DEBATES

A Letter to Professor McCloskey

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Dear Professor Mc Closkey,

I promised in my earlier acknowledgement to reply to your questions which arise out of the passage in volume V of the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, where I criticize the idea that the agricultural arrangements of medieval England may be explained by reference to the calculated " avoidance of risk " embodied in the system by which large numbers of English peasants held their land in scattered strips in the open fields. Let me begin with what I take to be the problem as you see it and the solution as you propose it.

Your second essay (1976) begins by describing the peasant holding of land in the open fields as " most peculiar ". In your first (1975) essay you talk also of the " inefficencies " of the system caused by the excessive scattering of each peasant's land.[1] You seem to agree with this opinion (which you attribute to XVIth and XVIIIth century critics), only to add later that the countervailing evidence shows that scattering was not so inefficient after all (pages 78 and 79).

You refer also in various places to " the miserably low ratio of yield to seed before the agricultural revolution "; to " a miserably low and precarious standard of living "; to say nothing of " the pathetic conditions of beasts raised on common grazing ", etc. You conclude that it is hardly credible that peasants would throw away their livelihood in face of such obvious inefficiencies, unless

[1] D. McCloskey, " The Persistence of English Common Fields ", in W. N. Parker and E. J. Jones, eds., *European Peasants and their Markets*, Princeton, N.J. 1975; D. McCloskey, " English Open Fields as Behavior Towards ", in P. Uselding, ed., *Research in Economic History*, vol. 1, Greenwich, Conn., 1976.

there were some good (and you seem to equate good with calculated, logical, rational) reason for accepting them. Thus, you say, for them: " Scattering was a Good Thing. So much is by now clear ". The reason? that scattering offered an insurance against farming risks which offset its inefficiences and inconveniences.

Here my difficulties begin. It is not at all clear to me either that the system seemed as inefficient to contemporaries as you and many of your predecessors assume (for in spite of your production of countervailing evidence you come down *against* the Midland system in the end); nor that medieval peasants were conscious, in the way you suggest they were, that their life was as miserable as their crops and their beasts; nor that the continuance throughout many centuries of the system was (disregarding for the moment the many exceptions to the system in its scattered form) the result of any deliberate decision by individual peasants to continue it.

By a similar fallacy, Victorian, and later, musicologists and editors set to work to eliminate consecutive 5ths from medieval music, discordances from Purcell's *Fantasies*, all on the apparent supposition that Dunstable should have studied the works of German professors of harmony of the 19th century; that Purcell ought to have followed Czerny's notion of the triad. Was this any more absurd than to suppose that a XIIIth century peasant could possibly have imagined yields one half of those modern miracles of agricultural science quoted by e.g. Titow? Or have been conscious that his way of farming was, by its nature, miserably inefficient? Such consciousness comes with the knowledge that better alternatives were open. Where and what were they?

Several years before the Orwins wrote (in 1938), I had heard the arguments, which they later put forward, explaining the open field-system largely in terms of practical agricultural convenience, from Edward Welbourne, who taught Peter Mathias, myself and many others at Cambridge. I found this kind of explanation, as I still do, far more convincing that arguments of an ' egalitarian ' kind, which you distrust — in my view rightly. Medieval peasants, as I see them, were tough, shrewd realists. Anything looking like ' egalitarianism ' that came out of their heads rested on self-interest, perhaps even bloody-mindedness. Orwin explains it (page 40). They needed every minute to get on with their work. They couldn't afford any trimmings (see below). This is quite different from a ' consciousness of inefficiences ' — a quite anachronistic concept.

A common-sense response to need seems to me to be the basic explanation not only of the beginnings of the system, about which we have absolutely no evidence, but also its continuance, where even today, after massive scholarly labours for many years, the evidence remains scanty and unreliable. As many historians have pointed out (Titow most recently) we have no evidence about the yields of *peasant* farming, because no evidence exists. This is important; you yourself are compelled to fall back on the evidence of *demesne* farming,

on the assumption that the two are the same thing. In this assumption you are in distinguished company, but allow me to say that I believe you are mistaken.

