

Divergent Paths of Agrarian Change: Eastern England and Tuscany Compared

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Agrarian change and agricultural improvement are commonly considered to be important precursors of industrialization (Marx 1906, p. 554; Jones and Woolf 1969, p. 15; Wallerstein 1974; Braudel 1982, p. 42; Wrigley 1985, p. 704; Brenner 1985; Beckett 1990, p. 67). Even in contemporary settings, where state intervention can attenuate the link between agricultural and industrial prosperity, a failing rural sector can have deleterious effects on economic development (Sovani 1964; Sachs 1976; Bates 1980; 1989; Wrigley 1987, p. 189; Zangheri 1969; Lipton 1977; Gugler 1982), while a dynamic rural sector can promote it (Nee and Sijn 1990). Thus, an explanation of agrarian change contributes to an understanding of economic development more generally.

In pre-industrial Europe, one of the most advanced agricultural regions was northern Italy in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (Aymard 1982; Braudel 1982, 1984). At that time the region constituted the core of the world economy, with a prosperous and thriving rural sector. Recent research shows that highly productive agriculture was also found in eastern England (namely, East Anglia, the lower Thames valley, and Kent) in the early fourteenth century (Campbell 1983, 1991; Britnell 1989, 1991a; Mate 1986, 1991; Hopcroft 1994). Although agricultural productivity declined in northern Italy, it continued to increase in eastern England, culminating in the agricultural revolution of later centuries. In this paper, we seek to explain these divergent paths of agrarian change.

This comparison not only advances knowledge of agrarian change

in history, but also allows evaluation of several theoretical arguments concerning the rise and decline of rural prosperity. A world systems perspective explains the decline of agricultural productivity in Tuscany and its rise in eastern England as a result of a shift in the centre of the European world economy (Wallerstein 1974; Braudel 1982, p. 251, 1984, p. 296). As the core moved from northern Italy to the Low Countries, and then to England, agricultural productivity declined in northern Italy and rose in England. However, contrary to expectation, agricultural productivity was high in parts of eastern England when it was at the fringe of the European economy (Campbell 1991; Britnell 1989). This suggests that a focus at the level of the European world economy is insufficient, and an examination of local dynamics is necessary to explain fully the divergent development of eastern England and Tuscany.

Other authors suggest that the rise of sharecropping was responsible for the decline of the Tuscan rural economy (Epstein 1991; Giorgetti 1974; Lachmann 1990, p. 409; Malanima 1982; Romano 1974). For example, Epstein recently argued that Tuscan sharecropping emphasized peasant self-sufficiency and inhibited specialization and commercialization (1991, pp. 33,39-42). Similarly, Chayanovian Marxists argue that agricultural production based on family production (by implication, sharecropping) is labour, not capital intensive, and therefore, cannot sustain long-term economic growth (Friedmann 1980; Goodman and Redclift 1982; Mann 1990). Classical economists, such as Marshall, also argued that sharecropping was inefficient because it discouraged investment in land and farm equipment. Other research, however, beginning with Cheung (1969), suggests that sharecropping is no less efficient than other land tenure systems and could have supported sustained economic development. Here we evaluate these competing claims about sharecropping in the light of comparative evidence from Tuscany and eastern England. We also examine whether other features of land, labour, capital or product markets inhibited rural productivity in Tuscany and facilitated its rise in eastern England (North and Thomas 1973; North 1990; Nee 1986; Hopcroft 1998).

Still other authors blame Florentine domination for Tuscan rural

decline. In comparison, England's relative lack of urbanization compared to the continent (Wrigley 1985; Britnell 1991b; Persson 1993) may have contributed to the continued development of the rural sector in eastern England. A broad range of literature, both neo-institutionalist and Marxist, considers how large sectoral differences, and urban domination in particular, is deleterious for economic development (Bates 1989; Gugler 1982; Jones 1988; Lipton 1977; London and Smith 1985; McIntyre 1992). Overtaxation by urban elites, as well as indirect taxation in the form of urban control over prices for agricultural commodities, often inhibits agricultural growth. Florence dominated the surrounding countryside by heavy taxation and forced financial transfers from the countryside and subject towns (Britnell 1991b; Epstein 1991, p. 32). In addition, sharecropping, which was common in Tuscany, was dependent upon inputs of capital, especially from Florentine landlords (Herlihy and Klapish-Zuber 1985, pp. 118- 120; Emigh 1996-1997). This dependence may have linked rural to urban fortunes. Here, we use comparative evidence to examine the role of cities in the rise (and decline in Tuscany) of agricultural prosperity.

To evaluate these arguments, we focus on rural developments in eastern England and Tuscany between about 1300 and 1500. During this time period, Tuscan rural prosperity peaked while developments that would culminate in the English agricultural revolution began in eastern England. We consider Tuscany and eastern England, rather than all of England, because these areas were most comparable during this time. They were both densely populated regions surrounding major cities (Florence and London). We first examine early fourteenth-century similarities and differences in population density, rural labour markets, property rights and land tenure systems, credit facilities, agricultural development, and urban/rural relations. Next we examine the divergent trajectories of agrarian change (the spread of sharecropping in Tuscany and the rise of fixed-term leasing in eastern England) and the reasons for this divergence. Last, we note implications for the long-term development of agriculture, that is, an agricultural revolution in England and rural stagnation in Tuscany.

Rural eastern England and Tuscany in the early fourteenth century

Tuscany covered a smaller territory, but in the early fourteenth century, it was more densely populated than eastern England. Estimates of population densities for pre-plague Tuscany range from 120 to 170 people per square mile (Epstein 1991, p. 18; Malanima 1986, p. 65; Pinto 1982, p. 68, 77; Pounds 1990, p. 149). This region was more densely populated than other areas in northern Italy, such as Lombardy or Veneto, which had population densities of slightly more than 100 people per square mile (Malanima 1986, p. 65). In contrast, eastern England was somewhat less densely populated. Reliable population figures for England (derived from taxation records) are not available until after the demographic decline of mid-century. At this time, however, the population of eastern England (using figures for Cambridgeshire, Essex, Kent, Lincolnshire, Middlesex, Norfolk and Suffolk) averaged about 50 people per square mile (Russell 1948, p. 313). Supposing a fifty percent decline in density since 1350 (a high estimate), this suggests that the most densely populated areas of eastern England had a pre-plague density of about 100 people per square mile - slightly less than the contemporary Tuscan density (see also Britnell 1991b, p. 26).

This difference in population density was no doubt due to the greater urbanization of Tuscany (Epstein 1991, 1993, p. 459-460; Malanima 1986; Persson 1993; Pinto 1978b, p. 76). By the early thirteenth century, four Tuscan cities, Florence, Pisa, Siena, and Pistoia had populations of over 10,000. Florence was the most populous — in 1338, there were 110,000 inhabitants (Britnell 1989, p.169; Pounds 1990, p. 163). Genoa, Milan, and Venice, all major commercial and population centres, were also in northern Italy. This was the contemporary centre of the European economy. Florence was perhaps the greatest banking centre in Europe by 1340. These northern Italian cities were major centres of international trade, famous for manufacturing. Eastern England, in contrast, was a relative backwater. It had only one major city, London, which had about 80-100,000 people, and only a few other urban centres, most of which were under 10,000 people (Britnell 1989; 1993, p. 115).

The two places also differed in climate and terrain, with eastern England the more promising agricultural region. Tuscany is much further south than eastern England, but it is situated at a higher altitude. Over half of Tuscany is hilly, the soil poor and the rainfall and river flow seasonal. Frosts and hailstorms, which can damage crops quickly and can make vines and trees unproductive for several years, are frequent (Cherubini 1974, pp. 83-87; Gill 1983, p.150). Eastern England tends to be flat, and the weather often cool, overcast and damp. The soil varies from sandy and poor to very fertile in some parts. On the whole, eastern England offered a more hospitable environment for agriculture than Tuscany.

