# Growth and Peasant Labour in the 10th-13th Centuries. Between Constraint, Consent and Economic Mechanisms

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Analysis of the connections between medieval growth and peasant labour calls for some preliminary considerations regarding the *seigneurie*'s place and part in economic life, the tools available to us for comprehending medieval economic life, and the notion of labour itself in a medieval context.[1] Can we simply accept the economists' definition, which makes labour a factor of production like land and capital? Jacques Le Goff pointed out that there is no medieval word equivalent to our modern idea of labour, that is, a factor that can be numerically measured and described, and whose value is determined in monetary terms. Whether the unbounded use of categories and concepts taken from economics is compatible with the medieval *seigneurie* as a means of extracting product and controlling men remains open to question. This study aims, accordingly, to investigate the pertinence of certain aspects of neo-institutionalist approaches to issues relating to growth, particularly through the lens of seigniorial constraints.

Until the 1990s, the *seigneurie* was thought to be a universal European structure that combined property rights and a series of rights of lordship and applied them to a specific area of land, governed either by an individual or by an institution. The lord, in addition to being the single owner of the land, wielded military and

[1] Le Goff, 1983.

legal power and thus levied taxes, thereby fashioning his rights into sources of revenue. Much like land, the *seigneurie* was exploited economically and transmitted by inheritance.[2]

This definition has its uses, but it makes out the *seigneurie* to be an institution that bonded and oppressed peasants by extracting most of their product for the lord's benefit. It thus appears to have been, first and foremost, an extremely efficient tool with which to extract an income, but also – as an institution – capable of protecting individuals and guaranteeing certain forms of property rights regarding land and its fruits. It was, as Georges Duby put it, a physical place where a community of peace existed, a place where conflicts could be settled and legal rights could be defined and guaranteed. Despite the measure of oppression and violence bound up with it, the seigneurie ensured some stability within human relationships. The latter aspect especially has received special attention from economists, in particular those conventionally labelled "neo-institutionalists".

The rights exerted over other individuals, together with labour, were inseparable from the *seigneurie*. Serfdom lay at the heart of the *seigneurie*, as did its ability to require that services be executed in labour. However, forced labour must be seen as a service performed in exchange for something else within an asymmetric relationship between lord and peasant: labour was rewarded with the concession of land, and, inversely, the right to land was paid for by the rendering of labour. Together with servitude and serfdom, the emergence of salaried peasant labour must also be taken into consideration. Remunerating peasant's work is a crucial point: as the primary requirement for production, the concession of a land appears also as a way to compensate workers' effort without having to use money as a mediator.

[2] Duby, 1953, p. 254; for an updated definition, see Carocci, 2015.

## Historiographical outline

The hypothesis that the behaviour of lords was economically rational, their main goal being to maximise their economic advantages, or, as in the jargon of economists, their resource allocation, was the prevalent framework of historical research in the second half of the twentieth century. According to this view, violence, expropriation and extortion were the lord's instruments for extracting profit from the lands under their rule. This hypothesis is no longer universally accepted. Considerations regarding social domination, its forms and rituals, have gained prominence compared with questions of production, exchange, and consumption, the economic translations of social control. Nevertheless, human subsistence, labour and the unequal allocation of its product remain essential parts of this equation.[3] How can these aspects be adapted to fit the new framework in the making since the beginning of the 1990s? In this regard, it is important to recall that as the discussion on the feudal revolution came to the fore, it put on standby the scholarly debate about coerced labour, the methods of its compensation and the effects of extraction on production, exchange and consumption.[4] These economic aspects deserve a place in our current debate, and the use of neo-institutionalist concepts facilitates their reinjection into the modern framework.

The historiographical vision of the seigniorial economy that was developed during the 1960s and 1970s was one of contests for power, of brutal, unlimited and uncontrolled domination of the powerful over their subalterns, which allowed total appropriation of the factors of production (labour and land) by the lords.[5] Seen through this lens, growth was the result of an increase in lordly pressure on a thoroughly subjugated peasant population, who retained nothing of the extra labour which the lords imposed on them. Though

[3] Polanyi, 2011, pp. 72-76.
[4] Barthélemy, 1996; Bisson, 1994; 1997; White, 1996; Wickham, 1997; Cheyette, 2003.
[5] Bonnassie, 1975-1976; Toubert, 1973.