To return to your question: why did peasants scatter their land (if they did)? You reject the idea of partible inheritance and certainly I would agree that this could not explain more than a part of the phenomenon. You do, however, make plain why you cannot accept this explanation. On the other hand, you mention joint ploughing as an explanation only to dismiss it (correct me if I am wrong) out of hand. Perhaps because you believe you have a better explanation?

I will comment on the merits of joint ploughing and the avoidance of risk later on. Let us look first at the evidence for the avoidance of risk. Here you make a very large claim indeed, for in spite of your protestation that you hold the doctrine only in strict moderation, it seems to me that you do in fact propose it as a monocausal dogma with an enthusiasm which beats away the numerous objections which may be made to a single theory which attempts to explain a system with innumerable variations that existed over many centuries.

Your second paper of 1976 which works out the theory of risk and its avoidance makes a point which has a strong general theoretical attraction. To come to this ' risk aversion ' theory of the economics of scattered holdings: I am quite ready to accept the theoretical case that risks of an unspecified kind might be less for the peasant (*or lord*) whose holdings were scattered. Your theoretical model (p. 131) may stand. But this gets us nowhere: the real issue is the nature of actual risk (July storms, a wet spring and summer or a prolonged drought, late frosts, pests etc.) Evidence of the precise character and extent of such a variety of hazards is minimal. There is certainly no clear case for supposing that ' scattering ' offered any obvious comfort to a peasant holding 20 or 30 acres scattered over (say) double that number of strips. Peasants of yesterday, like farmers today, (*vide* Slicher van Bath in the *Cambridge Economic History*, Vol. V) thought in terms of a ' good ' year or a ' bad ' year. Slicher van Bath does not even bother to mention short-term or local risks. By and large, I suspect that disaster struck by areas very much larger that half an acre — or even thirty acres.

But we speak of ' peasant ' risks. How can we do so without knowing something of peasant *yields*? What do we know of these? Nothing (*vide* Titow). We can only infer from *demesne* experience (as you do, entirely). This immediately raises another question which (though I don't claim to be a specialist in such things) seems to be unanswerable *viz.* What was the comparative structure, including yields, of demesne and peasant arable? " It was peasants, not lords, who were achieving insurance by scattering their plots... " (your words p. 132). Yet a little later (p. 145) you modify this: some demesnes were *not* consolidated. How many? We don't know. You give no indication of the *size* of your samples or whether or not they were enclosed. This whole problem of demesne ' structure ' is sidestepped by almost every historian of the subject

ancient and modern [2]: perhaps for good reasons, for the only ones who do *not* dodge, give answers which seem to me pure guessework. Certainly, for most of that unsurveyed England which still constitutes far the larger part, it is impossible to give any valid general answer. Often (I suspect) historians have simply *assumed* that 'demesne' was by definition consolidated. But if the demesme farming system continued to be on a 2 or 3 field system (as they frequently allege) how was 'consolidation' reconciled with the conventional sowing programmes for the different 'fields' of the village? And, in any case, why? What, again, is the scientific basis for assuming that peasant farming was inevitably inferior to lordly farming? (Postan's suggested answer to this in Vol. III of the *Cambridge History* (p. 602) seems to me no more than supposition. Why should we suppose that the advantages conferred on demesne farmers by larger resources inevitably more than cancelled out the force of Walter of Henley's observation (about customary tenants neglecting their demesne labours) when Postan's central argument on the great demesnes is that in the end they fell apart because they were uneconomic? Why should a system of land holding derived from political or military causes be more than temporarily successful?

Is it not equally (or more) probable that the manor was inherently — economically speaking — unnatural and unmanageable? Why otherwise were buyers or tenants found with such ease to take over the job of farming the demesne, paying a good rent *and* making a profit?