By the early fourteenth century, Tuscany and eastern England had somewhat similar rural labour markets. In both regions, feudalism declined comparatively early and agriculturalists faced few feudal and customary restrictions.¹ By the early fourteenth century, serfs constituted only a small percentage of the eastern English population, and serfdom probably never existed in some regions (such as Kent) (Postan 1973, p. 281). Wage labour, rather than customary labour, was used on many demesnes in Norfolk (eastern England) by the thirteenth century (Campbell 1983). In addition, many peasants in the region were freeholders. They may have paid money rents on customary land they farmed, but they did not owe feudal dues. Freeholders comprised as much as 80 percent of the population in some eastern English regions (Dodwell 1939, see also Gray 1915; Kerridge 1969, p. 35).

In Tuscany, feudalism had disappeared by the fourteenth century (Jones 1965, pp. 80-81; 1968, p. 214). The Florentine enfranchisement decree of 1289 banned fealty (Jones 1968, p. 212). After 1350, both lordship and fealty had few economic consequences and were merely formal aspects of customary tenure (Jones 1968, p. 214). As in Norfolk, labour rents were rare in Tuscany by the early fourteenth century. Unlike in eastern England, where

¹ By feudalism, we mean economic feudalism, where customary tenants worked demesne lands of manorial lords by rendering labour services. The obligation to perform such labour services typically identified a villein or serf in late medieval Europe. Customary land, that is, land outside the demesne, but belonging to the manor, was typically worked by customary tenants who paid a variety of rents and fees to the manorial lord in exchange for using the land, to which they had a customary right. We use the terms freeholding or smallholding to denote land that belonged to independent peasants, not the manor.

money rents were becoming common, labour rents were often replaced by rents in kind, which were consequently common by the mid-thirteenth century (Herlihy 1959, p.68; Jones 1954-55, p.27; 1968, pp. 205, 217-218; Britnell 1993, p. 192). For example, in Pistoia, leases in kind constituted nearly one-half of new contracts by the second half of the fourteenth-century (Herlihy 1967, p.136).²

As in many places in Europe, the decreasing use of labour services in Tuscany accompanied the decline of demesne farming (c.f. Bloch 1966). In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the "demesne" of Tuscan manors (formerly worked by serfs) was often leased (either in fixed or share terms). The use of labour rents on demesne land was generally restricted to outlying regions (Jones 1968, p.211). In eastern England, in contrast, direct farming of demesnes continued until the late fourteenth century, although often using wage labour, not the customary labour of serfs or tenants (Bean 1991, p. 573; Britnell 1993, p. 104, 192).

Rural property rights were privatized and individualistic in both Tuscany and eastern England. Both areas lacked highly communal agricultural systems, like those found in the midlands of England, northern France, and southwestern Germany (cf. Bloch 1966; Hopcroft 1994). Communal rights to land were limited, private property rights and enclosures were common. There was little communal participation in ploughing, sowing, harvesting, or grazing animals, and minimal communal control over individual farmers' decisions. Instead of large compact villages amid open fields, small villages and scattered dwellings were typical. In

² The reason for the spread of rents in kind is not entirely clear. Inflation or the devaluation of the coinage may have been partly responsible (Herlihy 1959, p. 68; Jones 1968, p. 198). Between 1280 and 1340, the value of the petty denario fell nearly fifty percent in value: in 1280, the gold florin was worth thirty-four soldi, in 1360, it was worth sixty-two soldi, and in 1427, it was eighty (Herlihy 1968, p. 265, 273). However, Herlihy (1968, p. 68) argues that landlords' desire to increase their income was more important than the devaluation of the currency. Where money rents were nominal remainders of feudal or customary rents, the conversion from low, fixed, monetary rents in kind allowed landlords to increase their income. The incremental increase in income between a low fixed monetary rent and a rent in kind was substantial. Furthermore, where money rents were used in commercial leases, the increases in rent outpaced inflation. At Santa Maria Impruneta, for example, rents more than doubled between 1280 and 1360. Thus, their real value rose, despite the declining value of the currency (Herlihy 1968, p. 265).

Tuscany, the spread of *mezzadria* (sharecropping) after the twelfth century further dispersed some rural inhabitants from nucleated villages onto scattered farms (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p.50; Jones 1968, p.232).

In both Tuscany and eastern England, the cultivating class had access to legal protection for their property rights. In eastern England, freemen could take land-related and other disputes to the king's (the common law) courts, which were well established throughout England by 1300 (Kerridge 1969; Hyams 1980; North and Thomas 1973:64). Customary tenants did not have this right, and had access only to manorial courts. However, the large number of freemen in eastern England meant that a large proportion of the cultivating class could obtain legal protection for their property rights. In Tuscany, smallholders' property rights (such as those established in notarial documents) were also enforceable in court. The notarial registers provide numerous examples of smallholders exercising their property rights, including land sales, leases, deeds, and arbitrations of property disputes. Rural inhabitants' access to courts, however, may have been limited by high cost of lawyers, by the absence of judicial officers in remote rural regions, and by the judicial system of the Florentine territorial state, with its numerous and overlapping jurisdictions (Kuehn 1991, pp. 19-74; Martines 1968, pp. 220-245; Stern 1994, pp. 1-19). Furthermore, Tuscan courts may have been biased towards Florentines and against rural Tuscans. For example, Epstein (1993, p. 453) argues that the judicial system tended to support Florentine's claims over those of rural tenants. In contrast, there is no evidence of such systematic bias in decisions of the common law courts in England.

Credit for agricultural enterprises was probably more widely available in Tuscany than in eastern England. Given the greater urbanization of northern Italy, it is not surprising that credit and other financial institutions were better developed in Tuscany. In fifteenth-century Florence, there were many banks and pawnshops (De Roover 1963, p.14; Goldsmith 1987, pp. 157-164). Pawnshops, licensed by the Florentine government, lent money on pledges of personal property. These Italian developments far surpassed contemporary English systems of credit. In fact, English monarchs and merchants often turned to Italian bankers (resident in England) for loans and other financial services.

It is not clear whether rural residents in Tuscany had access to urban credit institutions. Credit was available in the Tuscan countryside, but it was expensive; rural moneylenders usually charged high interest rates. Some of these loans were given to smallholders with the intent of obtaining the land used as collateral, by specifying conditions that virtually assured defaults (Polica 1980, p.677). Some notaries' businesses consisted of writing contracts in which the smallholders "sold" their land with a right to repurchase it after a few years, and then leased it from the new owner. The sum of money for which the land was sold was the loan, the rent the interest, and the land the security. The interest rate was often twenty percent and could reach fifty percent (Herlihy 1965, p.241). Smallholders could also sell perpetual rents on their properties, which could yield a return for the investor of nine to twelve and one-half percent (Herlihy 1965, pp. 239-240). They also sold crops in advance of the harvest for prices that concealed interest (Herlihy 1965, p.243; 1968, pp. 250, 262; see also Polica 1980, p. 676; Saponi 1955). Sharecroppers had more access to credit than smallholders, because landlords customarily made loans to their tenants, either by providing a cash advance or livestock or both when the lease was contracted (Emigh 1996; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p. 119). These loans, made by both small and large landowners, were virtually an inseparable condition of share tenancy (Jones 1968, p. 225).

There were fewer urban and rural credit facilities in England at the same time. For town people and major landowners, credit could be obtained from moneylenders. Jews frequently loaned money before their expulsion in 1290. Later, money could be borrowed from churchmen, merchants, local landowners or relatives (Britnell 1993, p. 129). Urban credit facilities which did exist were even less accessible to peasant farmers in England than they were in Tuscany, primarily because of the greater distance between urban centres and rural regions in England (Britnell 1993, p. 148). In sum, it is likely that rural Tuscans (especially sharecroppers) had greater access to credit and capital than their English counterparts.

In eastern England and Tuscany, agriculture had been partially commercialized by the thirteenth century. In Tuscany, estates and

customary holdings were reorganized and subjected to business methods of accounting and administration (Jones 1966, p.388, 1968, p. 204). Increased agricultural productivity is also evident from the beginning of the thirteenth century. Urban demand for Tuscan agriculture was great, and estates produced wheat, olives, and grapes for the Florentine and other Tuscan urban markets. Similarly, estates in eastern England produced wheat, barley, malt, and some wool for an international market (Mate 1991; Britnell 1993).