Charles Parain and others have much emphasised the diverse transformations of the technical systems employed in medieval agriculture,[6] technical innovation had no place in this social context: the techniques available to peasants remained relatively unchanged, innovation consisting in the use of long-known techniques whose utility had previously not been grasped.[7]

The seigniorial economy thus described appears, above all, as a way of exercising power on land and men. It is an institutional process at the end of which the interactions characteristic of production between man and nature are entirely dominated by the lord, who takes for himself most of what is produced. Such an economy satisfies the material needs of the lord first and foremost, those of the producers coming far behind.[8]

In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, most medievalists held that a great institutional transformation had occurred in the tenth–eleventh centuries and that the rules of society had evolved in that period precisely when the military aristocracy transformed their control of all local power structures into control of all land and human resources. Under this approach, the dislocation of Carolingian-era power structures made this transformation – the "mutation féodale" or "feudal revolution" – possible.[9]

Dominique Barthélemy struck at the heart of this model.[10] Tackling the issue of violence head-on, he enabled historians to disentangle themselves from a grand narrative that had become rather constricting and even cartoonish in some respects. Taking inspiration from a mainly English-language strand of historical anthropology, he trained critical sights back on the regulation of conflicts and the exercise of violence in feudal society.[11] He also addressed the is-

[6] Parain, 1979 (1941).
[7] Boserup, 1965.
[8] Polanyi, 2011, p. 72.
[9] Duby, 1978; Poly-Bournazel, 1980; and then by Bois, 1989.
[10] See his programmatic article and the later works in which he expanded his central themes: Barthélemy, 1992a; 1992b; 1996; 1997; 1999; 2004.
[11] Davies-Fouracre, 1986.

sues of serfdom and military service, the topics on which research had most advanced in the 1960–1980s under the leadership of Georges Duby, Pierre Bonassie and Pierre Toubert. He struck hard and where needed, although his study of serfdom, and the *servitium* implicitly bound up with it, did not deal with the issues associated with production and merchant or non-merchant transactions, which are characteristic of an institutionalised *seigneurie*. However, his assessment has made the study of medieval growth and development more difficult, as it sets aside questions of appropriation and redistribution and excludes the Marxist analysis that had previously been used.

Monique Bourin and her team have greatly facilitated defining medieval factors of production operating within the framework of an embedded economy.[12] But this does not tell us what factors caused growth and how it was maintained in the long run. To answer these questions, some notions from economists' toolbox must be brought in.

In the 1970s, some economists endeavoured to integrate a historical perspective into their work and, inversely, to accommodate their work to the different historical circumstances of economic life. Theirs was not a dominant school, and it went against the classical or neoliberal theories, which, accepting axioms about human behaviour in the face of economic problems, came to view rational actors, scarce resources and competition to acquire them as natural and self-evident. These determining factors were posited to be invariant, economics thus being seen as a natural science, not as a domain of knowledge that must also place human agency in historical context.[13]

[12] Bourin-Martinez Sopena, 2007; 2004; Feller-Wickham, 2005. On the embeddedness of the medieval economy, see Polanyi, 1944; Guerreau, 2001.
[13] Arnaud-Barrillon-Benredouane, 1991.

## Douglass North and the Middle Ages: contributions and limitations of the neo-institutionalist school

The writings of the so-called neo-institutionalist school and Douglass North's attempts in the 1970s to formulate a theory of economic life and growth that could be applied to historical periods can be of help, though they require due care because of North's limited historical knowledge of earlier times, including the Middle Ages. Although North used notions familiar to him without any critical detachment, in particular the notion of productive factors, he enriched the discussion by introducing the idea of "transaction costs" to historians.

At the height of his academic career, the early 1970s, North published "The Rise and Fall of the Manorial System" in the *Journal of Economic History*, immediately followed by a slim book called *The Rise of the Western World*, bringing new ideas to the debate. He sought to study economic growth over a long time horizon and to put economic data into context.[14] North took a "denaturalising" perspective on economics, not assuming invariably that rational agents, scarcity and resource allocation are the sole constituent elements of economic life. He argued that the relations between individuals could not be limited to competition for these resources; an approach that confined their behaviour concerning material goods to the administration of resource allocation could not suffice to explain complex phenomena such as economic growth in past societies.

