

The Character of the English Peasants' Rising of 1381

Bang-sun Ahn
Korea University

Introduction

Was the revolt of 1381 merely a 'passing episode' in English history, an irrational aberration, or was it deeply rooted in the economic and social life of the later Middle Ages? Historians of medieval society have recognized that peasant revolts were an important feature of it. But they have not all accepted that such movements were, in Marc Bloch's words, as 'natural to the seigneurial regime as strikes are to large-scale capitalism'. Other writers have suggested that peasant rebellion was not so much a natural and inevitable feature of the seigneurial regime as a symptom of its general crisis -indeed of the crisis of the whole society of medieval Europe - between the fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries. ¹⁾

On the other hand, Hilton asserts, as E.A.Kosminsky does, that rural social relationships in the Middle Ages were characterized by conflict rather than harmony of lord and peasant interests. He also argues that this conflict found its clearest expression in the revolt of Wat Tyler.

For the understanding of Peasants' Rising of 1381, all that I want to illuminate is as follows: the relationships between lords and peasants; the differentiation of the peasantry; the relations between the peasantry and the market in economic and social structure in the fourteenth century.

I. The Social and Economic Background of the Rising.

Demographic growth, according to Postan, characterizes the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed a decline in population as a result of falling productivity, famine and plague. Ultimately, demographic catastrophe led to a drastic reversal of the man/land ratio. Postan thus argues, consistently enough, that this demographic change brought about precisely the opposite situation to that which had obtained in the thirteenth century. Scarcity of peasants meant a decline not only in the level of rent, but equally in the lord's ability to restrict peasant mobility, and peasant freedom in general. With competition among lords to obtain scarce peasant tenants, one gets according to the laws of supply and demand, not only declining rents in general and labour-services in particular, but giving up by the lords of their rights to control the peasantry. Demographic catastrophe determines the fall of serfdom.²⁾

From the Postan's point of view, that the rate of wages is in inverse proportion to the absolute number of the working population, this increase can only be explained by a significant decrease in the numbers of labourers.

Postan's demographic or ecological theory causes him to fail to appreciate the historical significance of peasant political action, as opposed to their production and reproduction.

The crisis of the seigneurial social order had begun prior to the arrival of the bubonic plague, even before the great famines of the second decade of the fourteenth century.

Many circumstances influence the level of wages ; not only the supply of labour but also the demand for it, and also the ability of labourers to stand up for their interests. The rise in wages after the 1320s may be explained by the growing demand for labourers resulting from the incipient collapse of the labour service system and the lord's attempts to replace unfree villein by hired

labour on a more extensive scale.

In England after 1349 and the Black Death there was a seigneurial reaction: attempts to control peasant mobility by forcing peasants to pay impossible fees for permission to move; legislations to control wages; an actual increase in rents in some places.

The result of rising wage labor led first to the Ordinance(1349), then to the Statute of Labourers(1351). This legislation was an inevitable reaction by a Parliament of landowning employers whose demesnes by now were cultivated much more by wage labour than by the customary services of servile tenants. The most important aspect of the legislation was, of course, that it made it illegal to demand or offer higher wages than had been the case in 1346.

The labour legislation of the fourteenth century well illustrates the conflicting feudal and capitalist elements in the countryside. The exploitation of the almost landless peasant as an agricultural worker increased with the development of money rent. And this brought the new problem of wages to the medieval village. Those lords who had given up the exaction of labour rent but had not yet abandoned demesne production were faced with the problems of the supply of manpower. But there existed certain factors which created favourable market conditions for the workers who supplied the necessary labour power for the demesnes. These factors included the existence of small holdings which partially provided the worker with a livelihood, and of a growing rural home industry producing more and more for the market -all making for local shortages of agricultural labour. 3)