Agricultural technologies were similarly advanced in both places. Tuscany supported an unusually large non-agricultural population, given its poor natural endowments. Where commercial leases spread, agricultural production extended beyond the classical two-course rotation system, in which half the land was left fallow each year. The more intensive method of cultivation, the three-course system, sharply reduced the extent of fallow land because cereals were planted for two consecutive years, leaving the field fallow only one year. The fallow field was worked intensively; it was ploughed or hoed several times and commonly planted with beans in the spring. The crop of beans improved the soil and gave the cultivator a bonus crop of food or fodder. Sometimes this intensive cropping reduced the period of fallow to a few months or weeks (Herlihy 1968, pp. 252-3). Fertilization was common; including the use of green-manuring (ploughing under a crop), urban refuse and manure, and even wool clippings (Herlihy 1968, p.253; Kotel'nikova 1974, p.20; Niccolini di Camugliano 1925, p.13). The terms of some share-leases specified that tenants had to haul manure from the stable to the fields or to haul manure from the city to the farms. Some landlords merely gave their tenants permission to remove urban refuse.

Sharecropping leases (and fixed-term leases to a lesser extent) had detailed prescriptions specifying the terms of the tenancy. The tenants had to reside on the land and were responsible for "working it well" (*bene laborare*). "Working it well" was elaborated in statutes and leases and included specific rotations, ploughings, dates of sowing and harvest, intensive cultivation by digging and manuring, digging ditches, pruning, and cultivating vines and olives (Jones 1956, p. 194-5). Tenants were not allowed to cut vines or trees, remove hay, straw,

or manure, to assume another lease, or to take a job in Florence (Jones 1968, p.223).

Many of the same agricultural techniques were used on manorial estates in eastern England in the early fourteenth century (Britnell 1989). Patterns of crop rotations varied regionally. In some areas, a three-course rotation was used similar to that described above for the most intensively worked land in Tuscany. Some of the more agriculturally developed regions (such as eastern Norfolk) had multiple and complex rotation patterns, so that a very small proportion of the land (less than a third) lay fallow each year (Campbell 1991; Campbell and Overton 1993). Because more of the land was under cultivation, agriculture was highly productive. As in Tuscany, complex rotations were maintained by labour intensive methods such as multiple ploughings, the inclusion of beans and other legumes (to replace lost nitrogen in the soil) in the rotations, and extensive fertilizing. Some crops in eastern England were similar to those in Tuscany, and included wheat, barley, rye, legumes and oats, although there was little production of grapes or olives. In eastern England, fertilizer included marl (lime), night soil, and animal manure. Less is known about agricultural techniques on peasant holdings, which were very numerous in eastern England, but evidence suggests that similar techniques were used by all farmers in the region (Mate 1986; Britnell 1991a).

However, some agricultural technologies were different. In eastern England, horses were commonly used as traction animals to haul manure, pull carts, and plough the fields on manorial demesnes by the late thirteenth century. Horses may have been commonly used by the peasantry as well. In contrast, in Tuscany, oxen were used for traction and plowing, although the horse was not unknown in northern Italy by the fifteenth century (Jones 1966, p.374). The horse is a more expensive traction animal than the ox, but it is faster and more efficient (Langdon 1986, Rösener 1992). Thus, the prevalence of horses in eastern England suggests a degree of rural affluence not found in Tuscany. However, the lack of horses in Tuscany may have been a consequence of the topography - as neither ploughs nor horses can be easily used on hilly terrain.

In both locations, intensive agriculture produced high yields. In parts

of eastern England and Tuscany, seed yield ratios in the late thirteenth century could reach ten to one (Herlihy 1965, p.239, Campbell 1983). This was very high by medieval standards. Output per acre was similarly high in both countries. In Norfolk in eastern England, it could reach 20 or more bushels per acre, a figure which was not attained again until the eighteenth century (Campbell and Overton 1993). This level of agricultural productivity supported occupational shifts from agriculture to trade and industry as early as the thirteenth century (Persson 1991, p. 128).

Despite this productive agriculture, Tuscans did not produce enough food for urban needs. Florentines frequently imported grain from other locations (particularly Sicily) (Pinto 1978a, 1978b, pp. 73-106; 317; 1982, pp. 145-53; Tangheroni 1978; Jones 1966, pp. 384-385). For example, in the early fourteenth century, nearly twenty percent of Florentine wheat was imported (Pinto 1982, p. 39). Florentines tried, at least to some extent, to remedy this situation. After they conquered Pisa, for example, they attempted to turn the Pisan *contado* (the rural region surrounding the city) into a major grain producing region, as the Medici and other Florentines purchased land there (Epstein 1991, p.38). The high degree of urbanization contributed to the inadequacy of local agricultural production in Tuscany. In contrast, little food was imported to eastern England. In fact, parts of eastern England exported barley, wheat and malt in the early fourteenth century (Campbell 1983; Britnell 1991a; Mate 1991, p. 132). Even London was fairly well supplied by its hinterland. Wine from Bordeaux was the primary agrarian import (Postan 1952, p. 193). Food imports were usually luxury goods, not staples as in Tuscany.

Even with food imports, and despite similar wage levels in England and Tuscany (Britnell 1989, p. 181), famines, epidemics, and poverty were more common in Tuscany. In Florence, famines were common in the early fourteenth century (Pinto 1978b, pp. 73-106; 317; Tangheroni 1978; Jones 1966, pp. 384-385). The difficulties that rural inhabitants and communities had paying their taxes also suggests the existence of rural poverty (Herlihy 1968, p. 266; Molho 1971, p. 23-45). In England, in contrast, the only major famine in the early fourteenth century occurred in 1316-18 and did not even affect all of eastern England (Britnell 1989, p. 182; Mate 1986).

Cities in northern Italy restricted trade in agricultural commodities as a result of these food shortages (although these restrictions may have been partially a cause of the shortages). Such restrictions were virtually unknown in England. Most northern Italian cities and towns had grain legislation that regulated the price, production, and movement of crops and that imposed tariffs to restructure local agricultural trade. Most cities had government offices for provisioning foodstuffs. Some cities, like Parma and Padua, severely limited the number of regional markets for surer control over food supplies (Britnell 1991b, p. 32). Rural communities often became embroiled in disputes over the movement of agricultural products. Tuscan towns regulated (though not completely successfully) trade in, and the sale and price of, foodstuffs and established production quotas for the rural regions under their jurisdictions. Some cities made special provisions for the compulsory marketing of grain in a central city market. In years of crisis, Florentines restricted the operations of grain merchants in local markets and reserved the right to requisition grain for the city's needs (Herlihy 1958; Pinto 1978a; Pinto 1978b; Polica 1980, p. 670). Such regulations and interventions were rare in England (Postan 1973; Britnell 1989).

In sum, in the late medieval period, Tuscany and eastern England had not dissimilar labour markets, rural property rights, and legal institutions, as well as commercialized and intensive agriculture. Despite similarly sophisticated agricultural technologies and well-developed markets and market institutions, poverty was more widespread in Tuscany at the beginning of the fourteenth century than in eastern England. In addition, urban control over rural hinterlands was much greater in Tuscany than in eastern England.

Mid-fourteenth century crisis

The demographic collapse of the 1350s severely reduced the population densities in eastern England and Tuscany. Tuscany lost about two-thirds of its population between the early fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries because of the plagues (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p. 66). The short-term death rate (1348-9) in eastern England

reached 50 percent or more in some places (Ziegler 1969, p. 231). In both locations, land went out of cultivation, rents, prices, yields and output fell, and labour mobility increased, although the decline appears to have been less severe in Tuscany than in eastern England.

Lower population densities decreased the demand for foodstuffs. In eastern England, rent and grain prices fell along with demand, especially in the late fourteenth century (Postan 1952 p. 205; Bean 1991, p. 575). In Tuscany, fixed, commercial rents and the price of grain also fell after the mid-fourteenth century (e.g. at Santa Maria Impruneta, Herlihy 1968, p.273, at Pistoia, Herlihy 1965, pp. 238-239). Yields and output also fell from their former high levels. In Norfolk in eastern England, yields of wheat fell from 14.9 bushels per acre in 1300 to 12.7 bushels per acre in 1400 (Campbell and Overton 1993, p. 71), and seed yield ratios also fell (Campbell 1991, p. 155). In many places in England, rural producers shifted to stock farming, although this trend was less pronounced in the cereal producing regions of eastern England (Britnell 1991a; Dyer 1991, p. 80) such as Norfolk (Campbell 1991, p. 155).