(Forgive me if I get a little impatient with historians who seem to me to be ignorant of basic technology and psychology of farming. I come of a long line of farmers. My family, in branches close and remote, have farmed, and still do, from north Lincolnshire down to the Fens; away westwards from Spalding, Sutton and Wisbech as far as Huntingdon. My mother was born on a farm at Castor (yes, *your* Castor, near Peterborough); my relatives would doubtless be farming there still but for the fact that my grandfather's hunter trod accidentally on his hand, bringing on his death from tetanus (and my grandmother's immediately after from shock). So the 11 children were dispersed to orphanages. This was in the 1870s. My grandfather was doubtless an open field farmer. As Bursar of Jesus College, Cambridge from 1945 to 1955, I was responsible for 30 tenant farms (some 5000 acres), mostly ancient possessions, some dating from the XIIth century. I have never understood how they could *possibly* have been satisfactorily organised, even in small part, as e.g. College 'demesne', even in these days of professional management and highly expert agricultural accountancy. Keynes tried direct farming for King's on their Lincolnshire estates:

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[2] For example, such excellent studies as E. KING's, *Peterborough Abbey 1086-1310* or BARBARA HARVEY's, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates* (1977). However, the former stresses the Abbey's interest in retaining villein services; the second suggest the existence of "home farms".

it was a disaster but not abandoned for a long time after the truth dawned (for the typically XXth century reason (as I heard) that the losses incurred were written off against University tax: King's being rich, their tax rate was high).

This raises an awkward question: if demesne *was* generally enclosed, why did *lords* fail to notice the ' risk aversion ' benefits which (on your argument) were equally open to them too by ' scattering '? *Their* yields, too, were, God (and Titow) knows, low enough? But if they were scattered, why your repeated statements that you are concerned with the *peasants'* search for insurance, not the *lords'*? To summarise the verdicts of historians' work which I know, I would say that the idea that demesne was usually *enclosed* is often unsupported by direct evidence until latish periods are concerned. Tawney (*16th Century Agrarian Problem*, p. 218) remarks only that the *demesne* was usually the first part of the village to be enclosed, thereby implying that in earlier times it had been scattered. This seems to have been the case at Laxton. Beresford (*Medieval England*) likewise suggests that hedged fields were a later development on reclaimed land.

To summarise: I have criticised the assumption that the risks encountered would be much reduced by scattering. I have asked why demesne lords failed often to retain their confidence that the gains from a scattered farm outweighed the losses. The same question may also be asked of peasants who benefited by assarting and other forms of reclamation. If Bishop's observations can be treated as representative of England in general, the beneficiaries sometimes treated the new land as consolidated fields, sometimes as severally-held strips. There appears to be no uniformity, just as there is no uniformity among manors (or their historians) in these matters. These varied responses do not support the idea that any group of farmers, lord or peasant, was immediately attracted by the idea that ' scattering ' offered self-evident protection against risk.

Now to another assumption which seems to me to run through both your articles. You speak regularly as if, over long periods of history, peasants may be found debating whether to scatter or not to scatter, freely and rationally making up their minds, freely deciding, freely acting on their decisions. This debate had to do not merely with whether to buy or sell but with the fundamental arrangement, or re-arrangement, of the strips in the open fields — which of course was a very different matter.

Your quotation of Miss (?) Rosamund Faith (whose words seem to me, I must say, to exaggerate grossly if picturesquely) similarly suggests a free rural society of rational, free peasants, freely making up their minds for or against the *status quo* in their open fields.

This seems to me to misread the whole character of the medieval rural economy. Ernle has a phrase about the medieval peasant's life and routine being ' tied hand and foot by the custom of the village ' (p. 132 New Edn. 1961). If you riposte that Ernle is old hat nowadays (though, I would maintain, still one of the few economic historians who knew something about the realities

of farming) let me refer you to W.O. Ault's *Open Field Farming in Medieval England* (1972) where the introductory sections are replete with evidence showing how often the peasant was caught helpless in the web of custom immemorial in matters of farming; how rarely he was his own master. (Your reference to Ault (p. 82 of your 1975 article) is directly relevant here: you remark that local laws interfered with the individual only when his activities ' had an impact on the activities of others ' — surely a not uncommon feature of the law generally? — adding ' otherwise leaving men to their own devices '. But this whole section dealing with what you call ' neighbourhood effects ' of the open field provides testimony as eloquent as one could wish that the essence of the open field system was precisely that men were rarely left to themselves.)

