters seized and pillaged the palace of John of Gaunt (the king’s uncle and the Steward of England), and burned it. On Tower Hill both the king’s Treasurer and the Chancellor (who was also Archbishop of Canterbury) were murdered for having proposed the poll tax.

Panic gripped the government, but King Richard II, who at that time was only fourteen years old, acted with courage and cool-headedness, if not complete honesty. He promised pardons for the rioting peasants and even declared that serfdom would be abolished. He met with the leaders of the rebellion but the rioting, murdering, looting, and burning continued, and the uprising was soon crushed by the king’s forces, and many peasants were hanged.

Yet the country was changed. No longer were nobles confident that they could alter terms at their whim, for they had learned a painful lesson: the peasants would not meekly return to the old servitude. In response, more and more nobles pledged to rid themselves of the hassles of paying for labor by leasing more and more of their lands — leaving to newly freed peasants the trouble of finding and paying workers themselves — accelerating the break-up of the manorial system.

All did not turn out well for the oppressed, however. Many nobles adapted to the changed economic circumstances by going into sheep-farming, which required large expanses of land but far less labor. Many serfs lost not only their jobs but their land, which had ultimately belonged to

their lords. A new class of landless peasants arose, no doubt leading to much misery and starvation.

But with serfdom no longer worth keeping, it was on a downward spiral that would end with its gradual abolition. While the Peasant Uprising of 1381 cannot be said to have won much by itself, it was nonetheless the response of a large mass of the population who had tasted a greater degree of economic freedom and found it quite palatable. The institution of feudal servitude in England was doomed to eventual extinction.

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