In addition, fewer tenants could be recruited from this smaller population and land went out of cultivation (Postan 1952, p. 194; Britnell 1991a, p. 56). Labour mobility also increased in both eastern England and Tuscany. Partly as a result of the need to attract and keep workers, wages rose in England (Bean 1991, p. 575). In response, the king's Council issued the Ordinance of Labourers in 1349. This ordinance regulated prices, wages, and conditions of employment for servile workers, in an attempt to freeze wages at low, pre-plague levels. These regulations were in force for several decades, though compliance was far from universal. Enforcement of this legislation by royal officials caused much popular resentment (Fryde and Fryde 1991). Private landlords found it prudent to make concessions to tenants and to offer higher wages.

In Tuscany as well, rural mobility was high and tenants were scarce. Many sharecroppers abandoned their tenancies without repaying their debts to the landlords (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p.119; Giorgetti 1974, p.37; Pinto 1982, pp. 252-329, 423-24). Landlords complained of uncultivated land for which no tenants could be found (Herlihy 1965, p.243; 1968, p.272). Unlike English tenants, however, most Tuscan lessees'

attempts to improve the terms of their contracts and to increase their landlords' contributions to expenses were unsuccessful (Jones 1968, p.224; Jones 1956, p.195). Tenants' obligations may have even increased (Mirri 1959, p. 555). Consequently, the temporary labour shortages after the plague provided little long-term relief for tenants (Jones 1968, p. 206). Perhaps as a result, rural residents, often the wealthier ones, left the countryside for economic opportunities in Florence (Herlihy 1968, p. 266-8; Herlihy and Klapish-Zuber 1985, p. 112-115).

Depopulation also affected taxation. In England, tax returns fell dramatically after the plague. The English Exchequer tried to ignore the crisis and enforce the normal rules of tax collection. Thus, collection of ordinary direct taxes (lay fifteenths and tenths) continued during most of the decade after 1348, based on rates fixed locally in the 1330s. These rates, however, were too high for the remaining population. Many people evaded or underpaid these increasingly unpopular taxes. To alleviate the effect of the high, fixed tax rates, in 1349, the king authorized tax deductions based on fines assessed for breaches in the labour legislation. The conflict between king and populace over tax rates finally erupted in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 (Harris 1975; Fryde 1991; Fryde and Fryde 1991).

In Tuscany, the tax assessment of the Florentine *contado* declined throughout the fourteenth century, from 448,00 pounds in 1289, to 250,000 in 1327-28, to 200,000 in 1329-30, and finally to 150,000 in 1339 (Herlihy 1968, p.266). This decline continued in the next century. Returns (as opposed to the above assessments) fell from 30,000 pounds at the end of the fourteenth century, to 25,000 in the early 1400's, to 16,450 pounds in 1425 (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p. 2). After the 1350s, Florentine elites, unlike English ones, attempted to alleviate the tax burden incumbent upon the smaller rural population. They offered incentives to rural inhabitants to stem immigration to Florence and other cities, which had exacerbated rural labour shortages (Becker 1968, p. 95-114; Jones 1968, p. 233; Molho 1971, pp. 27-37; Osheim 1976, p. 340-344). The tax reform of 1427, the introduction of direct taxation based on assets (the *Catasto*), was also an attempt to reduce the rural tax burden. The prudence of the Florentine elite meant there was no rural uprising to match the English peasants' revolt at this time.

Late fourteenth century divergence

Land consolidation in eastern England and Tuscany. Underpopulation in both eastern England and Tuscany led to land consolidation and increased farm size. In eastern England, peasants benefited from these developments, in sharp contrast to Tuscany, where Florentines were the primary beneficiaries.

In Tuscany, land consolidation usually occurred when Florentines and other urbanites purchased land. For example, over the course of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century, at Santa Maria Impruneta, urban churches and families owned more and more land, while local residents owned less and less. There was also a decrease in the number and wealth of the fixed-term lessees and independent peasants (Herlihy 1968, p.274). By the fifteenth century, wealthy urban landlords owned a large percentage of land in many rural communities (Jones 1968, pp. 230-231). Investment during this period of time spurred land reclamation (Cipolla 1949, p.182), which was accompanied by rural development. At least some landlords provided capital investments for their farms or tenants, such as oxen, cash advances, or physical improvements (buildings, walls, ditches) to increase productivity (Emigh 1996). This urban investment helped to maintain high yields and outputs in rural Tuscany.

In much of western Europe, depopulation generally improved the conditions of the peasantry and shifted the relative balance of power away from the landlords. In contrast, demographic collapse in Tuscany did not dramatically improve rural life. Although a few rural inhabitants benefited from urban investment and a smaller rural population, rural poverty remained widespread (Mazzi and Raveggi 1983, pp. 37-73). In fact, rural population decline may have facilitated the expansion of Florentine control (Epstein 1991, pp. 19-21). Even when labour shortages benefited sharecroppers, the conditions of smallholders did not improve.

In eastern England, peasants were the primary beneficiaries of land availability: for them it was a golden age. After the plague, the great landlords began to dismantle and to lease their demesne farms. They consequently had little desire to incorporate former tenants' lands into

their demesnes. Instead, their primary concern was to find workers and to obtain rental income. They offered favourable terms to any takers. If they did not, they were unable to find tenants (Du Boulay 1965). The remaining peasants capitalized on the favourable prices by leasing or purchasing land to build consolidated farms. Peasants obtained land from vacant customary and free holdings, and also leased demesne land.

Consequently, the number of small farms in eastern England dwindled at this time. For example, Campbell (1980) notes how land sales and transferrals increased dramatically on manors at Martham in eastern Norfolk — one of the most densely populated regions in late medieval England — at the end of the fourteenth century. In 1292, over 60% of all customary holdings at Martham were less than 2 acres. Two hundred years later, in 1497, only 18% of all farms were that small, and 15% of the farms had more than 18 acres. These larger farms now accounted for nearly half the total land area (Campbell 1980, p. 190). Less is known about the status of freehold farms in the late medieval period, because information about them is not available from manorial records. Probate inventories (beginning in the late sixteenth century) record farm sizes at the farmers' deaths. These inventories indicate that substantial yeomen commonly held large farms and that the size of holdings was rising steadily (Campbell and Overton 1993, p. 53). If the same pattern extends backwards to the late medieval period, the overall situation of the peasantry was much better than in the thirteenth century.

Spread of sharecropping in Tuscany. After the 1350s, therefore, Tuscany and eastern England differed with respect to patterns of landownership. In addition, striking differences in tenurial arrangements emerged; while fixed-term demesne leasing spread in eastern England, sharecropping spread in Tuscany.

These tenurial transformations began in Tuscany before 1350. For example, the records of the monastery of Vallombrosa for 1250 to 1350 contain numerous share-leases and land sales (aimed at consolidation) contracted by rural residents (Jones 1968, p. 229). The plagues may have facilitated sharecropping's spread (Jones 1968). Labour shortages forced some landlords to convert high, fixed rents, to flexible share rents to

retain tenants (Herlihy 1965, p.243). For example, at Santa Maria Impruneta, before the 1350s, fixed-term lessees, who provided capital inputs to the subletters working the land, were common. After the plague, sharecroppers replaced fixed-term lessees, who virtually disappeared by 1427. Landlords increasingly leased property directly to labourers on share terms (Herlihy 1968, p. 270-275). In some locations, smallholders and customary tenants became sharecroppers (Jones 1971, p.516).

Sharecropping may have been an improvement over smallholding for some rural inhabitants. The sharecroppers' half of the produce from large, partially consolidated farms, may have provided more income than the entire yield from smallholders' modest, scattered plots (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p. 240; Klapisch and Demonet 1975, p. 425). In some communities, sharecropping was much more productive than smallholding. Share-tenancy was efficient because landlords made capital improvements to their properties, provided working capital to tenants in the form of cash and livestock, changed cropping patterns, and cultivated beans that increased the fertility of the soil. Increases in productivity were not solely the result of increasing the labour intensity of agricultural production, but increasing the productivity of labour as well (Emigh 1996). However, sharecropping was a mixed blessing. Tuscan share-leases rarely lasted more than five years and the threat of eviction was omnipresent. Leases usually included loans of cash or livestock. Although monetary infusions were probably welcome, they also created ties of dependence absent from the English countryside (Jones 1956, p. 195; Jones 1968, p. 234-241; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p. 118-120; Kotel'nikova 1974).