In the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries a feature of the rural society of the south-east, noticeable especially in Essex and Suffolk, was the very small size of most tenant holdings. Although a few manors, like Lawling(Essex)in 1310, had two-thirds of its tenants with 30acres of more, and on most manors the liveliness of the land-market allowed a small minority to prosper and accumulate very large holdings, it is often found that a half or even three-

quarters of tenants held 5 acres or less. And the many smallholders must have made use of the pastures, wastes and woods, as well as supplemented their incomes from agriculture with wage and craft work.⁴⁾

The plague epidemic of 1348-9, judging from the Essex frankpledge payments, killed nearly half of the population, and no real recovery is apparent in the next three decades. We might expect to find that the number of tenants was reduced, and the size of holdings increased; these trends can be discerned, but on a very limited scale. The holding left vacant by the plague were filled by inheritance, or taken on by survivors who were prepared to accumulate greater quantities of land, either on the old conditions or on new leasehold terms. On some manors a potential force for change came demesne leasing in parcels, which put further quantities of land in the hands of tenants.

There is some evidence of growing prosperity among the peasantry. Smallholders would have enjoyed the benefits of rising wages. There seems to have been a general increase in the numbers of animals owned, judging from the tenant animals presented for trespassing on the lord's demesne lands. Flocks of eighty or a hundred sheep or herds of six or ten cattle were not uncommon, and occasionally even greater numbers are mentioned, appreciably larger than the flocks and herds appearing in the early fourteenth century records. The value of land remained remarkably high, and tenants seem to have had large amounts of cash at their disposal.

The landlords of south-east, in common with those in other regions, were already experiencing economic difficulties in the second quarter of the fourteenth century. The labour shortage and rising wages eroded the profits for the demesnes, but most landlords continued with the old system. It cannot be assumed that the desire to thwart the economic expansion of the thriving peasants was a conscious motive of policy of all lords.

After 1349, marriage fines continued to be exacted, up to and beyond 1381. They declined in number at Ingetestone(Essex), but at Birdbrook(Essex) they were

levied in the late 1370s more frequently than before. Permission to leave could be hedged around with conditions, to return once a year, or in the case of a servile woman, not to marry without a licence.

Lords also attempted to control the acquisition of free land by their serfs, and to force them to pay extra rents and hold the land on customary tenure. The leasehold tenures often carried no more than a nominal entry fine, but the traditional tenures involved a liability to pay a variable fine on inheritance or transfer.

The growing variety of customary tenures in the late fourteenth century must have led tenants to make comparisons. Tenants of manors which did not see any significant move towards leasehold would have cause for resentment.

Landlords were much concerned with the control of the market in customary holdings. On some manors one gains the impression of some administrative slackness in the two decades after the plague, followed by more stringent controls in the 1370s.

The seigneurial courts were the key institution for the maintenance of lordly control. They were used to enforce the obligations of tenants, such as the performance of labour services, or the repair of buildings on customary holdings.

The perquisites of courts made an appreciable contribution to seigneurial incomes; they rarely accounted for more than a tenth manorial profits, but their value lay in the flexibility which allowed them to be increased when other sources of income were static or tending to decline. The normal pattern in the four counties was for court profits to increase between the 1340s and the post-plague decades. (See Table 1.)⁵⁾ The amount of increase may seem unremarkable, but to expand such revenues when the numbers of people attending the courts was declining must have involved a considerable growth in the average per capita payments made by the suitors.

Table 1. Average annual total of court perquisites.

Wheathampstead(Herts.)		Chevington(Suffolk)	
1340-7	6. 10s. 1d.	1339-48	2. 8s. 10d.
1371-81	7. 1s. 2d.	1359-80	4. 3s. 8d.
Meopham(Kent)		East Farleigh(Kent)	
1340-7	1. 0s. 1d.	1334-43	8. 3s. 7½d.
1368-75	2. 6s. 5d.	1372-88	9. 2s. 9½d.

