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The Communal Basis of Pre-1800 Peasant Uprisings in Western Europe

David Sabean

One of the common features of peasant revolts in "Early Modern" Europe was their basis in communal life. Many uprisings stemmed from the desire of one faction in a village to control access to resources within the community, or to exclude others from the franchise. Peasants often revolted to keep out the "outsider," either the tax official, the conscription officer, or the absentee landlord. But we cannot think of a single case where peasants attempted to take power on a national scale, or even to insert themselves on a regular basis in the local or regional political apparatus.

The peasants never thought of defending or furthering their interests by ensuring representation at the center. At the same time, their infrequent rebellions were considered totally illegitimate; they were not treated as part of the polity, and their threats of force were met with total opposition. Of course, authorities often temporized out of necessity, but the savage repression often found expresses the feeling of total illegitimacy on the part of the rulers. A good example is provided by the peasant revolt in Bavaria in 1705, where on two separate occasions the soldiers sent to stop the peasants were able to surround them. Both times, the armies proceeded, with negligible casualties to themselves, to slaughter up to 5,000 peasants, the business of a whole day. Such fury is explicable only on the premise that peasants were totally excluded from the polity.

In this article, we shall examine the concentration of peasant political interest in the village and look at some of the forces of early modernization—forces that moved at a much slower pace than in today's world. While the peasant's interest did not readily go beyond his village, in an uprising he had perforce to act together with people from outside his own community. This fact must be taken into consideration in analyzing the phenomenon of revolt.

In the literature on peasants, the village is frequently stressed as the fundamental unit of peasant society.[1] This identification between the individual and his village stems from the peasant subsistence economy: the village is the collection of peasant households, each autonomous to some degree, functioning together for political, cultural, and economic purposes. Some differentiation of economic function takes place with-

in the village, but outside it the peasant needs only the city, not other villages. The links between each town and village are single-stranded, with nothing binding the villages directly together. It is worth going into some detail with regard to village autonomy in Western Europe, because this autonomy is important and has recently received stress in the literature.[2] Rodney Hilton has argued that peasant interest in the Middle Ages is rooted in the fact that villagers had to cooperate in day-to-day agricultural activities. Sowing time, harvest time, rules of pasturing and for exploiting common land had to be agreed upon. Participating in village deliberations on these matters gave each peasant experience in decision-making.

From the late fourteenth century, peasant autonomy in this realm increased, for the nobles and ecclesiastical institutions withdrew from the direct exploitation of the land and parcelled out the manor to tenants. The officials were, of course, still resident; but they became more concerned with rent payments and keeping of the peace, and less with coordination of the agricultural round. In this situation, peasant proprietors began to develop independent rules for collective decision-making with regard to harvest and ploughing, gleaning and pasturing. This extended itself directly into the question of sanctions for violations. It came, in the course of time, to the demand that the peasant proprietors be allowed to choose officers to keep the peace, administer village affairs, and the like. Over the course of 200 years, villagers and nobles constantly negotiated on the questions of the ultimate responsibility for peace-keeping in the villages and of the right to appoint village officials. Each village had its own history vis-à-vis its lord, with its own agreements, landmark decisions, and charters. In some places the village picked the "mayor," council, and bailiff; in others, the lord picked some officials, the villagers others. Most often the process was two-sided: the villagers proposed two or three candidates for a position, and the lord selected one of them.

All of this brought an increasing sense of political autonomy to each village. Institutions such as the manor, which had often crossed village boundaries, were attenuated. The village's sense of self-identification was strengthened by other trends—notably the desire of each village to solidify its rights and territory in respect to all surrounding villages. The archives are full of documents relating to legal moves by villages to restrict rights of neighboring villages in their territories. Over the course of 100 years, a village might seek legal arbitration ten or more times in order to secure its boundaries, to restrict access to its woods, or to specify rights of other villagers in its territory. Specific people were sometimes accorded rights to trespass within strict boundaries and at specific times during the day or year.