Sharecropping continued to spread in fifteenth-century Tuscany. In 1427, 56.6% of rural families were smallholders (they may have leased a few, additional plots), 18.9% were sharecroppers, and 4.3% were fixed-term lessees (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, pp. 115-7). Most fixed-term-lessees resided in a belt adjacent to Florence; most sharecroppers lived relatively near Florence, just beyond the fixed-term lessees (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1981, 1985, p.117). Herlihy and Klapish-Zuber's evidence shows how sharecropping spread between 1427 and 1469 in the four rural quarters of the Florentine *contado* (1985, p. 117- 118). In

Santo Spirito, the percentage of sharecropping families was 33.7 in 1427 and 39.3 in 1469; in Santa Croce, it was 25.7 in 1427 and 29.3 in 1469; in Santa Maria Novella, it was 22.4 in 1427 and 32.4 in 1469; and in San Giovanni, it was 19.1 in 1427 and 18.5 in 1469. If the largest farms were worked by sharecroppers of Florentine landlords, then these figures, based on a percentage of households, not a percentage of arable land, may understate the geographical extent of share-tenancy.

Rise of tenant farming and yeomanry in eastern England. In eastern England at the same time, fixed-term leasing became the most common tenurial arrangement on former demesne lands of manorial lords. Tenant farmers were predominantly yeomen, although they also included customary tenants, merchants, and even landed gentry. At the same time, customary lands in eastern England gradually became copyhold lands. These were aspects of a general shift towards contractual land tenure.

At first, demesne land was leased piecemeal (in 60 to 80 acre blocks), for short time periods. Increasingly, however, land was leased in larger blocks, for longer time periods. For example, in the Archbishop of Canterbury's fifteenth-century estates in southeast England (a total of about forty manorial demesnes), Du Boulay (1965) found farms of 100-500 acres leased for 5-12 years. By the early sixteenth century, leases were longer, usually at least 10-15 years, and farms were larger. For example, one family of yeoman farmers, the Knatchbulls, leased nearly 2,000 acres from the archbishop. Many other tenant farmers and their descendants lived in the area for long periods of time — even to this day.

In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, lessees of demesne lands were typically customary tenants and yeomen, although some were merchants and gentlemen (who owned considerable property). For example, on the Archbishop of Canterbury's land described above, between 1502 and 1532, about a half of the lessees were yeomen or customary tenants, about a third were gentlemen, and a few were London merchants. Yeomen (like the Knatchbulls) held the largest and most expensive leases. However, all the lessees were generally able to fulfil their contracts without falling substantially behind in their payments at any time in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. They were quite

comfortable, and had plenty of cash and household furnishings. Leases required that the arable land be well maintained; some specified particular agricultural techniques or capital improvements. Farmers were required to live on the leased land and sub-leasing was forbidden. In most cases, these terms were fulfilled. In contrast to Tuscany, where sharecropping was a mixed blessing, in eastern England, leasing was apparently a mutually beneficial arrangement.

In the fifteenth century, customary tenants continued to work customary manorial land. Their rents comprised a substantial proportion of the manor's income (60% on the manors of the Archbishop of Canterbury- see Du Boulay, p. 446). However, the nature of customary tenures changed. By 1450, almost all customary tenants in eastern England were copyholders (i.e. they owned a copy of the terms of their tenancy as entered in the manorial court roll). Although copyhold tenancy remained a feudal legacy, it was more contractual than customary tenancy. In later centuries, copyholds for life, and eventually contractual leases, replaced hereditary copyholds (Hoyle 1990). Unlike in other parts of England, in eastern England changes in tenure were rarely accomplished by evicting customary tenants: there are few documented eviction cases in the fifteenth and later centuries (Britnell 1991a; Mate 1991). Such evictions occurred more commonly in the English midland plain (Dyer 1991, p. 88).

In sum, by the fifteenth century, conditions for almost all peasants in eastern England had improved. Some acquired or leased large farms from the demesnes; they were becoming members of the landed gentry. Customary tenures (of which there were already comparatively few in eastern England) became more contractual in nature. In Tuscany, sharecropping may have improved the material fortunes of share-tenants able to secure a lease from wealthy Florentines, but this form of land tenure created an agricultural sector that depended on urban investment.

Changes in taxation. Taxation systems also diverged in England and Tuscany at this time. Falling tax assessments in conjunction with greater state expenses from warfare prompted tax revisions and attempts to raise money through loans and debasement. Florentines were generally more successful in increasing taxes than the English. Pre-plague English tax

codes remained in effect throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and forced loans and debasement occurred only infrequently. Higher taxes in Tuscany contributed to the relative impoverishment of rural Tuscans compared to their English counterparts.

Before 1427, Florentines raised money through direct taxes imposed on the *contado* and subject cities; excise taxes (*gabelle*) on consumer goods; and forced loans imposed on urban residents (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985; Molho 1971, p.22). Direct taxes were based on a total assessment distributed among rural residents (Molho 1971, pp. 23-45). *Gabelle* were imposed on goods entering Florence, salt, contracts, retail wine sales, and other goods (de la Roncière 1968; Molho 1971, pp. 3,45-59). Forced loans were imposed on Florentines, in proportion to their wealth (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p.2-3). By 1338, the *gabelle* provided three-quarters of the government's revenue. The most remunerative was the tariff collected on goods entering Florence. The *gabelle* and direct taxes usually sufficed for ordinary expenses, but rarely for war.

The *contado's* tax assessment continued to fall in the fifteenth century (see above for the fourteenth century). In 1404, there were 40,711 households in the *contado* and their patrimonies were valued at 3,300,358 florins. In 1414, the respective numbers were 36,333 households and 2,362,522 florins (Molho 1971, p.26). Thus, the average patrimony per household was about eighty-one florins in 1404 and about sixty-five florins in 1414 (Molho 1971, pp. 26-27). In 1427, 26,681 households in the *contado* (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p. 65) received an assessment of 1,681,500 florins (Molho 1971, p.27). The average patrimony, therefore, was about sixty-three florins. Although these figures are not strictly comparable, they suggest a decrease in the number of households, the average patrimony, and the absolute size of the tax assessment (despite an increase in the *contado's* geographical size).⁵

Declines in tax revenues arrived simultaneously with demands for increased revenue. During the mid-fourteenth century, the Florentines

⁵ As sharecropping spread, the rural tax yield declined, because sharecroppers had few taxable assets. Thus, falling tax revenues may reflect either tenurial transformations or rising rural poverty.

began to build a territorial state (Becker 1968, p. 180-188) and the ongoing Milanese war was expensive. Existing methods of taxation were insufficient, and in 1427, a new system of direct taxation based on a census, the *Catasto*, was implemented (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985; Molho 1971, p.80-87). The *Catasto* assessed the amount owed by households when the government imposed a loan or tax. Urban and rural assessments were based on the value of each household's assets, after subtracting allowable deductions. Adult males were also subject to a nominal head tax. Florentines' allowable deductions were much larger than rural inhabitants', although these deductions were partially offset by the higher urban tax rate (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p. 18-19). For most urban and rural households, the value of land was calculated by capitalizing (at seven percent) the monetary value of the agricultural yield. Only half the yield of individuals who worked their own property (or used wage labourers) was capitalized. In some rural regions, the tax officials used the declared value of the property instead of capitalizing the yield. The value of the assets, after the subtraction of allowable deductions, was taxed at a fixed percent.

In 1429, the Florentine government imposed a special tax to be collected from all the households and entities included in the assessment (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p.20). This was apparently the only time the Florentine government attempted to collect a uniform tax over all its territory (Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p.20). Still, new *Catasti* were enacted and formed the basis for fairly regular assessment, direct taxation, and forced loans even though later surveys were less comprehensive and systematic than the hallmark *Catasto* of 1427. *Catasti*, in various degrees of completeness, were taken in 1430, 1433, 1442, 1451, 1457, 1470, and 1480 (Conti 1966, p. 73-79; De Roover 1963, p.24). A one-half percent tax was imposed and collected as necessary; sometimes it was assessed several times a year (De Roover 1963, p.27; Molho 1971, pp. 91-92). In 1481, taxation became more progressive when a graduated scale was adopted (De Roover 1963, pp. 27-28).