We must conclude that fourteenth-century landlords defended their interests and income with vigour in a period of economic adversity. To emphasize one aspect of their position in the late fourteenth century, they succeeded in retaining the initiative so that they were still capable of disciplining tenants and making arbitrary demands through fines and amercements. The tenants had gained access to more land, and presumably the growth in leasehold tenure represented a concession to them, providing greater certainty in obligations. They seem to have been constantly testing the regime: serfs successfully left their manors, attempted to conceal the marriages of their daughters, and secretly acquired free land. Customary tenants also sought to evade the restrictions on the sale and leasing of land, and neglected or wasted their buildings.

Profound discontent was also stirred by the imposition of a poll-tax in 1381. The poor were driven to take refuge in fraud, and gave false returns as to the numbers in their households. Altogether more than one-third of those who paid the tax in 1377 evaded the tax in 1381.⁶⁾

The lords were enabled, through the state, to acquire rights which restricted peasant access to the commons. State power aided the lords to overcome peasant resistance to rent increases. State taxes -in money- promoted the development of money rent, as the lords, who were often responsible for their collection, were able, in whole or in part, to transform them into feudal rent.

The great mass of the villeins were discontented, not because the lords had tried by coercion to make their obligations heavier, but because circumstances had rendered them less compliant and submissive. Indeed, the root of the trouble was not that the lot of the rural labourers had grown steadily worse, but that in various ways it had grown steadily better. The formidable and widespread organization of the insurgents indicates clearly enough that it was not the last despairing effort of a down-trodden peasantry; it was rather the outcome of social changes which by improving the condition of the labourer had made him more impatient with the antiquated survivals of a worn-out manorial regime.

II. The main condition of the Peasants' Rising.

1. Aggravation of feudal contradiction and development of peasant struggle.

The rising was essentially one of East Anglia and the Home Counties with support from the London poor. This does not mean that there was not discontent and even sporadic trouble elsewhere.

The peasant movements of the later Middle Ages were on the scale of risings or rebellions: Whole regions containing many villages are involved and aims are proclaimed—or are at least implicit in peasant actions, which subvert existing social and political relationships. The changes are attributed to a series of developments in medieval society, e.g. the growth of the apparatus and jurisdiction of the state, and the expansion of trade and communications. ⁷⁾

The 1381 Rising was initiated from within peasant society, but its social composition was much wider. It may have begun as a peasant rebellion but it was soon joined by others—artisans and merchants of small towns and traditional rural craftsmen (smiths, cobblers, carpenters). It was not, therefore, even limited to participants from the countryside alone but involved townsmen as well. In fact, expressed in the social categories of the medieval period: it was a broadly-based popular uprising of the third estate (but excluding the London merchant capitalists) against the other two components of the tripartite society

of the middle ages, not a movement of all social groups against a narrow governing clique.⁸⁾

2. Ideological aspect of the rebels' demands at Mile End & Smithfield.

Chief among the demands put forth by the rebels at Mile End and Smithfield in June 1381 was the abolition of serfdom. There was also a demand made for the elimination of all peasant obligations to landowners, both monetary and personal. But the movement also seems to have possessed a long-term programme of political action involving a conception of an alternative society and how to achieve it. The peasants and their allies envisioned a popular monarchy, a state where there would be no hierarchy or social classes standing between the people and their king. In other words, there would be no feudal ruling class owning lands and controlling law and administration. In fact, some of the rebels had in mind to establish county or regional monarchies rather than a single monarchy with a king distant from the people. The making of laws and the administration of justice were somehow to be taken care of by the people. The church was to be reorganized in a similar fashion: there was to be a people's church whose basic unit would be the parish, again with no intermediate hierarchy between Christians and the single bishop or archbishop who, as head of the church, was the ecclesiastical equivalent of the people's king. Thus, the rebels sought freedom and equality (at least in political terms). Though some things were to be held in common, they appear to have imagined a regime of family ownership of peasant holdings and artisan workshops, with the large divided among the peasants.

