

THE PERVERSION OF ECONOMIC HISTORY

IN 1829 William Cobbett published the *History of the Protestant Reformation*. Cobbett was a remarkable controversialist, and his views were always highly coloured, but in this work he disclosed one of the most significant truths of English economic history. He pointed out to an incredulous nation that the social conditions of the English peasantry had seriously and progressively deteriorated since the beginning of the sixteenth century. He attributed this phenomenon to the dissolution of the religious houses at the time of the Reformation, and to the alienation of property which formerly was held for the relief of poverty, and which now passed into selfish and unscrupulous hands.

The pioneer of modern critical economic history was Thorold Rogers. Without acknowledgment and without intention his detailed and laborious researches substantiate Cobbett's assertions. Thorold Rogers considered that the impoverishment and progressive deterioration of the peasantry between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries was due to a concerted effort on the part of landlords to lower wages in order that each estate's rent roll might be increased as much as possible. In many instances in his works Thorold Rogers made assertions and generalizations which could not be justified. It appears that later historians have used these errors as a ground for denying the main truth that lies in Thorold Rogers' theory of social development, and lately Catholic writers have been emphasizing that the accepted economic histories of to-day ignore the established thesis that the condition of the peasantry between 1500 and 1850 was consistently made worse by the individualistic attitude of the landowning class. This is a truth which cannot be disproved, and it is one of the most significant facts in economic history. Anti-Catholic writers can thrust it into the background, but it has never been satisfactorily refuted.

At the time of the Domesday survey only nine per cent of the rural population were without a holding of land, and although this proportion undoubtedly increased, land was

BLACKFRIARS

always available even to the very poor until the sixteenth century. At the same time the parish guilds and the monasteries consistently gave money to the destitute so that they might purchase stock and thus earn a living. The peasants could supplement the produce of their own holdings by wages earned as day labourers, and it is an historical fact that there was a shortage of day labourers between the Black Death and the middle of the sixteenth century. Thus any peasant who found the results of working his own holding unsatisfactory could choose to work as a labourer. Now as by far the greater proportion of the peasantry preferred to cultivate their own land than to work for hire, it is justifiable to infer that the return from independent production was greater than the labourers' wages. The rate of wages if estimated in terms of foodstuffs over this period can therefore be taken to indicate the minimum standard of living that was generally found. Gustav F. Steffen has shown that when estimated in the prices of the times the wage of an agricultural labourer was in 1275 equivalent to nine pounds of wheat. In 1450 it would purchase thirty-one pounds of wheat. For the next hundred years it zigzags between sixteen and twenty-six pounds. In 1605 it falls to ten and one-half pounds, and for two hundred years it fluctuates between nine and six.¹ Thus at the time of the Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries the peasant's income must have been equivalent on the average to between sixteen and twenty-six pounds of wheat.

It is possible to explain the decline in the condition of the peasantry which was noted by Cobbett during the period which intervened between the Reformation and his own lifetime. Between 1550 and 1800 the peasants lost their holdings of land, and by 1800 nearly all the land in the greater part of England had been engrossed into large farms. Thus in 1800 the peasantry were forced to rely entirely upon wages for their income. These wages could buy only from nine to six pounds of wheat. If we are to take diet as a basis for

¹ See *The Nineteenth Century*, June, 1893.

THE PERVERSION OF ECONOMIC HISTORY

reckoning the social condition of a class of people, Cobbett's assertion is abundantly justified.

At the time when Cobbett wrote the poor in rural districts suffered severely from the effects of the Speenhamland system. This came about at the end of the eighteenth century because so many peasants were expelled simultaneously from their holdings that employment could not be found for them all upon the new large farms. The Speenhamland system lasted from 1795 to 1832, and it inevitably rendered every agricultural labourer a pauper, because it supplemented wages by an allowance from the parish in order that the labourer should have enough to live on, and this supplement was refused to all who had property. Shortly after Cobbett published his *History of the Protestant Reformation* the Speenhamland system was abolished, and economic historians have thought it unnecessary to draw further attention to the unfortunate position of the English peasantry. Perhaps the following extract from a contemporary American observer reveals better than figures their state in 1844, and it proves that the poverty and hardships to which Cobbett referred were not only the temporary results of the Enclosures, and the Napoleonic wars, or the misguided Speenhamland system.

Mr. Henry Coleman was a well-known American, and he made a tour of enquiry into rural conditions in the Midlands and South in 1844. His report deserves careful consideration. He wrote: "The English agricultural labourers are very poorly fed, wretchedly lodged—their wages are inadequate to their comfortable support—and their situation affords little or no hope of improvement. . . . It is obvious that no great improvement can take place in their condition while they remain a distinct and servile class without any power of rising above their condition. The low state of their wages absolutely forbids any accumulation of property. They cannot own the soil which they cultivate. The houses which they occupy belong not to themselves, and they may be at any time turned out of them.

"Immense numbers of the labourers are actually perishing by hunger . . . and in a country where the accumulation

BLACKFRIARS

of wealth surpasses imagination there are such contrasts of want, destitution, privation and misery as would surpass belief and defy the power of imagination but for the support of incontrovertible and overwhelming evidence.

“Wages vary from seven to twelve shillings per week. Flower and yeast take all of this, and it leaves nothing for any rent, clothing, education or other expenses—the only fund for defraying which consists of the extra earnings at harvest time. Thus the bulk of the workers in agriculture in the districts visited are at the best just able to struggle on from hand to mouth, and any suspension of employment or rise in the price of provisions reduces them to pauperism.”²

A further striking and indisputable proof of the pauperization of the English peasantry occurs nineteen years later in the Report of the Medical Officer of Health to the Privy Councillor. In 1863 Dr. E. Smith stated in his official report that over one-fifth of the agricultural labourers' families in England in 1862 were receiving nutriment below the standard necessary to prevent diseases arising from lack of nutrition.

It is now impossible to deny that the position of the peasantry in most counties in England grew steadily worse and worse from the Reformation until the latter part of the nineteenth century. So marked is this deterioration that it is surprizing that it has not attracted more attention from historians who endeavour to trace theories of social development. It has to be admitted that this omission is due to a failure to recognize the true history of social theory. Dr. G. O'Brien,³ Father Paschal Larkin⁴ and Mr. R. H. Tawney⁵ seem to concur in presenting a history of the development of men's ideas upon property since the Reformation, and this history although manifestly authentic seems curiously distasteful to non-Catholic writers.

In the Middle Ages and up to the time of the Reformation men's ideas upon property were governed by the teaching of the Catholic Church, and it was considered wrong to use

² *Labourers' Friend*, March, 1844, page 58.

³ *Economic Effects of the Reformations*.

⁴ *Locke and the Rise of Individualism*.

⁵ *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*.

THE PERVERSION OF ECONOMIC HISTORY

one's property in such a way as to harm one's neighbour. Profit making at the expense of another was condemned, and one had to remember that one only had wealth for the common good. With the Reformation there was a change. Commercial morality fell, and individualism triumphed. The discipline of the Catholic Church disappeared, and man's innate avarice was allowed free rein. Individual self-sufficiency was the prevailing doctrine, and everywhere men used their property solely for their own advantage.

In this way the change in the social conditions of the peasantry between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries can be explained, and their transition from a well-paid and independent state to an ill-fed and hopeless pauperism can be regarded as a manifestation of the change in the outlook upon property and upon man's duty towards his neighbour that took place in England as a result of the Reformation. Surely this association cannot be ignored by historians without justification, and in any case the social development of so important a class in the nation should be the concern of economic history.

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