In England, the outbreak of the Hundred Years War with France in the fourteenth century similarly increased the need for revenues. At the same time, the population decline caused by the mid-century plagues

reduced the tax base. Thus, the English crown and the Florentine government faced similar financial problems. English solutions were also similar to Tuscan ones: loans and new taxes. Edward III borrowed heavily from the Bardi and Peruzzi of Florence from the beginning of his reign until the 1340s when both firms collapsed, primarily because he owed them about 180,000 pounds (Brown, A. L. 1989, p. 81).

Like the Florentines, English kings relied heavily on indirect taxes, called customs and subsidies. They were the most important source of royal income in the early fourteenth century (Brown, A. L. 1989, p. 65). By 1337, the wool subsidy provided the largest revenues. Until the seventeenth century, these customs and subsidies were the only regular and permanent taxes (Brown, A. L. 1989; Fryde 1991). However, revenue from these taxes could fluctuate, as production often ceased when the commodity's market price fell too low. In the latter half of the fourteenth century, as the tax on the export of wool rose, production declined (Postan 1952, p.193; Brown, A. L. 1989, p. 65). Similarly, in Tuscany, production and trade stagnated when the gate tariffs were raised (Molho 1971, p. 57). The Florentine government may have collected indirect taxes more successfully than the English crown, because the systematic collection of tariffs at the Florentine cities' gates was probably simpler than the collection of indirect taxes from major English markets scattered throughout the countryside.

In England, the crown's need for revenue remained acute. As in Tuscany, the government experimented with new taxes throughout the fourteenth century. The primary direct tax, the tax on movables, had been levied on movable property and income of free men intermittently from the thirteenth century (Harris 1975, p. 17). In the early fourteenth century, the direct tax had become common. There were fourteen grants of direct taxes between 1297 and 1337 (Harris 1975, p. 79). By 1334, taxes had become standardized: a fifteenth of assessed wealth in the shires and a tenth in the towns. Regular taxation was necessary to fund the ongoing war with France (Fryde 1970a). With the cessation of hostilities in the decade of the 1360s, no direct taxation was sought or granted (Harris 1975, p. 467). When the war resumed in 1369, there was another call for direct taxation. However, the smaller population could not support the

same assessment and the government collected insufficient revenues. The attempted implementation of a poll tax, based on people not wealth, was a disaster (Fryde 1991). The crown's attempt to combat massive evasion and enforce collection provoked the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. The revolt was centred in eastern England, where there were high concentrations of free peasants, who were most affected by the new tax. Peasant armies from Kent and East Anglia converged on London. The crown was not toppled, the Revolt was put down, and the leaders were executed. Still, the incident frightened the central administration, who consequently abandoned tax experimentation. The 1334 assessment on movables, with minor modifications, was used until the early seventeenth century (Fryde 1991; Fryde and Fryde 1991). Since assessments were fixed locally, taxes became proportionately less burdensome for rural inhabitants over time. In addition, unlike in Tuscany, collection remained an occasional event.

Taxes on movables fell on all free men, noble and nonnoble alike, although not on customary tenants. The new men farming the demesnes after the fourteenth century paid these taxes on movables, although more important landowners usually managed to exempt themselves (Fryde 1991). Thus, prosperous tenant farmers and the landed gentry shouldered most of the rural tax burden. The landed gentry, who assumed town seats in parliament in the fifteenth century, were also the most vocal parliamentary tax opponents. In the first parliament of Henry VI in 1422, the gentry in the commons outnumbered members of the burgess class by about four to three. In the parliaments of Edward IV (1461-1483), landowners comprised at least two-thirds of the house of (Fryde 1970b, p. 7). This trend continued.

In pre-fourteenth century England, the government on occasion debased the coinage to raise revenues, by reducing either the amount or fineness of the precious metal in the currency. Such debasement constitutes an extra tax on people who use money, because their cash holdings decline in value (Spufford 1965; Sussman 1993). By the fourteenth century, however, debasement was used infrequently in England. Edward III debased the coinage in 1335 with parliamentary approval for the first time in 60 years (Spufford 1965, p. 123). In 1344 and 1351, Edward III again

reduced the value of the coinage, this time without parliamentary consent. This created a great outcry, and in 1352, parliament decreed that changes in the coinage could occur only with their expressed consent. Thereafter, debasement was a rare event, occurring again most notably during the reign of Henry VIII in the sixteenth century. The value of the pound sterling was finally fixed at four ounces of silver in 1560-1 by Elizabeth I and remained unchanged until the early twentieth century (Braudel 1984, p. 356). This monetary stability was a remarkable achievement, compared to the continental situation.

The Florentine government could not use debasement to raise revenues, although devaluation was still common. The Florentine mint was not operated directly by the government. The state raised revenues by taxing the mint, so it did not benefit directly from a difference between the real and face value of the coinage. However, when the price of metal rose or inflation reduced the currency's value, the metallic content became more valuable than the coins. Under these conditions, the mint received no metal, could not produce coins, and the government lost revenue. Thus, the value of the coinage in relation to its metallic content was occasionally changed so as to maintain the supply of metal for the mint (Cipolla 1982). Through such devaluation and inflation, the silver coinage (the most commonly used currency in the city and country) fell in value with respect to the gold currency throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (De Roover 1963, p. 373). When the silver money was devalued, wealthy merchants benefited, because they were able to collect old currency for recoinage at the mint. A rise in the value of the gold florin usually followed the silver currency's devaluation. Again, merchants benefited, because they usually kept accounts in gold florins. The Wool and Silk Guilds benefited from devaluations that reduced real wages (De Roover 1963, p. 185). Rural inhabitants and manual workers were probably adversely affected by these devaluations.

In sum, the English crown and the Florentine government attempted to raise revenue by increasing the level and frequency of taxation in response to declining tax revenues and war-related financial needs. The Florentines, however, were more successful in this. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, Tuscan rural inhabitants faced heavier and more

frequent taxation than their English counterparts, as well as a more frequently devalued currency.

Explanations of the Divergence

As we have shown, by the beginning of the fifteenth century, Tuscany was becoming a region of sharecroppers, while eastern England saw the rise of leasing and other contractual landholding arrangements (not including sharecropping). Urban control over rural regions and agricultural production was tighter in Tuscany. In eastern England, the peasantry's condition improved significantly. In Tuscany, some sharecroppers benefited from Florentine investment, but the rural economy as a whole showed no signs of dramatic improvement. Given the numerous similarities in these regions before the mid-fourteenth century (in rural property rights, taxation, labour markets, legal rights, and agricultural productivity), what explains this divergence?

Sharecropping in western Europe is historically associated with the presence of a relatively poor cultivating class (Cooper 1985, p. 146; Braudel 1982, p. 506). Landlords provide cultivators with capital, equipment, and land. Share-rents distribute harvest-related risks between the landlord and tenant, unlike fixed-term leasing where a poor harvest does not lower the rent due. Although it is difficult to assess rural poverty, it was probably more prevalent in Tuscany than in eastern England in the late fourteenth century. Why was rural poverty more common in Tuscany than in eastern England? In particular, why were the Tuscan peasantry unable to take advantage of the population decline of the mid-fourteenth century to improve their economic position, as were their counterparts in eastern England? In Tuscany, rural conditions did not improve, even though the rural labour supply declined and land availability increased there after the plagues, as in eastern England. Furthermore, in Tuscany, greater urbanization maintained the demand for agricultural products and should have created even more economic opportunities for agriculturalists. Yet, instead of conditions improving for the peasantry, the opposite appears to have occurred (see above for figures on the declining value of the average patrimony in Tuscany at this time).