In all of these documents the sense of village identification is seen to have grown stronger with time. The degree to which village identifica-

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tion is important is very often clear in peasant revolts. In the famous "Twelve Articles" from the German Peasants' War of 1525, village corporate power as expressed in the word *Gemeinde* is the key to understanding the peasant demands. The *Gemeinde* was to elect and depose the priest, collect and distribute the tithes, administer the hunting and fishing rights and the use of forest and common land, and take part in legal affairs—civil and criminal—of the village.[3]

It is clear, then, that the village was an important unit of identification for its peasant members. Subsistence agriculture was carried on within its boundaries; in many cases, the right to farm was accorded only to residents of the village. The village administered its own affairs, restricted access to its own territory, and kept the peace within its boundaries. Yet it is also clear that at other levels the villagers took part in a wider territorial system and that external affairs were not solely conducted in single-stranded relationships with the lord or the local town. Villagers married people from surrounding villages, for example, met with them in courts, and served with them in military units encompassing wider regions.

If we examine how villages became integrated, the function of the local market town emerges as a crucial factor, time after time and in a variety of contexts. To take military service as an example, recruitment was centered in market towns in southern Germany in the sixteenth century.[4] Military enterprisers visited a town and recruited young men from the surrounding villages. They served as a unit for the season and then were demobilized to return to their homes. The network of relationships established in this way is important, for it was often through military service that a man built up a stake to buy a tenancy at home. As these men grew older and gained position in their villages, they had a ready-made network of old ties that could be used for a variety of purposes. The part played by former soldiers in peasant revolts is well-known.[5]

How the peasant economy functions in spatial terms has been studied by geographers and anthropologists for the past several decades.[6] G. W. Skinner argues that the market area—not the village—is the basic peasant economic unit. Markets are scattered across the landscape on a regular pattern, just close enough so as to provide all of the necessities of a peasant economy. In turn, markets are arranged in a hierarchy, the standard market being defined as the one that integrates all of the peasant needs. Above that, and encompassing a wider region, is a town with a higher degree of centrality, carrying wholesale and higher administrative and cultural functions. Since the peasant members of an area satisfy their needs at the standard market, their social networks tend to be bounded by the catchment area served by the town. Elites, in turn, find their networks based on the higher order market towns, since their dealings involve these wider bounds.

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One example of the way a market town integrates an area involves the kinship network. While village endogamy is often strong, reinforcing village identification, marriages often take place outside the village. But the marriage market tends to be encompassed by the catchment area of the market town. In arranging marriages, adults tend to reinforce ties already established or to create new ones. Naturally, new ties outside the area of normal social and economic activity would be of little or no use.

A modern example of how a market area works in this regard comes from the study of a Picard village.[7] Inhabitants of that village have no regular contact with villages more than six to ten kilometers distant. Their direct relations are limited to their own village and those that border it. The only way regular contact is kept up with the villagers beyond these limits is in the central town, so that the total area of social contact is bounded by those villages whose inhabitants frequent the town. Each village is oriented toward one town only. Thus, given two villages equidistant from a third, but oriented toward different markets, one will be in regular contact with the third, but the other will have few contacts with it. In Alain Morel's study, the region centered around the market is integrated in other ways as well. Summer Sunday fetes are held in a different village each week, according to a principle of strict rotation. Morel shows that knowledge of people's affairs is reinforced by regular patterns of gossip that restrict themselves primarily to villagers frequenting the same market town.

The peasant network involves diffuse as well as tight-knit ties based on kinship. At the marketplace, the peasant sells his produce in company with the people from other villages. He meets them at the lawyer's office on market days and spreads gossip on other people's affairs. The inn becomes a focal point for socializing and, incidentally, plays a fundamental role in peasant revolts.[8] In general, then, the market town is a central place in which peasants engage in a multiplicity of exchange relationships.