Differentiation made itself felt and found expression in both the course and in the outcome of the rising, in particular in the two programmes, that of Mile End and that of Smithfield. Of these, the Mile End programme is that of the upper and middle ranks of the peasantry, men who were turning into petty commodity producers. Their demands were the abolition of serfdom, the abolition of the labour-rent system, a low money rent, and freedom for peasant trade. This is a

programme for the bourgeois transformation of the village. The Smithfield programme was the programme of the poor peasants. Here broader objectives were included—the equality of all estates, which in fact meant the liquidation of the whole political system of feudalism.⁹⁾

More significantly, in the Peasants' Rising of 1381 there emerged a positive class consciousness, a recognition of the mutual interests of peasants and other basic producers and, to some extent, the formulation of a long-term programme of political action.

In addition to John Ball and his fellow clerics' radical Christian tradition, the peasant and artisan rebels of positive class consciousness were also influenced by legal thought.¹⁰⁾ This may seem surprising, but peasants did employ lawyers to present petitions and argue their cases in the courts. The arguments which the lawyers made regularly asserted that freedom was man's natural condition.

III. Influence of Peasants' Rising.

Some assessment of the historical consequences must be undertaken, not simply in terms of success or failure in the realization of explicitly stated goals, but also in terms of such changes of direction in the history of society which peasant movements may effect.

Peasant movements for a long time bore an elemental and sporadic, but clearly expressed, anti-feudal character. Wat Tyler's rising had a clear-cut programme of peasant demands. The suppression of this rising did not prevent a substantial part of that programme from being realised. The demands which the peasants presented at Mile End were realised almost word-for-word in the 15th century: the abolition of serfdom, and of labour services, low rent pay, and abolition of feudal restrictions on peasant trade. Some of the demands of the more radical Smithfield programme were also partly realised. The peasants acquired a significant part of the demesne not only of course not in the way designed by those who followed Wat Tyler and John Ball.

But the peasants' demands could be fulfilled only because they correspond to the whole course of social development of feudal England.

Some historians consider the fifteenth century to be the golden age of the English agricultural worker. On many large manors, church and lay, the demesne was abandoned and the lands once usurped from the peasants returned into their hands. But they passed into the hands not of those who lacked land, but of the rich, thus hastening the further differentiation of the peasants. Already the bourgeois transformation of village was under way; a new grouping of class forces was beginning to take shape there, which would find its full expression in the period of bourgeois revolution in the middle of the seventeenth century.

The great historic struggle of the medieval peasantry for land freedom against their oppressors was, objectively, directed towards freeing the productive forces from feudal fetters. Therein lies its great progressive significance.

Conclusion

In the history of the English peasantry we must take into account all the movements of peasant resistance in the 13th and 14th centuries. This resistance found its clearest expression in the rising of Wat Tyler, but it did not cease after it. Peasant rising arose not only because various forms of non-economic pressure by the lords were increasing, but also because a substantial part of the peasantry had begun, from the 12th century, to produce more and more for the market.

The rising failed to bring about the popular and egalitarian monarchy, but it was consequential. Though it did not succeed in ending landlordism, it seems to have been responsible for forcing an end to the feudal reaction following the Black Death. Moreover, it contributed, along with the struggles which continued after it, to the decline of the feudal-seigniorial regime in England and, thereby, helped the development of agrarian capitalism. And from this, in turn, industrial capitalism sprang. Moreover, the peasantry have been active participants in the making of history, rather than merely its passive victims. Also, they show that such struggles

and movements have been significant to the totality of historical development, i. e. to values and ideas as much as to political economy, and that they have, therefore, also contributed to the experiences and struggles of later generations.