As we have shown, however, there were two important differences between pre-plague eastern England and Tuscany, first, urbanization, and second, urban control over product markets. These differences persisted after the plagues. In Tuscany population decline did not alter the pattern of urban domination. The greater wealth, as well as political and economic power of Florentines, allowed them to control rural regions. Sharecropping spread as a result of this pattern of urban domination, because urban landlords used this form of tenancy to lower their transaction costs of land management and labour supervision (Emigh 1997). Sharecropping may have benefited some rural inhabitants and increased agricultural output on some farms, but it did not create autonomous rural growth, because sharecropping's productivity was dependent on urban inputs. Urbanites continued to distort product markets for agricultural goods, because of continued high demand and inadequate food supplies. Although towns in England also restricted product markets by monopolizing trading privileges, the imperfections in product markets for agricultural goods were greater (by orders of magnitude) in Tuscany than in England (Britnell 1991b, p. 32). Restraints on trade in agricultural commodities, such as limitations on markets and requisitioning of grain, disproportionately penalized and harmed rural smallholders in Tuscany, who were unambiguously and negatively affected by such restrictions. They decreased incentives for agricultural production by rural smallholders, and increased transaction costs by promoting uncertainty. In contrast, Florentines and sharecroppers partially benefited from urban dominance, as these market imperfections helped to increase the incomes of already wealthy Florentines. As noted earlier, Tuscan courts may have been biased towards Florentines and against rural Tuscans.

In addition, in Tuscany profits from urban manufacturing were higher than agricultural ones (Goldthwaite 1968, p. 246-251; Jones 1969, p. 35-38; Martines 1963, p. 35-37) because of the restrictions in product markets for agricultural goods and because urban manufacturing focused, to a large extent, on luxury commodities. Trade in luxury goods was very profitable, but risky. Agricultural holdings diversified Florentines' investment portfolios: profits were lower in agriculture (partly because

of regulation), but more secure (Goldthwaite 1980, p. 40). Because profits from urban manufacturing were higher than agriculture ones, wealthy urbanites could always outbid rural inhabitants in the land market. In 1427, Florentines comprised fourteen percent of the Tuscan population, but held sixty-five percent of the total taxable wealth (Epstein 1991, p.31; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985, p.94-100; for information about Florentine wealth, see also Goldsmith 1987, pp. 147-156). Thus, smallholders had little chance of competing in the land market with Florentines. Furthermore, where proximity to Florence made agriculture highly profitable, urbanites' land purchases increased property prices beyond what smallholders could afford. The few advantages that the cultivating class gleaned from the availability of land and the shortage of labour did not offset Florentines' advantages in the land market. Even relatively wealthy rural Tuscans rarely purchased land in regions where Florentine landowners predominated.

Other institutional arrangements in factor markets (land and labour), and capital markets are important in determining economic trajectories (North and Thomas 1973, p. 92; see also North 1990). Yet as we have illustrated, land, labour, and capital markets were subject to relatively few restrictions in either fourteenth-century eastern England or Tuscany. Feudal restriction in land and labour markets had been minimal for a long time in both places. Most workers in both regions could relocate to seek the highest wages or best conditions. Land was privatized, and could be bought and sold freely. Furthermore, private property rights in land and other assets were protected legally in both eastern England and Tuscany. (Although, as mentioned above, property rights may have been less secure in Tuscany because of the lack of an unbiased judiciary.) In terms of capital markets, fourteenth-century rural Tuscans had access to more sophisticated financial institutions (offering access to capital and credit) than their English counterparts. Thus institutional distortions of product markets were more important than distortions in factor or capital markets in giving Florentines their comparative advantage.

In eastern England the great landlords of the late medieval period were typically not urbanites. Over time, there were even fewer urban landlords (Brown, A. L. 1989; Britnell 1991b, p. 28). The great landlords

in England tended to be lay and ecclesiastical lords, while urbanites and merchants owned sizeable holdings only in the immediate vicinity of cities and towns. Away from the urban regions, agriculture was much less profitable than trade, which attracted most of the urbanites' capital. Consequently, urban investment in the countryside was minimal. In addition, after the population decline of the 1350s, the traditional landlords lost interest in farming their own large land holdings. Thus, there was ample land (both for sale and lease) to support the emergence of a relatively prosperous, independent peasantry.

Urban domination in Tuscany, coupled with Florentine expansionism, also contributed to the divergence in taxation systems. This, in turn, had implications for agrarian change in eastern England and Tuscany. The levels of taxation paid by rural producers (both absolute levels and as a proportion of individual incomes) became comparatively higher in Tuscany than in England. While indirect taxes remained common in both places, in England after the fourteenth century direct taxes continued to be levied at the low (pre-1350) rate. They were also levied comparatively infrequently. In Tuscany, in contrast, by the early fifteenth century direct taxes were both heavy and frequent. Thus, comparatively speaking, English cultivators paid fewer taxes than Tuscan ones.⁴ Higher taxation, in turn, contributed to the relative impoverishment of rural Tuscans, thus exacerbating their inability to accumulate land and resources.

Urban and rural Tuscans were taxed heavily (both directly and indirectly). However, the structure of *Catasto*-based direct taxation may also have had consequences for agrarian change in Tuscany. Because *Catasto* taxes were based on assets, lessees — either share or fixed — paid no direct taxes on their agricultural income from leased property. Furthermore, rural landowners sometimes paid proportionally more direct tax on their rural holdings than Florentines paid on their rural properties, because urbanites were allowed more deductions, lowering their overall tax liability (this was partially offset by a higher urban tax rate). Because

⁴ We emphasize our comparative point here. We do not wish to enter into the large historical debates about the particular effects of different tax policies on short-term economic upswings or recessions in either Tuscany or England.

share-tenants paid few taxes, the *Catasto* may have encouraged the spread of sharecropping. Of course, it is unlikely that smallholders actually sold land because of tax incentives, because of the numerous advantages of land ownership. Where possible, wealthy rural inhabitants purchased land. However, taxation based on assets may have offered incentives for cultivators to sharecrop, even if they retained their own holdings. Certainly, the heavy tax burden of smallholders increased overall rural debt and contributed to smallholder's selling or pawning their land (e.g. Herlihy 1968:267). In addition, the devaluation of the silver currency may also have promoted the shift toward rents in kind and sharecropping in Tuscany, where the use of money in general declined after the fourteenth century. In England, devaluation occurred rarely. Despite a coin shortage similar to the one in Tuscany (Britnell 1993), the use of money in England declined little over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and rents in kind did not increase. Thus, the sounder English coinage may have facilitated the rise of fixed term leasing and money rents.

Many authors have linked the spread of sharecropping to rural decline, arguing that urban domination and sharecropping were linked and sharecropping was a relatively unproductive form of agricultural production (Epstein 1991). This argument suggests that sharecropping decreased productivity and investment in agriculture. In contrast, we argue that sharecropping did benefit some rural cultivators. It increased agricultural productivity and some rural incomes. Florentines did invest in sharecropping, and the spread of sharecropping was driven by urban domination. However, urban involvement benefited Florentines and some sharecroppers at the expense of smallholders.

In sum, higher urbanization, higher profits in urban manufacturing, urban distortion of product markets and domination of the land market, higher taxation, the nature of taxation, and the lack of reliable currency helped promote sharecropping and inhibited the rise of peasant ownership and fixed-term leasing in Tuscany. All of this reduced incentives for agricultural production by rural small holders, while at the same time enriching a few sharecroppers. These conditions did not promote the formation of a well-to-do, independent rural landed class. Indeed, many wealthy rural residents moved to Florence, increasing the proportion of

rural assets under urban control. In eastern England, on the other hand, lower urbanization, less urban control, absolutely lower levels of taxes, tax policies which did not provide a disincentive for land ownership, and a relatively sound currency, promoted both the rise of fixed-term leasing and the accumulation of landholdings by the cultivating class.

Consequences (XVIth-XVIIIth centuries)

In eastern England in the post-plague era, ordinary rural inhabitants — peasants, customary tenants, and freeholders — accumulated land. With the growth of markets for agricultural commodities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, farming and land accumulation became a route of upward mobility. Wealthy tenant farmers increased the size of their leased properties and the length of their leases and finally purchased their own land. They bequeathed it to their children, whose descendants farmed the same properties and often accumulated more. Thus wealthy tenant farmers became yeoman farmers, and sometimes, a landed elite. For example, elite families, such as the Knatchbulls in sixteenth century Kent, can be traced to tenant farmers in the region two centuries earlier. Finally, the Knatchbulls became Lords Brabourne in 1880, when they possessed over 4,000 acres in Kent (Du Boulay 1965, p. 453). The same phenomenon occurred all over eastern England (e.g. Morceton 1992).