Beresford makes the same point vividly with the aid of air photography and open field maps. All the sources at our disposal suggest that, *once set*, the pattern of open-field farming was capable of even *modification*, let alone total reorganisation, only with the greatest difficulty. There could be occasions (like assarting) when, as Bishop finds, some participants in the operation could opt out of scattering the proceeds if they could (the words are critically important) ' dispose of something more than their own labour '. Otherwise the ancient methods of dispersal had to be followed — and for the ancient reason: so long as one man could rarely command the animals and implements to plough (and generally to farm) on his own, these operations were necessarily done jointly, and could not be done otherwise. Men were still as short of resources as were the men of Laxton and elsewhere of whom the Orwins spoke (see *supra*). Ernle was still making the same point when he came to write of the later general enclosure movement: small men (he wrote) still hesitated to support a local enclosure simply because the cost of hedging and ditching might cost almost the whole value of their land. He added: ' quite apart from the uncertainty of being able to prove their title '. (Ernle - New Edn., p. 251). (This last point is vividly illustrated by Samuel Pepys in his *Diary* and the description of the long-drawn-out wrangle about his hoped-for windfall at Gravely (in Huntingdon) when he suffered precisely the difficulty Ernle mentions. The land was part of Jesus College's Gravely property so I know the case from two angles.)

I must confess that I am extremely sceptical of any theory that a peasant may be assumed to have been free to act in regard to his holding without regard to the general village framework of landholding and farming operations based on custom. It was simply not the decision of one man but of the village community expressed through the manorial court that counted. To extricate the whole of the agrarian economy of Midland England from the tenacious consequences of the original joint ploughing by which it had been created was a difficult and long drawn out process — the longer because of the by-no-means negligible personal interests which time created in it and therefore the advantages that *could* be claimed for it, including that of long familiarity. It seems to me

that writers on these problems frequently fail to grasp the appalling load of work that accompanied a farm of 30 acres in medieval conditions. Far from being an inadequate endowment, 30 acres (even allowing for fallowing, which itself causes work) is a large piece of ground, especially when a substantial part of your time is spent working compulsorily for somebody else. Anybody who tries to dig even 10 square yards of Midland clay will quickly realise the force of the repetitive medieval prayer: " God speed the Plough "! No wonder the peasants were always itching to get away from the demesne and back on their own land, back to their fellows, back to speeding the joint plough.

Again, as Beresford has rightly said, you cannot understand the course of medieval agrarian history without taking account of factors other than weather, the difficulties or opportunities of terrain etc. Personalities — lords or abbots or bishops, slack or firm, casual or businesslike, bailiffs and stewards honest and otherwise — played a vital role in creating the infinite variations found in regional and local estates. Regional and personal variations in the legal status of free or customary tenants likewise. All this forms a vast and complex mosaic but one which remains, even after the labours of so many, woefully short of supporting evidence with which we may confidently interpret its multiple designs. It is this very shortage of hard evidence which has often left so much medieval history perilously perched on the tip of monocausal theory — I hasten to add, not merely your own but a number of others.

