

4.3.1 The Social Consequences of the Commercialization of Agriculture

We have seen that in the sixteenth century land became a valuable, indeed a marketable, commodity. Rising grain prices together with a greater demand for wool fed by an ever increasing flow of bullion from the New World, meant that land became more valuable than ever before. But this sudden transformation in the nature of the value of land meant the economic end for the feudal nobility. The feudal system, as we have seen, operated within a closed power system in which political, social and economic authority was closely intertwined. We have seen that this system was constantly under threat from the fourteenth century. Now when land became not merely an object of social and military prestige, but a tangible economic commodity the feudal lords were not in a position to take advantage of the changed circumstances. In western Europe peasants were well organized and vocal; they had been fighting feudal domination for centuries. Rents could be increased through force ; but this was impractical given the diminished power of the feudal lords. Therefore the feudal nobility chose the option of leasing out their lands at high prices to the urban capitalists who were anxious to share in the boom of the sixteenth century.

There soon evolved in rural Europe, and especially in England, a three-tiered structure comprising the feudal lord who leased out his land, the 'capitalist' tenant farmer who bought the lease and often farmed the land according to the dictates of capitalist agriculture, and the serf who, slowly but inexorably freed from feudal obligations as a result of these changes, actually tilled the land more or less as a free peasant. The rural structure that had endured for so long in Europe was therefore broken in the sixteenth century.

The emergence of a three-tiered class structure in rural Europe meant that while at one end the economic power of the feudal lords was considerably eroded there also appeared in rural Europe the influx of urban classes who bought land for gain, for farming, for pure investment, for speculation, and for social prestige. Braudel called this investment of urban capital in land the 'treason of the bourgeoisie' but in all fairness to the emergent bourgeoisie of early modern Europe it must be pointed out that they did not possess a clear consciousness of their separate identity as a distinct class.

There was thus considerable social stratification at work in rural Europe. Old families decayed and were replaced by the rising classes.

Lucien Febvre did an important study of the social consequences of the decline of the old and the rise of new classes in the Flanders region.

Social stratification occurred perhaps the most in rural England where the emergence of capitalist agriculture was most conspicuous. Commercialization proceeded at an unprecedented pace thanks to the aggressive policies of the new monarchy, the relative weakness of the feudal barons (as compared to France—the most feudal of all countries in Europe at this time), the combined effects of a boom that strengthened market forces, and most important of all— a massive turnover in landed property resulting from the sale of church and monastic lands by Henry VIII. As more and more land flooded the market there appeared what Lawrence Stone called two concurrent social pyramids : one in which birth was the determinant factor (that is the old feudal aristocracy) and the second in which 'profession' determined status. The result of this was that while population doubled between 1540 and 1640 the upper classes trebled in size and the total area of land that they held doubled.

At the other end of the scale as market considerations affected the behaviour of agrarian society in England many serfs lost their lands and became, in effect, landless peasants. While the feudal system had often been a restrictive system it had also been a paternalistic one—the new class of capitalist farmers and owners were not bound by any feudal ties of etiquette or paternalism towards their peasants whom they treated as workers. Also the enclosures meant that the right of the poorer peasants to use common land's vanished as capitalist farmers erected fences on common pastures for profit. Therefore there grew up, due to the changes of the sixteenth century, a class of landless and property less peasants who would later provide the bulk of the labour force needed by the factories during the Industrial Revolution.

That the loosening of feudal ties towards the serfs were creating serious problems of unemployment and vagrancy can be seen from the number of Poor Laws passed in England during the reign of Elizabeth I. Society was in constant flux : deprivation and sudden pauperization led to a situation which was only paralleled by the excesses of Victorian England.