At the heart of economic life North situated not scarcity and its consequences, but institutions, which he sought to historicise: the market should in no way be considered a fact of nature, but rather a temporary contextual institution whose construction must be understood by economists, who themselves have to determine under which conditions a market may be efficient, i.e. promote economic exchange and growth as a consequence. In other words, the law of supply and demand is not the only factor to be considered for past

[14] North-Thomas, 1973; North-Robert, 1971.

societies and in no case is it to be treated as a historically invariant. Under this theoretical premise, however, North does not discuss the thematic validity of embeddedness. His reflection is rather about property: institutions serve to guarantee it, protect it, and assure its stability. Their efficacy lowers transaction costs (stemming from the search for information, the conclusion of contracts, and transport costs), which are added to production costs. The evolution of transaction costs constitutes one of the key factors explaining economic changes, particularly short term fluctuations. Thus, an analysis of merchant exchanges must investigate their evolution in order to understand how the market can function, under which conditions it is efficient and at what point it encourages or does not encourage growth. These costs are usually expressed numerically, and thus seen as quantifiable. This is not possible for the medieval period, in which numerical information, when at all extant, does not permit phenomena to be translated into numbers; these can only be accessed indirectly, through the introduction of qualitative notions and thorough contextualisation. The efficiency of a market can only be assessed by integrating socio-political, geographical and economic factors, such as war, the location of markets, the intensity and nature of trade flows and the nature of the objects traded. Changes in itineraries and trading places modify merchandise flows, the quality and quantity of which are never stable.[15] But North did not put the subject of merchant trade flows in the foreground of his research in the 1970s. Indeed, for his demonstration he relies on the studies produced by Ambrose Raftis and the Toronto School, which deal exclusively with the manorial economy as it emerged in England in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.[16] He thus makes use of the particular case of England, where the seigniorial economy took on singular characteristics, for a general demonstration.

The manor, in North's approach, simultaneously possessed the functions of exploitation and of extraction, and as such did not differ

[15] Munro, 2001.
[16] Raftis, 1996.

substantially from the French *seigneurie*: it was made up of a number of tracts of land administered from a central place. From this central place, the landlord exerted a series of rights over the men residing under his political and judicial control. Among his prerogatives, there was the right to levy labour and to impose the *corvée*. Like the French *seigneurie*, the manor was based on a bipartition of the landholdings into domain and tenure, from the twelfth century on, it is managed directly by the lord, starting at the end of the twelfth century, through the *corvée* of tenant farmers, who received land in the form of tenures as compensation for their work and their payment of various dues. North uses a reductive but specific definition: manorialism was "a fiscal system involving a contractual relationship whereby public goods, such as protection and justice, were provided in exchange in the main for labor obligations."[17] This definition is important but it does require further elaboration. It introduces the notion of public goods speaking of protection and justice. It posits that labour was the principal means of exchange for the peasants living on the manor, and that it must be considered both a factor of production, separate from land, and a mode of payment. It was, then, a substitute for money and material goods susceptible to exchange.

North uses the notion of contract in its legal sense, i.e. as an agreement establishing reciprocal obligations which cannot be broken or altered unilaterally. This presupposes that customs are contractual, limiting the possibilities for both parties to modify the status quo: for the lord, to raise dues or demand anything beyond what was originally demanded; for the peasant, to pay less than the amount agreed upon, whether in labour or foodstuffs. The equality of both parties is assumed: they negotiate on an equal footing to produce a mutually advantageous agreement which is reified or realised as a system of customary or negotiated taxes and duties. Furthermore, North sees the manor as having emerged from a contractual framework, because the custom limits the arbitrary and because, once the custom is established, it cannot be modified without

[17] North-Thomas, 1971, p. 781, f. 7.

causing tension and risking rebellion. This would necessarily raise costs: retaliatory action would have to be taken, or legal costs incurred, which would be disadvantageous for the lord. The commutation of the cens, of payment in money or in kind, or indeed an increase in payments due, were out of the question if unilateral; in essence, the lord could not arbitrarily change the tributary system. I will address the question of whether or not the *seigneurie* was contractual below; here my aim is to describe the mechanisms of growth as dissected by economists.