All of this fits well into the classic formulation of peasant society.[9] Peasants are subsistence agriculturalists. They relate to outsiders in such a way that the outsiders dominate them politically, extract a surplus, and maintain a cultural hegemony over them. Such activities involve asymmetric exchange relationships, the mediation of which involves a central place or market. It is there that the elite establish political or administrative officials. Markets carry off part of the peasant surplus, and form a medium of exchange between the cultivator and the outside world. Grain from forced exactions, rents, and taxes is stored in town barns for shipment outside the area or for local sales; and peasants are usually expected to carry their dues to such collection points. The central shrine of a region or important ecclesiastical institutions overlap with political and economic institutions in spatial

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terms. Peasants, then, live partly enclosed within themselves, with
their own dialects, popular religious forms, subsistence economy, and
village self-regulation. They relate to the wider society through ex-
ternal courts, payment of rents, and the religious ideals imposed by the
elite. In carrying out their obligations to outsiders, they meet with
people from other villages at a central point.

In this two-sided process between elites and peasants, there are the
mediators or "brokers." Such people often hold formal positions in
the overall process; but informal mediators can also be structurally
important. The village official, as we have pointed out, is often ex-
pressly chosen so as to reflect the needs and wishes of both sides. The
small producer, merchant, and artisan of the town also play roles in
the middle as part of the world of external commerce, and as inter-
mediaries between the peasant and the world.

Historically, it is difficult to show exactly how peasant social net-
works were structured or how individuals in a town played the inter-
mediary roles that theory requires of them. One way of providing
some data on the problem is to examine extraordinary events, such as
peasant revolts, where peasants were forced in a short space of time to
actuate earlier networks that were either latent or invisible to the his-
torian. The extraordinary amount of data generated by a revolt affords
the historian material not only for the study of the dynamics of a revolt
itself, but also for the analysis of everyday society.

In this regard, we can take the whole phenomenon of Western Euro-
pean peasant revolts from the end of the Middle Ages to the French
Revolution, for one of their striking features is the fact that the leader-
ship seldom, if ever, came from the peasants themselves.[10] In England
during 1381, for example, the leaders were tailors, bakers, priests,
merchants, weavers, butchers, and a few knights, priors, and an abbot.[11]
They fall into several general categories of artisans, minor churchmen,
and the "honorability"—knights, gentlemen, a mayor, an abbot, and a
few apparently prosperous merchants. In the German Peasants' War of
1525 the same categories emerged, with the addition of innkeepers. In
the various seventeenth-century French peasant uprisings studied by
Roland Mousnier, the leaders were often "chief persons of the market
towns," artisans, officials, gentry, advocates, and priests.[12]

In many cases, the leader was not an instigator of the revolt. Instead,
he was sought out by a peasant horde to act as its spokesman. In revolt
after revolt, some of the leaders alleged that they were forced to act as
spokesmen or organizers. Another common feature is that the person
sought out by the peasants had a reputation for being a "good speaker,"
or was "used to speaking to the honorability." Thus, the peasants
sought out brokers—people that they were used to dealing with—whom
they set willingly or unwillingly at their head. There is enough detail
in many of the chronicles to show that discussion often took place over

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the terms of the new leader's position. And it is clear from that discussion that the leader was someone important in peasant economic or political life before the revolt began. It is intriguing to ask under what circumstances a smith, for example, gained a reputation for public speaking or as an intermediary between the elite and the peasants; but the sources give no further information. However, it is clear that a man who had played the role of informal broker was asked now to lead a revolt.

It would be useful to map out a specific example of the dynamics of a revolt to see how the process of choosing leaders at each stage took place. The example comes from the regional uprising in Upper Swabia during the German Peasants' War of 1525.[13] At the beginning, while the revolt remained on a purely village level, leaders came from the well-to-do peasantry. As several villages coalesced around a minor market town, the leadership passed to men in the town itself: at Altsdorf, for example, the "mayor"; at Oberteuringen, an innkeeper. These small bands, in turn, began to join together around the "standard market" towns. From its center on Ravensburg, the Lake of Constance band forced a landed patrician to lead them, and put as second in command the senior administrative officer of one of the rich cloisters. Similar bands around Kempten and Biberach were headed also by townsmen whose networks encompassed the larger region of Upper Swabia. They suggested a unification of the three troops, and to that end organized an alliance centered on the intermediate market town of the region, Memmingen. Here, again, the leadership moved to the central place—the chief Reformation minister at Memmingen and a furrier. The two of them wrote the "Twelve Articles," complete with biblical proof texts, created a chancellery, a postal service, and a military organization, and began to think in terms of a permanent unified peasant force.