Notes

- 1) E.Power, M.Mollat, D.Waley and G.Duby refer to peasant and other social revolts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as the consequence of the difficult times which were experiencing at that time.
- 2) M.M.Postan, *The medieval Economy and Society*, pp.172-173.
- 3) E.A.Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, ed., R.H.Hilton, Oxford, 1956. p.357.
- 4) C.Dyer, " Social & Economic Background to Revolt of 1381 ", *The English Rising of 1381*, ed., R.H.Hilton & T.H. Aston, Cambridge, 1984. pp. 20-21.
- 5) C.Dyer, *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.
- 6) E.Lipson, *The Economic History of England*, I. 9th. edn., London, 1947. pp.122-3.
- 7) R.H.Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, Methuen, 1977. p. 96.
- 8) _____, *Ibid.*, p.221.
- 9) E.A.Kosminsky, *Ibid.*, pp. 358-359.
- 10) R.H.Hilton, *Ibid.*, pp. 130-34.
_____, " The Rebellion of 1381 ", ed. David Rubinstein, *People for the people*(London:Ithaca press, 1973) pp. 22-23.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Manuscript Sources

Bracton's Note Book, Vol. 3. ed., F.W.Maitland. London, 1887.

2. Printed Sources

Froissart, T., Chronicles of England, France, Spain & The Adjoining Countries,

Vol. 1. Trans., Thomas Johnes, New York, 1803-5.

Myers, A.R.ed., English Historical Documents 1327-1485, Vol. 4. London, 1969.

Rothwell, Harry, ed., English Historical Documents 1189-1327, Vol.3. Oxford Univ.,
1975.

3. Secondary Works: Books

Bloch,M., French Rural History, English edn., 1966.

Dobson, R.B., The Peasants' Revolt of 1381, sec, ed., London, 1983.

Duby.C., The Rural Economy & Lige in the Medieval West, London,1983.

Dyer, C., Lords & Peasants in a Changing Society, London, 1980.

Hilton, R.H., Bond Men Made Free, Methuen, 1977.

_____, The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England, London, 1966.

_____, The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages, Oxford, 1975.

_____, ed., Peasants, Knights & Heretics, Cambridge Univ., 1976.

Hilton, R.H., & Aston, T.H., ed., The English Rising of 1381, Cambridge, 1984.

Kaye, H.J., The British Marxist Historians, Cambridge, 1984.

Kosminsky, E.A., Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth
Century, ed., Hilton,R.H., trans. R.Kisch, Oxford, 1956.

Lipson, E., The Economic History of England, I, 9th. edn., London, 1947.

Mackisack, M., The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399, Oxford, 1959.

Mollat, M & Wolff, P., The Popular Revolutions of the Late Middle Ages, London, 1973.

Postan, M.M., The Medieval Economy & Society, London, 1972.

Vinogradoff, P., Villainage in England, Oxford, 1982.

4. Secondary Works: Articles

- Brenner, R., " Agrarian Class Structure & Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe ", P. & P. no. 70. 1976.
- Britnelle, R.H., " Production for the Market on a Small Fouteenth Century Estate ", Eco. Hist. Rev., and ser., 19, no.2. 1966.
- Hansen, H.M., " The Peasant Revolt of 1381 & The Chronicles ", Journal of Medieval History, 6. 1980.
- Hilton, R.H., " Peasant Movements in England before 1381 ", Eco. Hist. Rev., sec. ser., Vol II. 1949.
- _____, " The Rebellion of 1381 ", ed. David Rubinstein, People for the People (London: Ithaca press, 1973).
- _____, " Wat Tyler, John Ball & The English Rising ", New Society, 30. Apr. 1981.
- _____, " A Crisis of Feudalism ", P. & P. no. 7. 1955.
- Hyams, P.R., " The Origins of a Peasant Land Market in England " Eco. Hist. Rev. Vol. XXIII, no. 1. 1970.
- Kosminsky, E.A., " The Evolution Feudal Rent in England from the XIth to the XVth Centuries ", P.& P. no.7. 1955.
- Kriehhn, G., " Studies in the Sources of the Social Revolt ", Ame. Hist. Rev. VII. 1901.
- Postan, M.M., " Some Economic Evidence of Declining Population in the Later Middle Ages ", Eco. Hist. Rev. sec. ser., no.3. 1950.