The most interesting parts of North's work for our purposes are those bearing on commutation, which open up perspectives that have contributed greatly to our understanding of peasant behaviours. In North's opinion, within the twelfth-century manorial economy, lords and peasants set up arbitrations, and as a result it appeared advantageous for both of them to use peasant labour as a means of payment. From the lord's perspective, it was all the more logical to demand labour inasmuch as land was abundant and men few. Consequently, even if labour productivity must have been low, it was more profitable to demand labour than money or foodstuffs, the value of this factor of production being greater by orders of magnitude than that of any payments that could be obtained. The nature itself of the *servitium* of the peasant, whether serf or not, was thus determined, among other things, by the lord's capacity to ensure his own subsistence with minimal costs through his ability to appropriate labour or its products. The interest of the peasants lay in agreeing to give up some of their labour; the only alternative was to run down their food reserves, at the risk of facing a shortage or even causing a famine due to miscalculation. Furthermore, the value of these goods varied, depending on the harvest's yield. Agreeing to cede a share of labour instead of a product was therefore also a calculated economic choice whereby the sacrifice did not impact the producers' diet so directly or immediately. The scarcity of labour within a relatively depressed demographic setting (few men, abundant land) put the lord in an unfavourable position if negotiation rested solely on economic terms. It is evident, then, that North underestimates the

importance of coercion in establishing a system in which corvée could be and was demanded. He also underestimates the symbolic importance of the corvée, for it created a hierarchy within the peasant world between those who were subject to it and those who were not, and between those who performed it under constraint and those who did so freely.[18]

However, if the value of labour fell because the number of men was rising, while the value of land rose as it became a scarce commodity, it was in the lord's interest to cease levying labour and to compensate it in money or goods. This is what happened starting at the end of the twelfth century, owing to demographic growth and the decrease in clearing. In addition, the rise in the prices of foodstuffs recorded for that period made market opportunities increasingly profitable for all the parties involved. Finally, the use of money created much greater flexibility in the relationship between lord and dependents. In other words, it became less and less profitable to use labour as a means of payment, and, starting in the twelfth century, foodstuffs or money were demanded in an economy in which the multiplication of rural markets made it possible for the application of monetary value to agricultural products to be systematised.

## The embeddedness of the economy and its consequences

The position outlined above is not without drawbacks, although North does provide essential arguments and concepts for the description of economic systems, in particular by focusing on factors of production and the use of labour currency. In fact, he paints a picture that is hardly compatible with the idea that the economic cannot be separated from the social, which economic historians since Polanyi have taken for granted. As Polanyi himself demonstrated in an essay,[19] it is by no means futile or impossible to consider questions of production, exchange and consumption in and of them-

[18] Feller, 2000; Rio, 2017, pp. 75-89.
[19] Polanyi, 2011, p. 72.

selves. Discussions of costs, means of payment or contracts must be contextualised and seen from multiple perspectives – something that North does not do. In our perspective, costs, particularly transaction costs, take on a moral dimension, in that a moral economy exists, not just a material one. Setting up a transaction and writing a bill of sale – a contract – means abandoning a simpler relationship wherein promise and trust, along with community control, are sufficient for the stability of the exchange. Of course, the written word acts as a guarantee, and it enables legal action, if necessary. It may also serve to jog memories of the transaction and enables the summoning of witnesses, who are listed therein. In other words, although it has worth, both intrinsic and as a tangible, durable proof of a legal agreement, it is also the herald of a social dynamic which is established publicly, after negotiation or discussion in which quantities and values will have been compared and attached to persons.[20]

In the relationship of domination of peasants by lords, monetary cost was of less-than-prime importance when the nature and amount of what the latter owed to the former was being negotiated. Markets were not firmly established as the universal mode of exchange, and exchange was not always and not necessarily commercial, nor was money always its mediator: prices did not just measure use or exchange value; they were also a form of compensation, crystallising the correspondence between goods and values. Moreover, means of payment were far from neutral: whether one paid in labour, in debt or in kind indicated one's rank within the *seigneurie* and reflected the nature of the relationship between peasant and master or between persons of equal status.[21] For example, accepting an animal in exchange for land means that land has been given monetary functions, those of a reserve of money and a means of payment. This also implies that buyer and seller take up specific social roles: the buyer, who gives an animal in exchange for land, styles himself a protector, and his action will undoubtedly be prolonged beyond the act itself,