All of this went well beyond the limits of effective peasant action. As soldiers came to put down the revolt, the alliance splintered into the constituent bands centered on the three market towns whose catchment areas encompassed the effective peasant networks. The elite had been able to coordinate a larger effort for a time, because their networks were based on towns with higher central place functions.

The foregoing account illustrates the duality in Western European peasant society between identification with the village and the higher level integration within a set of networks focused on a central place and composed through a series of exchange relationships. These facts explain at once the extreme localism of peasant consciousness and the ability of peasants to organize rebellions over large areas in a very short space of time. The exchange relationship—not the "market" as such—is the informing idea in considering the integration side of the equation. It is hard to conceive of a peasant society where villagers do not enter

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in some fashion into exchange relationships. One thinks, for example, of the central role played by monasteries in Russian life.

Another aspect of peasant revolts in Europe was their spontaneity and the resultant choice of leaders from among people who were on the spot. There is little evidence that any leaders engaged in long-term agitation or attempted systematically to orchestrate a coordinated political movement. The articulated goals of peasants in revolt were seldom very ideological; whatever ideology there was, it was tacked on by the leaders they found in urban centers.

Something more needs to be said about the village as a central focus for peasant revolts. In many cases, revolts reveal conflict within the villages and involve an attempt on the part of one element to gain control. In the revolt in Upper Swabia in 1525, for example, the movement for *Gemeinde* independence meant, in reality, control by the farm tenants. It came at the end of a period of rapid population rise which had created an ever increasing class of farm laborers. Disputes arose over the rights to hunt and fish, to use the common land, to build cottages, glean the fields, pasture livestock, and to take part in decision-making in the villages. Farm tenants meant by *Gemeinde* only those members of a village who were fully enfranchised by virtue of the fact that they had farms of a certain size. The number of such people was considered fixed for all time. The "Twelve Articles" were the political expression of this group, which sought to put in their own hands the responsibility for poor relief, administration of command land, village affairs, justice, and the appointment of the priest and all officials. We find a similar kind of battle between landless and farm tenants during the French Revolution.[14]

Another way that the village forms a focus for revolt has to do with the early stages of modernization and the way that peasants were affected by it. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed a basic struggle between two notions of the way power should be ordered. Basically, the state was structured on a decentralized system that involved private armies and the clustering of power around important aristocrats with large landed fortunes. Through a complex system of clientage known as "bastard feudalism," these aristocrats played out their ambitions in a patterned way around a powerful king. However, when a weak king or a minor ruled, the system broke down into an anarchic struggle: witness the War of the Roses and the French religious wars following the death of Henry II. In the wake of these struggles, monarchs all over Europe demanded the right to monopolize the means of violence, to create standing armies and bureaucracies to control them, and to raise taxation. As a result, the peasants became the foundation of the new absolutist states, as recruits for the armies and as objects of taxation; but they were not allowed into the political system. All they could do was to respond in a negative fashion by ex-

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cluding the outsider—the tax official, the conscription agent, the judge. Throughout the seventeenth century, France was rocked by a series of peasant revolts directed most often against the tax official. The aristocrats were often in support because they saw increased taxation as a threat to their own ability to squeeze rents out of their tenants. The 1705 uprising, in Bavaria, for example, was directed against military conscription and accompanying taxation to pay for a series of dynastic wars. In none of these cases was there any question of the peasants gaining representation in the political system.

It would be useful to inquire at what stage in the process of modernization traditional forms of peasant protest were transformed into more modern ones. A distinguishing mark of a modern political movement as opposed to a "traditional" one is perhaps the attitude toward modernization itself. A traditional movement attempts to reestablish conditions as they were, while a modern movement accepts the conditions of change, and its participants want to take part in the national political process. To do so, protest groups based on face-to-face relationships are no longer enough; political activity involves associations of a more permanent nature encompassing a much wider region and implying professional organizers and an ideology.[15] What, then, was the process whereby peasants developed an interest in modern political activity? What drove them beyond the village?