This process has been referred to as the “rise of the gentry”. Combined with representation in parliament, this class greatly influenced future English developments. As Tawney once noted, the sixteenth century parliament was essentially a “committee of landlords.” Their wealth stemmed primarily from agriculture, not from urban manufacturing or luxury trade, and they strove to protect their agricultural interests. The Corn laws (passed periodically over the early modern period) are the best example of such self-serving legislation. The Corn laws created a sliding tax scale which amounted to a cap on the price of grain when English grain prices were high, and protection from imports when English grain prices were low (Riches 1967, p. 13; Bates 1988, p. 512; Beckett 1990). The corn laws of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also encouraged exports by offering bounties on grain exported overseas,

and this created additional incentives for agricultural production (Chambers and Mingay 1966; Coleman 1977). In contrast to Tuscany, agricultural productivity in eastern England continued to rise over subsequent centuries. Increased agricultural productivity, in turn, supported a general shift from agriculture to industry and non-agricultural occupations, and an overall increase in the standard of living. This, in turn, provided an important basis for industrialization and continued economic development.

This was not the case in Tuscany. Conditions in Tuscany precluded the rise of either a rural landed gentry or yeoman class. Instead, the system of urban landlords and rural sharecroppers was maintained, linking the fortunes of the rural and urban economy (Aymard 1982; Brown 1989a; Braudel 1982, p. 294; Malanima 1982). While Florentine manufacturing flourished, urban landlords funnelled profits to rural holdings. They bought land, invested in agriculture, and improved productivity. They had strong incentives to do so. Prices for agricultural commodities remained high (grain prices were again as high in 1480 as they had been in 1380; Goldthwaite 1975) and profits from agriculture could be substantial. Yet in later years, the profits from Florentine manufacturing declined. As a consequence, Florentine landlords invested less in agriculture. Some urban landlords, content with a small but stable agricultural income, became country gentlemen.⁵ This was probably the result of a variety of conditions, including diminished capital for investment and the overall contraction of the Florentine economy. Continued urban control of the grain market also kept agricultural profits lower than they might otherwise have been. As a result, agricultural productivity tapered off. The most dynamic rural sector in the sixteenth century seems to have been sericulture (silkworm- breeding). This development reinforced the relations of urban and rural dependence because the raw materials from the countryside were finished in the city (Brown 1989b, p. 776, 1989b, p. 108, Malanima 1982).

⁵ The retreat from entrepreneurial activities is discussed in the debate over "the return to the land" for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Herlihy 1981) and over "refeudalization" for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Romano 1974; Jones 1978; Cipolla 1970).

Although the absolute prosperity of Tuscan landlords and their investment in agriculture declined, urbanites maintained their comparative advantage over the impoverished peasantry. Unlike in eastern England a few hundred years earlier, rural inhabitants rarely purchased land. Instead, they remained sharecroppers under less favourable conditions. Farms were large and benefited from economies of scale, but productivity was lower than in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Unfavourable sharecropping terms, heavy taxes, urban control of agricultural markets, and periodic warfare maintained the poverty of the cultivating class and perpetuated sharecropping, which became more subsistence-oriented. Although the population grew during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Tuscany, agricultural productivity declined. By the eighteenth century, Tuscan rural prosperity had disappeared (Aymard 1982; Zangheri 1969; Braudel 1982).

Sharecropping itself, however, was not responsible for the decline of Tuscan rural prosperity. The spread of sharecropping coincided with high agricultural productivity in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Nor did sharecropping prevent agricultural investment or the adoption of innovative agricultural techniques. In fact, the techniques commonly used in both eastern England and Tuscany eventually produced the agricultural revolution (Beckett 1990). Nor was a heavy reliance on labour inputs in agriculture (often associated with sharecropping) the ultimate cause of the Tuscan decline, as some have argued (Epstein 1991; Giorgetti 1974; Romano 1974). In both eastern England and Tuscany, changes in agricultural production (crops and cropping practices, simple capital inputs) were primarily labour intensive. The methods of increasing agricultural productivity that laid the foundation for the continued development of rural productivity in eastern England, cannot have prevented its rise in Tuscany.

Conclusion

In the early fourteenth century, both eastern England and Tuscany had dense populations, relatively free labour and land markets, and highly productive rural economies. Yet over the course of the next few centuries,

the fortunes of these two rural sectors diverged widely. In eastern England, fixed-term leasing spread, a yeoman and gentry class emerged, and agricultural productivity increased. In Tuscany, a system of urban landlords and rural sharecroppers was established, and rural productivity declined.

In this paper, we traced this divergence to the development of a relatively autonomous rural sector in eastern England. In Tuscany, the rural sector remained closely tied to urban fortunes. A variety of conditions, stemming from greater urbanization and Florentine domination, contributed to this outcome. First, Florentines were able to dominate the Tuscan land market. Second, urbanites regulated prices of, and trade in, agricultural commodities. Third, taxation was heavy and the currency devalued, which contributed to rural impoverishment. Finally, *Catasto*-based taxation may have encouraged sharecropping. Consequently, few rural Tuscans accumulated land or profited from agriculture. These conditions promoted the spread of sharecropping and prevented the rise of an independent peasantry and/or landowning rural gentry. In eastern England, on the other hand, a smaller urban sector exerted much less influence on the countryside. Unlike in Tuscany, the major landowners in eastern England were not usually urbanites. Nor were urbanites interested in monopolizing available land. There was less regulation of trade and prices, little debasement of the coinage, and comparatively lower levels of taxation. Combined with the increased availability of land in the late medieval period, this promoted the growth of a substantial peasantry and yeoman class and an independent rural sector, resulting in the continued development of agriculture.

These findings have several implications for various theoretical perspectives on development. With regards to world systems theory, the comparison of eastern England and Tuscany shows how local dynamics shape the character of the world economy. For example, Tuscan decline was partially a consequence of taxation policies and urban monopolies generated locally. We also found little support for the argument that sharecropping was the cause of Tuscan decline. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the spread of sharecropping did not hinder the growth of an exceptionally productive rural sector in Tuscany. Instead,

institutional conditions surrounding sharecropping were important, as institutionalists argue (North and Thomas 1973; North 1990; Nee and Sijn 1990; Hopcroft 1998). Here, however, we found that institutions influencing capital, land and labour markets were less important. In fact, banking services and credit facilities were better developed in fifteenth-century Tuscany than in eastern England. There were few institutional differences in land and labour markets, although there was probably more support for property rights of rural-dwellers in England than in Tuscany.

Instead, institutional distortions in product markets for agricultural goods and the restrictions on the movements and prices of foodstuffs were important. These lowered agricultural profits, which hurt rural producers. Higher profits from urban manufacturing and the nature of taxation reinforced this tendency, giving urbanites a comparative advantage in the land market. Thus, Florentines, not rural inhabitants, bought land and took advantage of lower, but more secure agricultural profits. All this effectively prevented the emergence of an autonomous and enterprising rural sector in Tuscany. In eastern England, in contrast, such conditions were absent. Paradoxically it was the less urbanized economy which proved most congenial to enduring economic development.

Thus, the best explanation for the decline of agrarian capitalism in Tuscany and its rise in eastern England lies ultimately in the exploitative nature of urban and rural relations, as both neo-institutionalists and neo-Marxists have suggested (Bates 1980, 1989; Wrigley 1985; Jones 1988; Lipton 1977; Davis 1980; Gugler 1982; London and Smith 1988; McIntyre 1992). The evidence presented here shows how, in certain empirical instances, there can be little disagreement between these disparate theoretical approaches. Furthermore, the evidence presented here calls into question the traditional Weberian claim that powerful, autonomous towns played a critical role in the development of western capitalism (Chirot 1985, pp. 184, 188; Weber 1978). Rather, here we have shown how in the case of Tuscany the power of such towns could inhibit, rather than promote, long-term economic development. Once again there is evidence that economic development in England took quite a different course to development on the continent. As others have argued (c.f. Sayer 1992), this exceptionalism may have been the source of its early success.

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