[20] Goody, 1979; Coquery-Menant-Weber, 2006; Morsel, 2000.
[21] Feller-Gramain-Weber, 2005.

while the seller shows himself to be, at the very least, a client of the buyer and most certainly his debtor. This social meaning of exchange is particularly evident in the not-so-rare cases of sales due to famine, where the buyer-seller relationship was extended into one of dependency whereby the seller's continued survival depended afterwards on his master's willingness to cede to him a farm or a tract of land enabling him to continue to earn enough to live.

The payment, always in kind, of *exenia*, eulogies, or of *ammisceres* was thus part of what Duby called "necessary generosities" and can be classed as an obligation arising from situations like those described above.[22] It expressed due gratitude for protection given: the simple fact of having been granted a *tenure* required this concrete manifestation, for a tenure secured the peasant's livelihood. Payment or the performance of a service also served as an indication of each party's honour. The status of the peasant could be measured by the quality or nature of the service rendered to the lord: in ninth-century Abruzzo, for example, the manner in which the corvée was assigned to the peasants was symbolic of their status. In Mitry, in the Île-de-France, peasants performed a *servitium inferiorem*, signifying their degraded position.[23]

In fact, all aspects of social domination, up to and including the lord's humiliation of the serf or dependent peasant, are relevant to the payment relationship. The way in which the abbot of Ramsey, in the mid-thirteenth century, feigned remunerating his reapers' labour exemplifies this: the reapers were entitled to take with them, as payment, as much of their product as they had the strength to carry on the prongs of their pitchforks, but if the implement broke, the hay as well as the tool's metal stayed with the abbey, and the peasant had to pay a round for the other labourers.[24] Beyond the derision, which reinforced the worker's humiliation, all social relationships came into play here. The labour was salaried but in a random

[22] Duby, 1973, p. 69.
[23] Feller, 2000.
[24] Feller, 2018.

and individualised fashion, to each according to his strength; clumsiness or incompetence could cost the peasant more than the value of his day's work. Though framed as a competitive game, it is one whose rules were set by the abbot and by him alone. So, we find that the apparently kind or debonair character of the lord hid the reality of the relationship, which was one of oppression, buttressed by the extreme violence that could erupt at any time. The lord was certainly the master of the social game, as he was also the master of the judicial system and of armed force.

The asymmetrical nature of the relationship means that a transaction between lord (or his representative) and tenant cannot be called a contract when it was agreed upon within the seigniorial system. Where a contractual context did exist, as in central Italy during the Early and High Middle Ages, it did not constitute the whole of the lord-peasant relationship, and while the *livelli* of Latium or Abruzzo no longer mention the corvée from the ninth century on, this does not mean that it had disappeared. In fact, *census* registers and surveys show exactly the contrary: local customs determined the quantity of labour that the lord could demand as well as the customary dues, which were often a much heavier burden than the *census*.

To assume that the relationship between peasant and lord was contractual would, finally, imply an untenable paradox: that of considering serfdom, along with all those dispositions regarding the levying of labour, as negotiated arrangements as a result of which labour service was demanded in exchange for the enjoyment of public goods like justice and protection. It would be also mean that the serf's willingness is free and unconstrained, which is contradictory. Such a conception implies a failure take into account the physical violence and coercion exercised by the lord, including in cases, such as in southern Italy, in which the servile status of peasants forced into labour services was not self-evident.[25] This underestimates the negative effects of the face-to-face relationship. In the end, peasants

[25] Carocci, 2015.

may have consented to their own oppression by offering up their labour, whose value had been enhanced by an ideology that assigned them a certainly inferior but nonetheless essential social role. It is unlikely, however, that they desired this situation and that their servitude was perceived to be voluntary.[26] Furthermore, the moral obligations born from the relationship of dependency were real: they were highly individual, according to the personal relationship that each dependent had with his master; they were also constrictive per se and no doubt just as effective as the violence that underpinned the *seigneurie*.