We would suggest that a key change in Western Europe was the creation of national markets, a process in full swing during the eighteenth century. Georges Rudé has analyzed the peasants' response to this change, which they expressed most directly in their attempts to prevent the export of grain from the market towns.[16] He demonstrates that, during a time of shortage, the chief centers of riot were not those where the shortage was the most acute. Rather, protest developed where grain was being shipped, often to relieve dearth elsewhere. The local townsmen and peasants sought to keep the grain stores in local barns in the eventuality of a shortage at home. Nonetheless, as military roads opened up areas on the continent, making long distance haulage over land cheap for the first time, and as urbanization made a steady supply of grain necessary, the expansion of the market continued. We can say that the process was completed in France by the 1830s; and with it came the end of the grain riot. Once a national market had been established, the peasants became directly interested in national policy with regard to exports, imports, imposts, and tariffs. At the same time, they began to produce for a market beyond the local market town and to rationalize their production in the light of demands made by the market.

In this process, a shift took place that altered the very basis of cooperation. We have argued that peasant political activity was rooted in the complex system associated with three-field agriculture, in which

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common rights to pasture were fundamental. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, property rights became individualized, common rights disappeared, and the old form of cooperation became unnecessary. Early on in the nineteenth century, peasants developed cooperative societies for marketing their produce. Thus, cooperation shifted from production to marketing—a shift that implied greater stress on associational rather than on face-to-face relationships.

Perhaps it would be useful to emphasize some of the points we have been making about peasant participation in protest movements. It should be clear that, when reference is made to "traditional" society, the term does not imply the lack of change. It means that the market for peasant produce remains highly local, that peasants are not integrated into a national market system. They are not yet specialized producers, and their production/consumption remains largely autarchic. In such a society, communications are also highly restricted; there are no means for the systematic mobilization of peasant opinion or political pressure. Nonetheless, considerable modernization took place at the state level although peasants were excluded from participation. When they threatened violence vis-à-vis the state, the state responded by developing larger, more disciplined armies, and, in the nineteenth century, rural police. It might be argued that for a while peasants won some success, that they entered the political nation at the time of the French Revolution, securing tenurial rights and the abolition of feudal restrictions on their production. While peasant cooperative associations grew only slowly in the nineteenth century and entry into the electorate and lobbying over tariff issues came only after 1850, peasant violence or its threat affected state policy. However, this came at a time when the peasantry was rapidly disappearing, by transforming itself into separate classes of farmers and skilled agricultural laborers.

The backbone of peasant movements in Western Europe since the Middle Ages has always been the tenant farmers or the freeholders. As we have pointed out, their activity was often directed against the landless, although there are many instances over the course of time when farm laborers or cottagers did secure some rights within the village. Whenever rural people had grievances to express, no mobilization was possible unless they were joined by tenant farmers. In Upper Lusatia after the Thirty Years' War, for example, farm laborers fought a running battle with nobles over the conditions of employment on estates. They went to court, rioted, fled, and went on strike; but they were never able to band together across village lines because the landholding peasants had no interest in joining them. Part of the reason why noble landholders in England were able to do away with the peasantry in the eighteenth century without a major uprising was simply that many landholding peasants profited from the enclosure of village land. There was no solidarity of interest among the peasant class. In any event, in

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Western Europe as a whole, widespread peasant ownership or tenancy meant that peasants were able to profit from changes in the market without expropriation by landlords.

Another peculiarity of traditional peasant movements in Europe is their general freedom from ideology. They were for the most part spontaneous movements with few informing ideas, characterized instead by concrete goals. Some historians have tried to raise the cry for the "old law" to the level of a social idea,[17] but such an expression is in reality not much more than a simple conservatism. Modern associational movements, however, do need an ideology, precisely because the actors do not interact personally and they do act over time. Of course, traditional types of movements take place constantly in modernizing societies. In such cases, the peasant remains acted upon; the dynamic element is external to him. A modern movement makes the peasant part of the process of change as he expresses his demand for participation in the polity. In this transformation, however, he probably determines his own disappearance *qua* peasant.

NOTES

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