Now to come to the crunch: I freely acknowledge the ingenuity of your econometrics. I admire your disarming ability to make a generalisation, only to withdraw it or modify it in the next (even in the same) sentence. This can be confusing but at least it answers any charge that you are trying to fudge the evidence. Indeed, it is disconcerting to find how often you seem to produce — even to emphasise — evidence which seems to me to suggest the opposite of your general thesis e.g. that generally the re-arrangement of fields moved *away* from scattered plots rather then towards them. But what *is* your evidence? First, mathematical probabilities relevant but often difficult to harness to your particular purpose. Second, mathematical possibilities based on evidence which has *nothing whatever* to do with medieval England — the habits of cultivators of Japanese paddies, Swiss meadows, Greek villages, Hopi Indians, Pakistan peasants, farmers in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Brazil. Please correct me if I am wrong, but I cannot discover in your argument a single piece of direct evidence from a single medieval Englishman, peasant, priest, lord, bailiff, poet or bishop which shows the slightest concern for ' risk aversion ', let alone any conviction that scattering of holdings was necessarily a good way to achieve it. Why? Because, first, there were more immediate or unavoidable reasons for the lay-out of the open fields (which *can* be identified from contemporary evidence e.g. joint ploughing); and, secondly — in my view — because this was not, and is not, the way farmers think or behave. You yourself quote Robert Loder — and a very good quotation too. Risks were a chasti-

sement of God. A man prayed and did his best: he could do no more (as I have suggested and Ault etc. reinforces).

Farmers grumble: they do not, on the whole, worry. A farmer who worries (about risk-aversion or anything else) had better go and do something else or he will end up in a home for hopeless neurotics. (It goes without saying that as time went on the probability that any significant body of farmers would support the theory you propound diminished).

One last word: you refer at a number of points to the old argument that the scattered strips reflect medieval man's 'egalitarianism'. You dismiss this as mere romanticism which calls for rewriting etc. In the somewhat caricatured form in which you put it, quite rightly. But you put it (if I may say so) unfairly, and in a form which surely no historian worth the name would nowadays dream of using. The very word 'egalitarianism' itself is misconceived, conjuring up (as it does) visions of bearded Victorian prophets busily drafting ordinances for the equal distribution of misery rather than of Piers Plowman and his fellows drawing lots for the day's work. You suggest that the Orwins merely substituted 'community feeling' for 'egalitarianism'. With respect, I believe they do better than that: taking their general picture as a whole they seem to me to be saying:

"The most urgent job was to plough: the second, to distribute — and to do it in a way that combined speed and convenience with a degree of objectivity that could not be questionned". Like hundreds of millions since, they 'tossed the coin': but the beneficiaries did not benefit arbitrarily (nor, for that matter, equally). On the contrary, they were in the game precisely because they had contributed capital and labour. The device was meant to ensure a fair reward to men who had put roughly equal effort and capital into an enterprise. 'Fair' did not mean 'mathematically equal'; it was simply designed to make sure that no individual *participant* rigged the share-out. Can you think of any alternative in their circumstances? That was the work of Providence (or chance): whichever it was, its workings were inscrutable: this was no socialism. But, however inscrutable they were, there were doubtless occasions where Tom or Dick had reason to suspect a loaded dice. Anybody brought up on the cruel intimacy of village life more easily raises two cheers for it than romanticises it. The romance of rural life is an urban invention: true rusticity has the redeeming merit that its 'community instincts' are always modified by an earthy individualism — it is embodied in the characteristically popular game of rural life which might be described as 'bugger-my-neighbour', i.e. it was strictly human, not ideological.

You asked what new evidence I have which you have overlooked. In my view this is hardly the relevant question; indeed, I admire the wide coverage of your documentation. The only conspicuous omission, unless I have overlooked them, are the writings of M. W. Beresford. It is, as I tried to say in the *Cambridge History*, not so much the *evidence* as its *interpretation*, that

divides us (*vide* your reading of Warren Ault). If, as I have felt bound to explain, I doubt your *quantities*, I doubt even more the *psychology* of your thesis. You seem to me to attribute to medieval peasants, whose major preoccupation was to keep alive, motives and attitudes that are either over-rationalised or anachronistic or both.

I have written down my thoughts as they came into my head, for better or worse. Please accept them at least as genuine and spontaneous; I certainly do not expect you to accept them without a stout resistance. I am, as you are, deeply committed in this!

Yours sincerely
Charles Wilson