What concrete advantages did the *seigneurie* offer the peasants that they were willing to pay for? First of all, it offered guarantees for the stability of their possession of land, whose fruits remained in part in the hands of the producer, whatever the quantities levied by the lord. It also effectively ensured the subjects' physical protection and functioned as a judicial institution able to regulate the inevitable conflicts of agrarian society and to guarantee the existence of common goods such as the market, currency, uncultivated land, and the enjoyment thereof. Its positive aspects made its institutional violence less intolerable.

Historical analysis of the *seigneurie* also shows it to have been an institution that responded to changes in economic factors, such as population growth or increasing scarcity of free land, in a context in which land ownership was connected to rights over human resources. Here, the contribution of economists can again be of use: Land was still an abundant commodity in the eleventh–twelfth centuries, but its effective availability was rendered problematic by the rights to farm it and the methods of farming it, as well as by its appropriation. This does not mean that land lost its other functions: it was certainly a means of production, but it was also a source of prestige and a sign of rank. Thus, the land-based relationship that the *seigneurie* induced allowed for a ranking based on honour, but also on the wealth that resulted from possession of land within the *seigneurie*.

[26] Lordon, 2010; contra Arnoux, 2012.

Not all peasants were serfs, and some were not even part of just a single *seigneurie*. The seigniorial system's territorialisation was very imperfect: a peasant could be the dependent of multiple lords at once, as was the case in central Italy, could owe dues on multiple grounds, and could thus play his lords off against each other to gain a margin of flexibility. Furthermore, we must also consider free smallholders, who could not be so easily integrated into the *seigneurie* and for whom the sole relevant factor was that of their landholding.

How does our understanding of growth evolve in the light of these issues? First, economic analysis confirms what we already knew: the functioning of the *seigneurie* must remain central to our research, and only within its context can we observe relations of production and the multiple factors contributing to growth. The main question remains whether we can gain a further understanding of the institution by re-elaborating concepts created by economists. The notions employed by North, that of "transaction costs" in particular, enrich our toolbox, though it is still necessary to consider the nature of those transactions. Furthermore, renewed study of the roles of productive factors and means of payment is highly useful. The scarcity of men and the abundance of land inevitably lead back to the subject of property and its stability, as well as raising the question of the part that forced labour played in the seigniorial economy. In Carolingian times, forced labour was first and foremost the burden of the tenants, only secondarily that of the enslaved workforce (*praebendarii*). In the seigniorial economy, the latter element regressed, and the tasks originally performed by prebendary slaves were very soon – in England, already in the eleventh century – shifted onto free peasants, enfeoffed or remunerated, first by way of non-monetary forms of salary, then via payments in currency and in kind.[27] The growth of the trade economy, the multiplication of the sites for merchant trade, that is, marketplaces, brought about change in the causal sequence of economic factors. Demographic growth

[27] Postan, 1954.

thus appears to have been one of the conditions for the peasants' legal liberation and emancipation, before the crises of the fourteenth century altered the situation.[28]

In conclusion, while current trends put the political in the foreground, the economic dimension should be restored to its place among the prime causes of social transformations and treated as an essential determinant of social change. Studies of what became of peasant property and of free peasants during the economic transformations of the Middle Ages must accompany this process. While the *seigneurie*'s influence was certainly widespread, it was not all-encompassing, nor was it oppressive and effective everywhere: there were vast areas of central Italy devoid of *seigneuries*, where, though trade may have had a place, the relationship between producers and consumers was not purely market-based. We still have to gain a thorough understanding of how the transition occurred from a society in which mutual aid, familial bonds and redistribution regulated internal relationships, to one in which they were conditioned by contracts and merchant trade. It was not sufficient to change the organisation of labour. It was also necessary to find more diversified sources of revenue and to integrate commerce into the realm of peasant activities, in order to satisfy the conditions of having to pay dues and – from the fourteenth century on – taxes, given the desire to acquire more types of material goods which were not available *in situ* and to obtain them in ever greater quantities – the desire, therefore, to consume. The tools of economic analysis should make the further study of these questions possible and, more importantly, should also enable us to gain a better understanding of the connexion between agricultural development, the transformation of rural societies and commercialisation.

[28] Bois, 1981; Carpentier-Le Mené, 1996; Dyer, 2007; Feller, 2017.

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